Swearing of Serendipity

Okay, I have to be honest. I’m writing this column about serendipity because, I’m sick, yearning to go to bed, and, in the foggy state I’m in, I just think it’s a cool word. But I’ll pretend I have higher aims than that.

The title of “Serendipity,” one of my many study breaks (read: attempts to sabotage my GPA for the semester), I went to see “Serendipity,” the cutesy little romance starring John Cusack and Kate Beckinsdale. I’ll tell you up front that it isn’t the best movie I’ve seen this semester, but the main idea behind it is worth a discussion. Don’t get me wrong, I think John Cusack is adorable, but “Serendipity” wasn’t “The Sure Thing.” Those 30s’ teeny-bopper movies put his more recent efforts (read: “America’s Sweethearts”) to shame. Regardless of my assessment of “Serendipity,” I have to go over its basic premise before I can get to the meat and potatoes of my column, so bear with me. Essentially, the movie is about two people who meet by chance and discover that they’re soul mates, but part without exchanging names or phone numbers. The woman in the encounter basically believes that if it’s meant to be, fate will bring them together. The rest of the movie focusses on how, just days before their loveable Cusack character is set to marry another woman, their paths cross again and fate brings the two main characters together. Surprise, surprise (prepare to have the ending ruined for you), the marriage doesn’t get off the ground and Jonathan and Sara, the soul mates, end up together just fate intended all along. Everything, even what we can’t control, fits together in a way that makes sense and has some sort of cosmic meaning. Much as we like to believe in free will, we like to chase down destiny too, because it tells us that we’re headed down the right path when we take risks and that we don’t have to worry about it when doors close behind us, because they’ll open right up again if that’s where we’re meant to be. Believing that each and every one of our choices is pivotal in deciding whether or not we get a happy ending overwhelms us. Fate is a soothing concept that takes the responsibility out of our hands.

Fate is particularly comforting when terrorists start destroying national landmarks and planes begin crashing into residential areas. How else can we explain why one person bought a ticket on a doomed flight and another didn’t? How do we understand why some people die today and others live to see tomorrow? Destiny is the easy answer to why. “It’s more comforting to say, “I guess it was just his/her time to go” than to recognize the frightening reality that we control so little about the outcomes of our lives. If everything fits into a plan, somehow tragedy is comprehensible to us. It’s paralyzing to think that the world is a chaotic mess of comings and goings, and there’s very little that our choices can guarantee us. We can’t even guarantee our own safety, when so much is out of our control.

Just because absolutely everything isn’t in our control, however, doesn’t mean that we have resign ourselves to some great plan and adopt a “what will be, will be” philosophy. We do have a modicum of control. After all, we can decide what we’re going to do in any given moment. We just can’t control how it will all work out. So we exert what control we have over our own lives, whether we’re aware of it or not, rather than couching ourselves in serendipity. It’s no good to live our lives relying on accidents. We need to make things happen. If “Serendipity” had taken place in the real world, Jonathan and Sara would have never ended up together. They would have met on a flight, been thrown together, and then, rather than making the obvious choice to try it out, they resigned themselves to the fantasy of destiny. If we believe in destiny at all, we should believe in it as something that we need to pursue, something that our choices can make happen. No one wants to hear that outcomes won’t come to us. We have to make them, and the only way we can do that is by living in the here and now. Sure, we’ll have to take risks, and yes, our choices may end in disaster, but it’s better than living on fate, and ending up the losers for it.

The Crusader Column Call

On the heels of my last column, which discussed the pressing issue of Senioritis (and apparently made an impact, since a very noteworthy professor lauded my coverage of the complex topic), I feel it is necessary to use last week as a springboard into a much deeper topic that concerns the senior class.

For those of you who haven't noticed, Thanksgiving is literally right around the corner. Ah, Thanksgiving break. Roughly five carefree days to be spent with family and friends from home, gobbling up leftover turkey and playing flag football with your high school buddies. The Turkey Day break gives all students a rest from the trials and tribulations of first semester, and heralds in the most expected holiday of all – Christmas. Thanksgiving is a herald to all college students that help is in sight, and we can all breathe a collective sigh of relief in anticipation of a much needed reprieve from exams and other assorted academic nonsense. Yet as happy an occasion as this coming break may be, it holds import for seniors that only we can truly understand - our second break to last semester here is about to go by the wayside. That's right kids, we're just about down to one last semester, one final hurrah.

The signs of our impending graduation are everywhere, and they bear a frightful resemblance to a funeral, if you ask me. Take, for example, senior pictures. We're forced to dress up and smile, our picture to be slapped in a tome to serve as a remembrance of the four years we were here. That's right, our pictures are taken so that one day, people can flip through our Purple Patcher and mock the way we wore our hair and other nuances of life as a 2001-02 senior. When someone poses on relatives usually throw a picture of what the deceased looked like when he or she was on the coffin top. No other class gets this honor, unless you count the freshman facebook, but that is of a different matter altogether, something we'll get to in due time.

After our memorial pictures are set up, we're measured and fitted for caps and gowns so that we look dignified when we're given the boot come May '02. People get “measured and fitted” for other things too, you know - like those nice wooden boxes. After cap and gown fitting, we fill out how much the cover will cost and we choose the fabrics for applying for on a single sheet of paper so that it can be read off as we morosely march down the graduation aisle. We're reading a three line obituary: “John Doe, Political Science, Summa Cum Laude too many.”

We're suddenly showered in parties and honors, as well. There's no freshman, sophomore or junior Ball, no organizations that assemble dances and such purely for the underclassmen (unless you want to count House Councils and such, but we know those institutions never really accomplish anything.) We get Senior Weekend, the 100 Days Dance and Senior Week after graduation. Everything about senior year seems to be about partying and having a good time. Why then do I refer to this hubbub as being much like a funeral preparation?

I refer to this because we're going from one extreme to the next in terms of seniory, just as freshmen did this semester. You go from a rock solid senior in high school to a mumbling, stuttering, waste of a freshman who has to beg his way into parties and kiss-up to upper classmen to get a solo cup. Then you're a senior, who revels in this kissing-up. Yet in a year, we seniors are rookies in corporate America (unless you're one of those hippies who has to backpack through Europe on a money from a college's career services department). Whenever I'm in the career services department and try to count out my career options, I realize that my college experience was non-existent work experience.

Graduation preparation is thus a two-headed beast. On the one hand, we're seniors. Woo-hoo! We're the oldest students here, we're honored for our tenure spent at HC, we are the cream of the crop, we've survived the past three years? The reason, people, is that we're not going to get a chance to do it again, at least not at this utterly deprave scale and scope. Graduation caps off an orgy of excess in nearly every aspect of our lives, and this career call deserves celebration. Yet at the same time, once the parties are over, we're part of the Real World, and the carefree days when we could make our own schedules are done with. Well still have fun, of course, but nothing that can compare to college. Hence we're mourning as much as we're celebrating - people cry at graduations for a reason, people, and it isn't because students can't wait to put in 80 hour workweeks at the mercy of some clueless taskmaster.

With this in mind, why are we celebrating so, especially since we've partied to a similar level for the past three years? The reason, people, is that we're not going to get a chance to do it again, at least not at this utterly deprave scale and scope. Graduation caps off an orgy of excess in nearly every aspect of our lives, and this career call deserves celebration. Yet at the same time, once the parties are over, we're part of the Real World, and the carefree days when we could make our own schedules are done with. Well still have fun, of course, but nothing that can compare to college. Hence we're mourning as much as we're celebrating - people cry at graduations for a reason, people, and it isn't because students can't wait to put in 80 hour workweeks at the mercy of some clueless taskmaster.

Graduation preparation is thus a two-headed beast. On the one hand, we're seniors. Woo-hoo! We're the oldest students here, we're honored for our tenure spent at HC, we are the cream of the crop (well, in theory at least). Let's party our heads off! At the same time, we're seniors. Cry! Interviews! Internships! That damned corporate ladder! No other point in college life contains such contrasts and conflicting emotions.

It's at this time that most of us seniors step back and begin to realize just how close this grim reality is. Look no further than our senior athletes - for four years, these students have poured their hearts and souls into making their teams succeed. Each year has been highlighted with various successes and failures, but above all, a continual look forward to the next year, where things can only get better. This forward thinking comes to an end as the semester winds down, since there is no “next year.” Winter sport athletes will feel a similar twang of pain in the coming months, as the excitement of competition and camaraderie of the past four years tinged with a bittersweet disappointment in that their careers are over.

While not a member of a sports team, I can share in their mixed feelings. I've worked for this since I got to HC, starting as a sportswriter, becoming sports editor, then Ed-in-chief of The Crusader. With the end of the semester, my tenure here will be up, with fresh legs taking over for me. In one sense, I'm grateful for having the responsibility removed from my shoulders. In another, I'm slowly coming to terms with the fact that leaving The Crusader blatantly foreshadows my coming graduation. I'd be lying if I said I wasn't slightly anxious about the whole situation.

The senior class of 2002 will leave this world after four years of their respective paths. Each year has been highlighted with various successes and failures, but above all, a continual look forward to the next year, where things can only get better. This forward thinking comes to an end as the semester winds down, since there is no “next year.” Winter sport athletes will feel a similar twang of pain in the coming months, as the excitement of competition and camaraderie of the past four years tinged with a bittersweet disappointment in that their careers are over.