

C.S. Lewis for College Students: Interview with Renowned Lewis Scholar David C. Downing

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Over the past few months, I have had two big questions on my mind: What are the key issues facing students as they transition from high school to college? And, what is the relevancy of C.S. Lewis for college students and for college transition?

Okay, the first question is perhaps obvious. In September, 2005 I became the director of College Transition Initiative (CTI). My first order of business was researching transitional issues and getting a handle on the many challenges students face.

Admittedly, the second question wasn't as pressing as the first. But C.S. Lewis has been on a lot of people's minds lately, including mine. The release of Walt Disney's *The Chronicles of Narnia* movies reminded us of Lewis' legacy. And, because of the movies, many people were learning about Lewis' work for the first time. I was significantly influenced by Lewis as a college student while coming to terms with one of the most important questions students need to ask when transitioning from high school to college: *What do I believe?*

I discovered the writings of the late Oxford professor and Christian apologist (Lewis died in 1963) at an important time in my college career. My dilemma? I wasn't sure the Christian faith could survive the scrutiny of the "new knowledge" and ideas that bombard students on college campuses. In fact, I had a philosophy professor who asked to see the hands of all the professing Christians in the class. All semester he tried to make us look like fools. I needed some encouragement and someone suggested I read Lewis.

The first Lewis book I read was his autobiography *Surprised by Joy*. I was hooked. Here was a man who went through the academic "fire" of the "secular" university and came out the other side not only with his faith intact, but with a much stronger faith for going through it.

About two miles from my office sits a small, private liberal arts institution. A few years ago I was pleasantly surprised to discover that a renowned Lewis scholar was a professor in the English department. David C. Downing has written many notable books on the life of Lewis including, *Into the Region of Awe: Mysticism in C.S. Lewis*, and *Into the Wardrobe: C.S. Lewis and the Narnia Chronicles*. I was most interested in Dr. Downing's book that deals with Lewis' conversion, *The Most Reluctant Convert: C.S. Lewis' Journey to Faith*. This book reveals how Lewis navigated and eventually answered many of the same questions I was being forced to ask in my philosophy course as an undergraduate.

I asked Dr. Downing if he would talk with me a bit about the book and about issues facing college students, especially as they make the transition from high school to college. He agreed and what follows are some highlights from our conversation.

Melleby: What do you think are some key issues facing Christians on secular campuses? And, as a professor, what do you see as the role of youth ministry in combating some of these issues?

Downing: A lot of students are used to going with the flow. Even in high school, their parents are Christian, their friends are Christian, they go to church, Christianity seems self-evident. It's not until they go to college that they realize Christianity is a worldview choice a lot of people don't share, which a lot of people directly attack.

At college, students realize their faith has been from the outside in, their external environment has encouraged their faith, nurtured their faith. Suddenly they get to college

and all of the external supports are removed. They don't have to go to church if they don't want to, they certainly don't have to go to fellowship groups.

Some students just lose their faith. If they have only been going with the flow, they get into a different environment and suddenly, Christianity is not important to the people around them; it's not cool. They just decide to drop out. Many people have to learn how to be Christians from the inside out, rather than from the outside in. They have to say, "How much of this do I believe? How much of this can I argue for intellectually? How comfortable am I with it emotionally?" So I would think a lot of youth ministry would be coming alongside of students who are having to learn what it means to be a Christian from the inside out rather than just going with the flow and being a Christian from the outside in.

Many students haven't confronted intellectual issues until the professors bring them up. Like the problem of evil, church history, whether or not Christians have made that good of a showing with the Crusades, slave-owning Christians, and that sort of thing. And students honestly have not thought about those questions. Their faith needs to be more clearly articulated in intellectual terms. They need to have something to say about particular intellectual topics that they probably never thought of until they go to college. So I think part of youth ministry would be to give students the intellectual tools to be confident in their faith academically, cognitively, as well as emotionally. But beyond that, I'm not an expert on youth ministry!

Melleby: You mention Christianity as a worldview. This is very important for students to grasp. Christianity is not just about "going to heaven when you die" or the "religious part" of our life but it should be integrated into all areas of our lives. I think that was what was so good about Lewis' story, as related in your book. He wasn't looking for any kind of quick fix, or something to take care of one small aspect of his life. He was looking for a way he could coherently view the world.

Downing: And his journey was very intellectual. He wasn't driven by emotional needs like, "I need a father figure," or "I need some reassurance about when I die." He was quite cognitive in his approach to developing a worldview. Of course, he approached everything intellectually.

But I think part of what's interesting about his journey is that he would really sit down and look at idealism, and he would look at "New Age" philosophy or vitalism and think about the strengths and weaknesses. A lot of people, I think, end up with a worldview that just feels emotionally comfortable. Especially when I talk to people who are New Age. They just kind of generally like spirituality, they like the idea that there is some kind of benevolent force out there, but if you press them, "Well, how do you know that there is a benevolent force? If you don't follow the authority of scripture, where do you get your information?" They might respond, "Well, I'm not that analytic, I don't like to think about it." Spirituality for them is sort of this emotional bubble bath. It's not something that they can really talk about as a consistent worldview.

So yes, I do think Lewis was a model in that regard, searching and coming up with a worldview that was intellectually coherent as well as emotionally satisfying.

Melleby: Why do you think that Lewis is so well read and received today?

Downing: I think he was a pilgrim, but he was also a prophet. The worldviews he looked at most assiduously are ones still with us. A lot of what he was getting at with vitalism is very similar to new-age philosophy, like "may the force be with you" and so on. And he asked a really good question: "If there is this 'life-force' out there, does it have a mind, is it conscious, does it have intentions and a will? In which case you are coming very close to a personal God, and you need to interact and ask, does this god's will impose itself on my will,

or does it not have a mind; is it more like gravity or electro-magnetic radiation? In which case it's not really something that you can worship or pray to or take comfort in."

Lewis tended to ask those really perceptive questions about other worldviews. I think it does have a lot to do with his relevance. He spent so much time critiquing Christianity from the outside that, by the time he looked at the alternative worldviews of Christianity, he had a much deeper understanding of what the key issues were.

Melleby: What advice can you give college students who are on similar journeys?

Downing: I think some students feel more defensive than they need to be about a Christian worldview. I think that, by reading C.S. Lewis, they can realize that a lot of what sounds to them like new criticisms of Christianity are actually the same issues people have been arguing about for 2,000 years: the authority of scripture, the problem of evil, the nature of the incarnation, the atonement. All of those issues have been around, but sometimes students are confronted with them for the first time in college.

I think it's also important to have the support of one other person to see things differently from the majority. You can sort of hold out and say, "I don't know what's wrong with the rest of these people, but you and I understand." There is something about having even one other person who sees things the way you do that gives you confidence to stand with your convictions and not just go with the crowd. I think part of the role of campus ministry would be creating a body of peers who can share their problems and worldview, and feel that, even though a lot of people around here are attacking our worldview or are indifferent to our worldview, as long as there are a few of us who are willing to raise our hands together, we can have more confidence to go against the majority.

Do you run into students who feel attacked by professors in class?

Melleby: Certainly, and it was true in my experience as a student. I had a philosophy professor who made it clear you were not going to leave his class believing in God or thinking there was any validity to the Christian faith. And that's why I was attracted to C.S. Lewis and his story. Especially in your book when you talk about a person "having to lose faith in order to find it." That was true in my life.

Downing: I've gotten a lot of e-mails about this book from parents who said it was very encouraging, because they have adolescents who are kind of "out there" right now, struggling with issues and saying, "I don't want to go to church," or "I'm not a Christian." They said it was encouraging to them to realize that their sons or daughters can be on a journey that eventually can bring them back to faith. And also, their very questioning and critical attitude toward their childhood faith could actually be deepening their adult faith. This doesn't have to be considered a bad process.

I've been surprised that I have gotten six or eight e-mails telling me they have given a copy of the book to their 17-year-old or 19-year-old. They want their kids to know it is okay to ask a lot of these questions and it's okay to feel like you are not a Christian for a while, because you are on a journey. They were also encouraged to find that Lewis didn't come back to faith until in his early 30s.

Melleby: Why do you think college students should be reading C.S. Lewis?

Downing: In his spiritual and intellectual quest, Lewis was a pilgrim but also a pathfinder. He seriously considered atheism, the occult, various forms of pantheism and New Age philosophy. I think it is very relevant for contemporary Christians to see how he weighed each of these worldviews and found them wanting. Even though he called himself a "most reluctant convert," Lewis looked long and hard at the alternative philosophies the world has to offer, but returned to re-embrace his childhood faith with all his heart and mind and soul.

Downing offers three valuable insights for parents, pastors and youth workers thinking about college transition.

First, we need to create space for students to wrestle with some of the intellectual challenges to the Christian faith before going to college. Students need to know how Christian beliefs will be challenged not only in the classroom, but by living in close proximity with other people who do not share the Christian worldview. Kara Powell, the director of the Fuller Youth Institute at Fuller Theological Seminary recently e-mailed me some very interesting discoveries from their research on college transition. Dr. Powell wrote, "The more students have the chance to express their doubts in high school, the higher their faith maturity and spiritual maturity. Thus the key is not to get kids to say the right things before they graduate to the 'big bad world,' but to help them think through the tough questions and verbalize some of their faith and personal struggles before they hit the ups and downs of the college transition." (Learn more about this research at: www.fulleryouthinstitute.org.) Creating space for students to articulate what they believe and why will help them to be Christians from the "inside out, rather from the outside in."

Second, it is essential to find Christian community on campus. Parents and youth workers can begin to make some of the needed college connections now, before their kids go to college. Check the college's Web site to find out what Christian clubs and organizations are available on campus. Many campus ministry organizations have a campus locator site. Call local churches. Start with your own denomination. Call or e-mail campus ministers. You are NOT bothering them. College ministers appreciate these e-mails and phone calls and are always looking for ways to meet new students.

Third, be patient with students who are struggling with their faith. Let them know it is okay to ask questions and to have doubts. But also help students understand that there is a difference between good, honest doubting, and not-so-good, dishonest doubting. The latter is usually an excuse for immoral behavior. You will probably know when students are really searching or when they are simply "going with the flow."

If you are struggling with a child who appears to have walked away from the faith, learn to ask good, open-ended questions about his or her journey. And be genuinely curious. *What have you been learning? How are you trying to "live out" the new things you believe?* Most importantly, students need to know that they are loved and cared for, even when they are finding it difficult to embrace their childhood faith.

And, of course, pray. Pray that students who feel they aren't Christians for a while, will, like C.S. Lewis, return to a deeper, strengthened, adult faith.

Derek Melleby is the Director of the College Transition Initiative, author of Make College Count: A Faithful Guide to Life and Learning (Baker Books, 2011) and co-author of The Outrageous Idea of Academic Faithfulness: A Guide for Students (Brazos Press, 2007).



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www.HowToMakeCollegeCount.com