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Dear Student,

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One of the best lessons in life I learned was ca. 1975. My husband, our six children and I lived on a small farm, south of Anamosa, at the end of a long lane. My husband worked in Cedar Rapids. When I graduated from Manchester High School I was unable to attend college like most of my close friends did. I always regretted it. But now that all my children were in school all day, I signed up for Kirkwood Community College's "Wednesday College." This allowed adult students like me to select classes which met only once a week on Wednesday to work on a degree two or three classes at a time. Attending Kirkwood was not only educational, but a psychological lift into a different, stimulating world. I needed that.

That's the good part of Wednesday College – the bad part was if you missed a day, you missed a week's worth of three classes. With six young children and living where we did I managed to do that more than I wanted. If anyone got sick, it was always Tuesday night and it would last through Wednesday, so I'd miss classes. If we got a blinding snowstorm, it was always Tuesday night, which meant it would be Wednesday afternoon or Thursday before we got our long lane cleaned out. I'd miss classes. It seemed the fates conspired to keep me from attending college.

But then one Wednesday everyone was well and off to school or work. There was still snow on the ground, but the lane was passable. I was all ready for class and very eager to get there.

As I turned the car in the yard and headed for the lane, my front wheel slipped off the drive into a snowbank on a downward slope. Try as I might, I just got myself in deeper. I tried cat litter, pieces of carpet, ashes from the wood stove. By this time, my first class of the day was starting. I called neighbor after neighbor and no one was home to help me. I didn't have a road service which would pull me out. I was stuck and there was nothing I could do about it. My second class would start soon – without me.

I cried, I yelled, I swore. I even kicked the car as if it were the car's fault. Life was passing me by. I was angry about my situation and my responsibilities. I believed this incident was a metaphor for my life – stuck and going nowhere, and that I'd be stuck forever and go no where at all. It seemed I had no choice, I was just plain stuck.

I felt so sorry for myself the next couple days, I was irritable with everyone. I was even mad at myself. Earlier I had signed up for an adult education Lenten class at our Anamosa church which met at night. After much grumbling I decided I might as well go. Eight miles away, to a church class. Whoopdeedo! It seemed like that was the only thing I'd be able to do that got me out of the house and my restrictive responsibilities. I wasn't at all enthused about going, but I did.

The topic for that night was something like Making Choices, taught by a priest who was chaplain at the Men's Reformatory at Anamosa. He told about helping inmates see that they always had choices, even if the choices weren't desirable choices, there were always at least two choices. I thought, "Yeah, sure, look at him. He can believe that junk. He's single, no children, free to come and go when he wants, what does he know about being in prison, or being stuck in a situation like I'm stuck in?"

But I took the handouts the priest provided and later started thinking, yes, by golly, I do have a choice. I'm not chained to a tree, I've got a little money, I know people around the country, I COULD leave, get a job somewhere, do what I want to do when I want to do it! The thought was appealing and I mused about the places I could go, who I'd visit. It would be exciting – an adventure! Then reality crept in. How much money did I have? Not enough to pay rent, get a car or feed myself for very long. What kind of job would I get? I had been out of the job market for years, and even at my previous peak, I did traditional women's work which paid little. Who would I chose to visit? Each place or person I thought of had some drawback, I wouldn't want to be around them very long, even if they'd take me in.

Then I started thinking about holidays. My birthday was coming up. What would I be doing on my birthday if I left? Usually my kids made me a cake, decorated it, made me cards and sometimes made their own gift for me. Simple but sincere. My husband always chose such wonderful, meaningful cards to give me. I wouldn't have that this year, I'd be someplace else.

What about THEIR birthdays – who would make their cakes and special meals, who would shop for their presents or plan their birthday parties? Not me, I'd be someplace else.

Then I thought about Christmas Eve, always the most emotionally loaded holiday of the year for me. Where would I be? Would I be alone in some dingy room, drowning my sorrows with cheap wine? Would anyone invite me to Christmas dinner or would I be eating alone at some greasy spoon – if I was still eating? I didn't have a visit from Dickens' Ghost of Christmas Past or of the future, but I was able to see clearly what my life might be like. It would be miserable!

I decided I'd rather be where I was – in fact, I chose to be where I was, I CHOSE it! And that was a magic moment. When I said to myself, "I choose to be here," it was like an enormous weight slid from my shoulders. It was like sunshine after days of gray. Nothing at all had changed in my life except within me. I really did have a choice! I still missed some classes, but finally graduated with honors and went on to graduate from the University of Iowa. I've been to several foreign countries, served in the state legislature, met exciting people and seen such beauty in the world. I've had a good life, because even though it took me a while to comprehend it, I made the right choice.

Severly C. Hanson