

The Unforgiving Minute: A Soldier's Education

by Craig M. Mullaney

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Reviewed by:

Brittany D. Henderson (bhenderson@devry.edu), Senior Student Services Coordinator, DeVry University-Seattle Metro

Craig M. Mullaney is the subject of his own book, *The Unforgiving Minute: A Soldier's Education*. The story begins as Mullaney begins his first year (plebe year) at West Point and continues through his graduate studies at Oxford, his deployment to Afghanistan, and his transition back into the civilian world as a veteran.

The book is divided into three main sections: Student, Soldier, and Veteran. The author also includes a reading list with over 100 titles at end of the book with the note, "Reading has been an essential component of this soldier's education. With that in mind, I offer the following partial list of works organized loosely by subject" (p. 375). The subjects include Afghanistan, history, literature, military affairs, oxford education, philosophy, poetry, and West Point. The books ends with "an appeal" (p. 385–386) where the author makes the point that many people express an interest in supporting the troops but are not really sure how to put that sentiment into action. A portion of the proceeds from his book are donated to non-profit organizations working to support U.S. troops and veterans. The author asks that the reader consider contacting listed organizations to help on a more personal level.

Penguin also offers its own Readers' Guide at the end of the book to facilitate discussion around the author's development as a student, soldier and leader; his most influential educators; the role of travel and multiculturalism in his education; and the impact that study of literature, languages, and history had on his sense of self.

Mullaney's book would be a provocative choice for a new student reading program. With the population of military veterans and active duty students quickly increasing on many college campuses, orientation and student affairs professionals are searching for ways to integrate this population into the campus community. This book provides an opportunity to learn about military culture and add to the diversity training taking place on many campuses. It describes situations in the author's journey as a student that new students at any institution can relate to, as well as experiences that are likely to be dissimilar from their own. Because the book also offers a reading list and an appeal for service, it could easily be part of a larger programming theme, and service projects connected to the reading of the book could be incorporated into campus programming efforts.

While Mullaney arrives on his Reception Day at West Point to shouts from drill sergeants and messages that no one cares about his first name, the anxiety and the overall transition process that he encounters is not dissimilar to what students on our own campuses may experiencing. The author describes: "Forty eighteen-year-olds turned at different speeds. . . We must have looked ridiculous—a ragtag collection of shorts, untucked T-shirts, and long hair" (p. 3). It is a sight many orientation professionals may see at their own institutions. He asks himself, "What am I doing here?" (p. 11), a question that many of us, as orientation professionals, hope students will be able to eventually answer by accessing the resources we expose them to in our programs.

Yet, the richest opportunities for discussion will come from those very things that may seem most foreign to students on our college campuses. Relaying his experience as a Rhodes Scholar, Mullaney notes that "[a]fter four years with almost no freedom, Oxford was intoxicating. It was exactly what I needed after West Point, a chance to catch my breath" (p. 134). He describes his first

term as “a shock to every academic instinct [he] had honed” (p. 136). After spending five weeks tracking down his research advisor, he leaves the advising meeting confused with his advisor’s instructions to “[j]ust find a question and answer it. . . Read and think . . . Simultaneously if possible” (p. 137).

Another significant part of Mullaney’s story is meeting his wife, Meena, while at Oxford. He fumbles his way through their first encounters and then launches his “wooing offensive” (p. 153). As they progress into their courtship, they begin reading about each other’s cultures. He gives her books on West Point and the Army, and she gives him a primer on Hinduism, a history book about Indian independence, a novel set in Mumbai. Mullaney says he dove into Indian culture “heartfirst” as he explores Bollywood films and takes lessons in Hindi, all the while deepening his relationship with the woman who would become his future partner.

Travel becomes an important part of Mullaney’s instruction as well. He plans a three-week trip through Malaysia and Thailand with one of his Rhodes classmates, and afterwards gets away as often as possible to explore “the world’s classrooms,” traveling to such places as Egypt, Israel, Turkey, and New Zealand. It is in New Zealand that he learns of what took place on 9/11 and realizes the impact that day would have on his career after Oxford.

The theme of forgiveness is an undercurrent to the memoir as well. Not only does Mullaney cope with what he calls his own “unforgiving minute” while in combat, he also wrestles with his relationship with his father when his parents divorce after 28 years of marriage.

As mentioned earlier, the author provides a reading list at the end of his memoirs as a supplement. Campuses interested in expanding their programming efforts beyond a new student reading program may be able to turn to this reading list to develop a more comprehensive theme throughout the academic year. Additionally, faculty members who already feature some of these books in their curriculum may be able to provide particular insight into how particular pieces of literature or poetry influenced the author.

The author’s appeal for service and listing of non-profit organizations also lend to potential connections between service-learning programs and community service efforts on campus. Partnerships with departments responsible for coordinating service learning or community involvement may jump at the chance to plug into a new student reading program. Since service learning programs seek to integrate learning and reflection with meaningful service opportunities, projects based on material in a new student reading program could inspire new and rewarding collaborative relationships across multiple departments on campus, all to the benefit of the student.

For institutions experiencing a large increase in the number of military veterans entering college, this book would provide an excellent opportunity to connect with those students and build bridges between veterans and non-veterans on campus. However, it may also bring up areas of vulnerability and potentially painful memories for veterans of Operation Iraqi Freedom or Enduring Freedom; sensitivity to these issues should be part of preparing facilitators and instructors who may use the book. Counseling staff on campus, or professionals in the local community, may be able to provide insight into how to navigate discussions on the most sensitive topics. Considering partnerships with the veterans affairs office or veteran student groups on campus would also be a worthwhile pursuit if choosing this book for a first-year reading program.

The Unforgiving Minute has the potential to promote engaging discussions on leadership, multiculturalism, self-identity, and more. It can also help make connections between military veteran and non-veteran students and integrate the new student reading program into a larger programming theme throughout the campus.