DWELLING IN POSSIBILITIES (2008)

AT THE BEGINNING of school last fall, I ran into a student out on the University of Virginia Lawn, not far from the famous statue of Homer instructing an admiring pupil. Homer's student is in a toga. Mine was wearing wrap-around sunglasses like Bono's, black jeans, and a red T-shirt emblazoned with white Chinese characters. Over his shoulder he carried his laptop.

We asked each other the usual question: What did you do over the summer? What he did, as I recall, was a brief internship at a well-regarded Internet publication, a six-country swing though Europe, then back to enjoy his family and home, reconnect with high school friends, and work on recording a rock CD. What had I done? I had written five drafts of a chapter for a book on the last two years of Sigmund Freud's life. I had traveled to Crozet, a few miles away, to get pizza. I'd traveled 150 miles to Virginia Beach the day after I woke up distressed because I couldn't figure out how to begin my chapter. I stayed a night at the beach, figured it out (I thought), and come home. My young friend looked at me with a mixture of

awe and compassion. I felt a little like one of those aged men of the earth who populate Wordsworth's poetry. One of them, the Old Cumberland Beggar, goes so slowly that you never actually see him move, but if you return to the spot where you first encountered him two hours ago, lo, he has gone a little way down the road. The footprints are there to prove it.

I headed back to my office for draft number six, or something comparably glamorous. Where was my student going? He was no doubt heading into a more turbo-charged version of his summer, a life of supreme intensity created in collaboration with the laptop slung over his shoulder. For his student generation is a singular one: Its members have a spectacular hunger for life and more life. They want to study (a little), travel, make friends, make more friends, take in all the movies, listen to every hot band, keep up with everyone they've ever known. And there's something else, too, that distinguishes them: They live to multiply possibilities. They're enemies of closure. For as much as they want to do and actually manage to do, they always strive to keep their options open, never to shut possibilities down.

This hunger for life has a number of consequences, for now and for the future. It's part of what makes this student generation appealing, highly promising—and also vulnerable and dangerous. These students may go on to do great and good things, but they also present risks to themselves and to the common future. They seem almost to have been created, as the poet says, "half to rise and half to fall." As a teacher of theirs (and fellow citizen), I'm more than a little concerned about which it's going to be.

Internet technology was on hand for my current students from about 1995, when the Netscape browser made the Internet

prior media. (My students are possibility junkies.) You can multiply the number of possible clothing purchases near to infinity and do it with stunning speed. You can make all the pleated skirts in the world appear almost all at once for you to choose from. As we talked about this in class—with Thoreau's disapproving specter looking on (sometimes it appears that Thoreau disapproves of everything, except the drinking of cold water)—something surprising came out. The moment of maximum Internet pleasure was not the moment of closure, when you sealed the deal; it was the moment when the choices had been multiplied to the highest sum. It was the moment of maximum promise, when you touched the lip of the possible: of four majors and eight courses per term and a gazillion hits on your Facebook page, and being everyplace (almost) at once, and gazing upon all the pleated skirts that the world doth hold.

This is what Immanuel Kant, were he around to see it, might have called the computer sublime. (He called something like it mathematical sublimity.) The moment when you make the purchase, close the deal, pick a girlfriend, set a date: All those things, the students around the Thoreau table concurred, were a letdown, consummations not really to be wished for. The students were a little surprised by the conclusions they came to about themselves. "It's when I can see it all in front of me," one young woman said, "that's when I'm the happiest."

Ask an American college student what he's doing on Friday night. Ask him at five thirty Friday afternoon. "I don't know" will likely be the first response. But then will come a list of possibilities to make the average Chinese menu look sullenly costive: the concert, the play, the movie, the party, the stay-at-home, the chilling ("chillaxing"), the monitoring of SportsCenter, the reading (fast, fast) of an assignment or two. University students

now are virtual Hamlets of the virtual world, pondering possibility, faces pressed up against the sweetshop window of their all-purpose desiring machines. To ticket or not to ticket, buy or not to, party or no, or perhaps to simply stay in and to multiply options in numberless numbers, never to be closed down: Those are the questions.

And once you do get somewhere, wherever it might be, you'll find that, as Gertrude Stein has it, there's "no there there." At a student party, I'm told, about a fourth of the kids have their cell phones locked to their ears. What are they doing? "They're talking to their friends." About? "About another party they might conceivably go to." And naturally the other party is better than the one that they're now at (and not at), though of course there will be people at that party on their cell phones, talking about other simulacrum gatherings, spiraling on into M.C. Escher infinity.

It's possible that recent events in the world have added intensity to a student's quest for more possibilities. The events of September 11, which current college students experienced when they were eight, nine, ten, were an undoubted horror. But they had the effect, I think, of waking America's young people up from a pseudo-nihilistic doze. Before New York, Pennsylvania, and Virginia, the middle-class American teenager's world had been a pleasure dome full of rare delights. It was the reign of television: the oracle that knows everything and can take you anywhere. Television brought images of bliss, and its ads showed you the products that you needed to buy in order to achieve it. That well-known Jeep ad I mentioned in the last chapter that depicted hip kids tossing Frisbees and laughing like rock stars had nothing to do with the properties of a Jeep. It was a persona

accessible to everyone. And the Internet seems to me to have shaped their generation as much as the multichannel TV—with that critical device, the remote control—shaped the students who registered for my classes a decade earlier. What is the Internet to current students?

Consider first what it is not. A friend of mine who has assiduously kept a journal for forty years calls the journal, which now runs to about forty volumes, a "life thickener." His quotations, pictures, clips, drawings, and paintings give dense meaning to the blind onrush that unexamined life can be. He looks back through the volumes and sees that there *was* a life and that to him it meant something. To my students, I suspect, my friend would look like a medieval monk laboring over his manuscripts, someone with a radically pre-postmodern feel for time, someone who did not, in fact, understand what time actually is.

An Internet-linked laptop, one may safely say, is not a life thickener. At the fingertips of my students the laptop is a multiplier of the possible. "I dwell in possibility," says Emily Dickinson, "a fairer house than prose." My students want to dwell there with her. Just as TV and the culture of cool slowed kids down, made them languid and a bit shell-shocked, the Internet has had the effect of speeding them up.

My university recently passed an edict: No one, dammit (insofar as edicts can say dammit), is going to triple-major. Everyone now who is worth his tuition money double majors: The students in my classes are engineering/English, politics/English, chemistry/English. An urban legend in my leaf-fringed 'hood is that someone got around this inane dictum about triple majors by majoring in four subjects—there was, it seems, no rule against that. The top students in my school, the ones who set the stan-

dard for the rest even if they drive the rest crazy, want to take eight classes a term, major promiscuously, have a semester abroad at three different schools, connect with every likely person who is on Facebook, be checked in with by their pals and check in at every living moment.

One day I tried an experiment in a class I was teaching on English and American Romanticism. We had been studying Thoreau and talking about his reflections (sour) on the uses of technology for communication. ("We are in great haste," he says, "to construct a magnetic telegraph from Maine to Texas; but Maine and Texas, it may be, have nothing important to communicate.") I asked the group, "How many places were you simultaneously yesterday—at the most?" Suppose you were chatting on your cell phone, partially watching a movie in one corner of a computer screen, texting with three people (a modest number), and glancing occasionally at the text for some other course than ours—grazing, maybe, in Samuelson's *Economics* rather than diving deep into Thoreau's "Economy"—and then, also, tossing the occasional word to your roommate? That would be seven, seven places at once. Some students—with a little high-spirited hyperbole thrown in, no doubt—got into double digits. Of course it wouldn't take the Dalai Lama or Henry David Thoreau to assure them that anyone who is in seven places at once is not anywhere in particular—not present, not here now. Be everywhere now—that's what the current technology invites, and that's what my students apparently aspire to do.

Internet-linked computers are desiring-machines—machines for the stimulation of desire. But so is a TV; so in a certain sense is a movie screen. What makes the Internet singular is its power to expand desire, expand possibility beyond the confines of

ad that advertised the sort of person you'd be when you acquired the product. The ad was an emblem of the consumer moment: Buy in order to be.

Students wanted to be cool. They wanted to be beyond reproach. There was a sense abroad that if you simply did what you were supposed to do, kept low to the ground and stayed on the conveyor belt, the future that TV promised would be yours. Everything was a mode of entertainment, or could be transformed into one after it had been submitted to Letterman-style ridicule. President Clinton was a genial boy from Arkansas who awoke one day and found himself in office. But that had not slaked his boyishness at all. He still wanted a version of what every boy did: all-nighters, pizza, and his pals in constant attendance. The president was a dog who couldn't stay on the porch. My students—the guys in particular—often found him the perfect image of success: You need never grow up; need never abandon college-boy mode. The couch where you sat, hours a day, monitoring TV in lordly condescension, would in time morph into an airship to swoosh you into your dreams.

But then there came the day of near–American Apocalypse, September 11, 2001. The prospect of hanging, Doctor Johnson observed, does wonders to concentrate the mind. The mind of America has been concentrated. No one believes that the whole edifice is likely to topple down around us soon. But everyone now lives charged with the knowledge that today, tomorrow, next week, we can suffer an event that will change everything drastically. A dirty bomb in the middle of a great city, poison wafting in sweet-smelling clouds through a subway system, a water supply subtly tainted: Such things would not only destroy the lives of those they touch directly, they'd discompose and remake America in ways that would be, to say the least, none too

sweet. Tomorrow the deck may be shuffled and recut by the devil's hand. So what shall we do now?

The answer that comes from current students would seem to be this: Live, live, before the bombs go off in San Francisco or the water goes vile in New York and the new Mahdi appears on a billion screens at once to pronounce another turn in the Holy War that, for him, has been ongoing since the first Crusader scraped an armored foot on the soil of the Holy Land. On that bad day there will be, at the very least, the start of a comprehensive *closing down*. There will be no more free travel, no more easy money, and much less loose talk. Life will become a confinement, a prison, a pound. So now, as James's Strether instructs Little Bilham, you must "live all you can; it's a mistake not to." There's a humane hunger to my students' hustle for more life—but I think it's possible that down below bubbles a fear. Do it now, for later may be too late.

It's clearly a new university world that I'm living in, though it took me some time to see it. My revelation occurred a few months ago. Up until that point, I was always happy to see students bringing their laptops into class. The sight of them conjured up visions of upbeat news magazine covers: kids in ordered rows behind their computers, tapping in the new millennium. And the students who brought their laptops seemed to be the most engaged: They'd be skittering fast across the keys, alert and alive and glancing up from time to time to toss a few sentences into the conversation. These were the plugged-in kids, the committed ones. But then one day I made a rare trip to the blackboard and on the way glanced over a laptopper's shoulder. There was what appeared to be a YouTube video in one corner (Shakira? The "Hips Don't Lie" video?) and e-mail front and

center, but nothing much to do with the subject of the class. How could I have missed it? This sort of thing is now the way of the classroom world.

Three thousand first-year students entered my university last year: Two thousand nine hundred and six of them—we keep some tight records here—brought laptops with them; ninety brought desktops. Four students—the incoming James Deans no doubt—showed up computerless. (Ten years ago, half of our first-year students came to school without computers.) At Virginia, as at just about every other university, almost all buildings are now equipped with wireless routers. This began to happen about four years ago, and many of us professors barely noticed it in part because we generally travel only from office to classroom. But our students are nomads, on the move all day. Wherever they sit, they set up Internet Command Central. Now students in almost any classroom can get directly onto the Internet and, given the shieldlike screens on their laptops, they can call up what they like. Especially in the big lecture classes, everyone's flitting from website to website, checking e-mail, and instant messaging. Do they pay any attention to the class? My students tell me that they're experts in paying attention to many things at once: It's no problem at all.

A romantic, says Nietzsche, is someone who always wants to be elsewhere: If that's so, then the children of the Internet are romantics, for they perpetually wish to be someplace else and the laptop reliably helps take them there. The e-mailer, the instant messager, the Web browser are all dispersing their energies and interests outward, away from the present, the here and now. The Internet user is constantly connecting with people and institutions far away, creating surrogate communities that displace the potential community at hand.

Then, too, booking by computer has made travel easier and, by eliminating a certain number of middlemen, kept it reasonably cheap. So there's an inducement to take off physically as well. The Internet is perhaps the most centrifugal technology ever devised. The classroom, where you sit down in one space at one time and ponder a text or an issue in slow motion, is coming to feel ever more antiquated. What's at a premium now is movement, making connections, getting all the circuitry fizzing and popping.

For students now, life is elsewhere. Life is at parties, at clubs, in music, with friends, in sports, and on and on through the Internet. Classes matter to them (a little), but classes are just part of an ever-enlarging web of activities and diversions. Students now seek to master their work—not to be taken over by it and consumed. They want to dispatch it, do it quickly, cop a high grade, and then get on to the many things that truly interest them. For my students live in the future and not the present; they live with their prospects for success and pleasure. They dwell in possibility.

Drugs? Drugs are a big part of the game, along with the Internet. The answer to the question "What drugs are college students taking now?" is, as it has been for some time, "All of the above." But the drugs that have most recently entered the scene are the ones designed to combat attention deficit disorder: Adderall, Ritalin, Concerta, and Daytrana, which delivers the meds through a patch. These are all pharmaceuticals, obtained by prescription, though often the people taking them have never gotten diagnosed. The ADD drugs seem to be omnipresent; they're on sale in every dorm at prices that rise exponentially as the week of final exams approaches. "Twenty dollars for a hit," one student told me, "on the night before an exam in

the intro econ class." Their effect is, pretty subtly but pretty surely, to speed the taker up. They kick him forward, give him fresh juice to keep exploring possibilities, to keep buying and doing and buying and doing.

The idea is to keep moving, never to stop. It's now become so commonplace as to be beneath notice, but there was a time that every city block contiguous to a university did not contain a shop dispensing a speed-you-up drug and inviting people to sit down and enjoy it along with wireless computer access. Laptops seem to go with coffee (and other stimulants) in much the same way that blood-and-gold sunsets went with LSD and Oreo cookies with weed. (It's possible, I sometimes think, that fully half of the urban Starbucks in America are located in rental properties that once were head shops.) Nor were there always energy drinks, vile-tasting concoctions coming in cans covered with superhero insignias designed to make you run as fast and steady as your computer, your car, and—this is Darwinian capitalism after all—your colleagues. You've got to keep going. Almost all of my students have one book—an old book—that they've read and treasured and read again. It's the American epic of free movement, *On the Road*, a half century old this year, but to them one of the few things in the culture of my generation that's still youthful.

The sports that this generation has put its stamp on, X Games sorts of things like snowboarding, surfing, and skateboarding, are all about velocity, motion, skimming. They're about speeding flawlessly through space without being diverted, slowed down, or captured by mere gravity. (Gravity, in all senses, is what my students are out to avoid.) Like the drugs, the sports help to keep the kids moving elsewhere.

How about their music? It's a little hard to say. Students no

longer turn their speakers out the dorm window and blast the quad with Poco's *Deliverin'*. Music now comes personally, a whisper in the ear, through the iPod, so that everyone can walk around with the soundtrack to his own movie purring. This constant music plug-in is another mode of being elsewhere, about right for the current dispensation. As to the sort of music it is, the kind of stuff that runs through the iPods is varied. Many of my students delight in listening to bands that absolutely no one but they seem to have heard of. When I ask them in class to tell me their favorite tunes, I'm reminded of the days when my friends and I would show each other our baseball cards. As you flipped over yours, the other guy responded with "Got it. Got it. Don't got it. Got it." "Don't got it" came with a wince. The coolest kid in the room now is clearly the one whose favorite bands are the ones the others wince most over—the ones they don't got.

But the students have a collective musical taste, too. When they're together at a party, when they've unplugged their iPods and put their cell phones temporarily on vibrate, what they want is rap. Whatever the content of rap, its form is propulsive forward motion—the beat, the energy pulse, is what it's about. It drives you forward, runs fuel through the motor. Rap is part of the constant stimulation that students seem unable to live without.

When a seminar is over now, the students reach their hands into their pockets and draw—it looks like *Gunfight at the O.K. Corral*. But what they're reaching for—after discussing Thoreau, say, on the pleasures of solitude—are their cell phones. They've been disconnected, off the drug, for more than an hour and they need a fix. The cell phoning comes as a relief: The students have been (give or take) in one place, at one time,

pondering a few passages from *Walden*. Now they need to disperse themselves again, get away from the immediate, dissolve the present away.

But I teach at one university, the University of Virginia, known for high-powered students who are also sometimes high partiers: Is what I'm saying true for all schools? Well, I do some traveling and talking to colleagues at other places, and from what I can tell, the more high-prestige the institution, the more frenetic and centrifugal the pace. At Harvard and Yale, I'd now expect to find kids who've hit a white incandescence or maybe who've fused completely with the Internet, living within it, like characters out of *Neuromancer*, finding in their merger with the machine a kind of high that can take the place of happiness.

Skate fast over the surfaces of life and cover all the extended space you can, says the new ethos. Perhaps the greatest of all surface skimmers, the poet laureate of the way we live now at college, was William Wordsworth's arch-antagonist, George Gordon, Lord Byron. The poetry of Wordsworth, the explorer of inner space, is deliberate, slow, ponderous, like those old men of the woods he loves to depict—and that I may resemble to my fast-skimming students. The complaint against Wordsworth is that he is tiresome; he has no time for sex or violence, just muted natural beauty and a mystical sublime. Byron—rich, beautiful, glamorous, with startlingly white skin, black hair, and a swanlike neck—doesn't celebrate violence. Sex is his game. In *Don Juan*, the hero skims and skips from one encounter to the next. His desires are mobile: He can play the woman's part and the man's. Desire doesn't provoke complex ambivalence in Byron, just the need to move from one beckoning satisfaction to the next. Byron's poetry has all the velocity of this ever-

moving, ever-changing desire: His rhymes are shrewd, arch, unexpected, and seem to be turned with a wrist flick's ease. Thus Byron on Wordsworth's good friend Samuel Taylor Coleridge, who had just published his *Biographia Literaria*, a book Byron disliked because it was dense and difficult, something you needed to read at least twice: "And Coleridge, too, has lately taken wing, / But like a hawk encumbered with his hood,—/ Explaining metaphysics to the nation—/ I wish he would explain his Explanation."

Byron claimed to compose best on horseback and to be able to concoct dozens of lines in an outing. Wordsworth shouted his lines aloud as he roamed through the Lake District, his dog browsing ahead of him to bark if strangers, who might hear his bellowing and think him mad, appeared on the trail. Byron disliked Wordsworth for one reason above all the rest: boring. The poet of "rocks and stones and trees" was boring. Byron wished never to be bored. So he kept moving, kept accelerating from one point to the next, not in hopes of being satisfied—that he took to be an illusion—but so as not to be overcome by the new-tide demon, ennui. In 1825, the year after Byron died, the first passenger locomotive appeared and maybe, says Camille Paglia, Byron's aristocratic spirit flew by metempsychosis into the machine. Perhaps Byron's restless demon has migrated again, this time from locomotive to laptop.

Students now are quasi-romantics—of a Byronic sort. He would have adored their world of fast travel, fast communication, and fast relationships. There is no more Byronic form of erotic life than the hookup. When after the publication of *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage* Byron became a celebrity—"I awoke and found myself famous," he said—he was surrounded with erotic opportunities. Women sent him notes begging for liaisons;

they followed his carriage through the streets; they smuggled themselves into his rooms. And frequently Byron, who was probably more often seduced than seducing, was pleased to comply. In his superspeed erotic life, Byron is said to have hooked up hundreds of times.

What exactly does it mean to hook up? It means managing to have good sex without activating all the strong feelings that sex usually brings. Hooking up is a fantasy of frictionless sex—sex free of deep emotion. It's sex that lets you keep on sliding over surfaces, moving from partner to partner as smoothly as you move from site to site on the laptop. In fact, the Internet-linked computer is an erotic bazaar, a hookup machine. All of those pages on Facebook are, among other things, personal ads. (Byron would love shopping there—and, more, being shopped for.) Here students (and others, too) can find objects more alluring than pleated skirts. They can find sexual possibilities without end.

Hooking up, of course, is a kind of myth. Sex usually does provoke strong feelings, even when people swear to each other that—this time, this time—it won't. Not everyone is wired like Lord Byron. Students often find that they need continuity and comfort in what can be a harsh college world. Many of them hold faithfully to boyfriends and girlfriends through all four years of school (albeit sometimes with special spring break dispensations). And a few of those students busting out of my class, grabbing for their cell phones, are calling not the alluring near stranger who just texted them, but their parents. In every class I teach, there are at least two or three students who call home every day.

For the way that my students live now is dangerous—some of them know it, some learn in time. "In skating over thin ice,"

Emerson says, "our safety is in our speed." But sometimes, like it or not, we're slowed down or stopped, and then trouble begins. Last term a young woman, an art history and commerce major who was in one of my classes, stopped by my office. She's a marvelous student; I've never taught anyone who could read poetry with much more subtlety and feeling. She was pale, sleepless; her teeth were chattering softly. I invited her to sit down, and then asked some questions. "How many courses are you taking?" Five, no six, seven. "Audits?" Yes, one. "A thesis?" Almost done: She planned to knock out forty pages over the weekend, but now her father, whom she clearly adored, was sick, and she'd have to go home and then how could she—?

"It's too much," I said.

"What?" she hadn't heard me exactly.

"What you're doing? It's too much." And then came—as it almost always does when I say these words, or something like them—a feeling of great relief. Someone with a claim to authority has said that it's okay to be tired, okay to ease up. Okay to rest. When my students crash on their own, they crash like helicopters dropping straight out of the sky when the rotor stops spinning. They're often unaware that they're on the verge of trouble. They're doing what they are supposed to do, what their parents want, with all those courses and the multiple majors; and they haven't got much of any resources to look inside and to see that matters are out of joint—no one has thought to help them acquire those. Did Byron ever fall apart, victim of his own hunger for speed and space? If so, he told us little about it.

I wonder, thinking back, was it something like an encounter I had had—to take the reincarnation trope a step further—with Lord Byron that fall day on the Lawn? He was all for glamour

and motion. I was all for—well, what was I for? Was it the magic of the fifth draft on a project about a thinker, Freud, about whom—let us be generous—not everyone seems to care a great deal? I admit that I love that line of Yeats's about how writing is ceaseless stitching and unstitching, but "if it does not seem a moment's thought / Our stitching and unstitching has been naught." The stitching-unstitching business fascinates me. Yet my student had been to six countries, *six!*—and that was only part of his summer's story. If you asked returning students now for that old composition standard—What I Did This Summer—they'd have to hit you with three-decker novels.

And what do I have to offer the speedsters, I, a slow person from the generation of one kind of Coke, three TV stations, one mom and one dad? How exactly do we professors teach this kind of student? What do they need to know?

Many of my colleagues have a ready answer, and its essence is this: If you can't lick 'em, join 'em. In effect, they've made the courses an extension of the Internet. Their classes are laser and light shows, fast-moving productions that mime the colors and sound and above all the velocity of the laptop. There are movie screens, sound systems, Internet tie-ins. And, these colleagues say, it works. One professor I know equips his students with handheld wireless input devices that have twelve buttons and look a lot like TV remotes. Every five minutes or so he stops teaching and polls the kids to see how well they're doing. I admire the resourcefulness that's on display here—and I admire the skill and energy that many of my fellow teachers have deployed to meet students halfway. And yet . . .

Not long ago, a younger colleague came by my office to chat and at a certain point informed me that her son, who was four

years old, had a favorite dinosaur and that it was called the Edmontosaurus. ("Edmundosaurus" is what I could have sworn she said.) She remarked, with what seemed untainted goodwill, that this may be the very oldest of the dinosaurs. A few weeks later she came by again—was she wheeling a TV in front of her, taking it to class?—and ended up telling me about this Edmundosaurus one more time. Well, the kind of schooling I endorse goes back at least as far as Socrates and maybe further, though—thanks anyway for the suggestion—not all the way to the thunder lizards.

For a student to be educated, she has to face brilliant antagonists: She has to encounter thinkers who see the world in different terms than she does. Does she come to college as a fundamentalist guardian of crude faith? Then two necessary books for her are Freud's *Future of an Illusion* and Nietzsche's *The Anti-Christ*. Once she's weathered the surface insults, she may find herself in an intellectual version of paradise, where she can defend her beliefs or change them, and where what's on hand is not a chance conversation, as Socrates liked to say, but a dialogue about how to live.

Is the student a scion of high-minded liberals who think that religion is the Oxycontin—the redneck heroin—of Redneck Nation? Then on might come William James and *The Varieties of Religious Experience* or Schopenhauer's essays on faith. It's this kind of dialogue, deliberate, gradual, thoughtful, that students immersed in the manic culture of Internet and Adderall are conditioned not to have. The first step for the professor now is to slow his classroom down. The common phrase for what he wants to do is telling: We "stop and think." Stop. Our students rarely get a chance to stop: They're always in motion, always spitting out what comes first to mind, never challenging, checking, revising.

Not long ago a young man came to my office, plopped down, and looked at me with tired urgency. "Give me ten minutes on Freud," he said. "Convince me that he really has something important to tell me." Despite appearances, this was a good moment. It was a chance to try to persuade him to slow it down. Get one of Freud's books—*Civilization and Its Discontents* is usually the best place to start—read it once and again, then come back for a talk.

When you have that kind of conversation, one on one, you begin, however modestly, to create a university. Why does the encounter need to take place face-to-face, rather than online? Because the student and teacher need to create a bond of good feeling, where they are free to speak openly with each other. They need to connect not just through cold print but through gestures, intonations, jokes. The student needs to discover what the teacher knows and what she exemplifies about how to live; the teacher needs contact with the student's energy and hopes. That kind of connection happens best in person; perhaps it can only happen that way.

This Socratic education, the goal of which is self-knowledge, is not a luxury. Over years of teaching I have seen that those students who, through whatever form of struggle, really have come to an independent sense of who they are and what they want are the ones who genuinely thrive in the world. Thoreau says that if you advance in the direction of your dreams, you'll find uncommon success, and teaching a few generations of students has persuaded me that he is right. The ones who do what they love without a lot of regard for conventional success tend to turn out happy and strong.

We teachers need to remind ourselves from time to time that our primary job is not to help our students to acquire skills,

marketable skills, bankables. And we don't preeminently teach communication and computation and instill habits of punctuality and thoroughness. We're not here to help our students make their minds resemble their laptops, fast and feverish. We didn't get into teaching to make trains of thought run on time.

As for our students, all honor to them: They may have something to teach the five-drafter. By their hunger for more life, they convey hope that the world is still a splendid place, worth seeing and appreciating. Into spontaneity they can liberate us. But life is more than spontaneity and whim. To live well, we must sometimes stop and think and then try to remake the work in progress that we currently are. There's no better place for that than a college classroom where, together, we can slow it down and live deliberately.

And to that end (Edmundosaurus, take the microphone): No more laptops in my classroom. You can leave them at home. You can check 'em at the door.