FELLOW STUDENTS

WHO ARE YOU AND WHAT ARE YOU DOING HERE?

A Word to the Incoming Class

WELCOME AND CONGRATULATIONS: Getting to the first day of college is a major achievement. You're to be commended, and not just you, but the parents, grandparents, uncles, and aunts who helped get you here.

It's been said that raising a child effectively takes a village: Well, as you may have noticed, our American village is not in very good shape. We've got guns, drugs, wars, fanatical religions, a slime-based popular culture, and some politicians who—a little restraint here—aren't what they might be. Merely to survive in this American village and to win a place in the entering class has taken a lot of grit on your part. So, yes, congratulations to all.

You now may think that you've about got it made. Amid the impressive college buildings, in company with a high-powered faculty, surrounded by the best of your generation, all you need is to keep doing what you've done before: Work hard, get good grades, listen to your teachers, get along with the people around

you, and you'll emerge in four years as an educated young man or woman. Ready for life.

Do not believe it. It is not true. If you want to get a real education in America, you're going to have to fight—and I don't mean just fight against the drugs and the violence and against the slime-based culture that is still going to surround you. I mean something a little more disturbing. To get an education, you're probably going to have to fight against the institution that you find yourself in—no matter how prestigious it may be. (In fact, the more prestigious the school, the more you'll probably have to push.) You can get a terrific education in America now—there are astonishing opportunities at almost every college—but the education will not be presented to you wrapped and bowed. To get it, you'll need to struggle and strive, to be strong, and occasionally even to piss off some admirable people.

I came to college with few resources, but one of them was an understanding, however crude, of how I might use my opportunities there. This I began to develop because of my father, who had never been to college—in fact, he'd barely gotten out of high school. One night after dinner, he and I were sitting in our kitchen at 58 Clewley Road in Medford, Massachusetts, hatching plans about the rest of my life. I was about to go off to college, a feat no one in my family had accomplished in living memory. "I think I might want to be prelaw," I told my father. I had no idea what being prelaw was. My father compressed his brow and blew twin streams of smoke, dragonlike, from his magnificent nose. "Do you want to be a lawyer?" he asked. My father had some experience with lawyers, and with policemen, too; he was not well disposed toward either. "I'm not really sure," I told him, "but lawyers make pretty good money, right?"

My father detonated. (That was not uncommon. He detonated a lot.) He told me that I was going to go to college only once, and that while I was there I had better study what I wanted. He said that when rich kids went to school, they majored in the subjects that interested them, and that my younger brother Philip and I were as good as any rich kids. (We were rich kids minus the money.) Wasn't I interested in literature? I confessed that I was. Then I had better study literature, unless I had inside information to the effect that reincarnation wasn't just hype, and I'd be able to attend college thirty or forty times. If I had such info, prelaw would be fine, and maybe even a tour through invertebrate biology could also be tossed in. But until I had the reincarnation stuff from a solid source, I better get to work and pick out some English classes from the course catalog.

"How about the science requirements?" I asked.

"Take 'em later," he said. "You never know."

My father, Wright Aukenhead Edmundson, Malden High School class of 1948 (by a hair), knew the score. What he told me that evening at the Clewley Road kitchen table was true in itself, and it also contains the germ of an idea about what a university education should be. But apparently almost everyone else—students, teachers, trustees, and parents—see the matter much differently. They have it wrong.

Education has one salient enemy in present-day America, and that enemy is education—university education in particular. To almost everyone, university education is a means to an end. For students, that end is a good job. Students want the credentials that will help them get ahead. They want the certificate that will grant them access to Wall Street, or entrance into law or medical or business school. And how can we blame them? America values power and money, big players with big bucks. When we raise our children, we tell them in multiple

ways that what we want most for them is success—material success. To be poor in America is to be a failure. It's to be without decent health care, without basic necessities, often without dignity. Then there are those backbreaking student loans: People leave school as servants, indentured to pay massive bills, so that first job better be a good one. Students come to college with the goal of a diploma in mind—what happens to them in between, especially in classrooms, is often of no deep and determining interest to them.

In college, life is elsewhere. Life is at parties, at clubs, in music, with friends, in sports. Life is what celebrities have. The idea that the courses you take should be the primary objective of going to college is tacitly considered absurd. In terms of their work, students live in the future and not the present; they live with their prospects for success. If universities stopped issuing credentials, half of the clients would be gone by tomorrow morning, with the remainder following fast behind.

The faculty, too, is often absent: Their real lives are also elsewhere. Like most of their students, they aim to get on. The work they are compelled to do to advance—get tenure, promotion, raises, outside offers—is, broadly speaking, scholarly work. No matter what anyone says, this work has precious little to do with the fundamentals of teaching. The proof is that virtually no undergraduate students can read and understand their professors' scholarly publications. The public senses this disparity and so thinks of the professors' work as being silly or beside the point. Some of it is. But the public also senses that because professors don't pay full-bore attention to teaching, they don't have to work very hard—they've created a massive feather bed for themselves and called it a university.

This is radically false. Ambitious professors, the ones who,

like their students, want to get ahead in America, work furiously. Scholarship, even if pretentious and almost unreadable, is nonetheless labor-intense. One can slave for a year or two on a single article for publication in this or that refereed journal. These essays are honest: Their footnotes reflect real reading, real assimilation, and real dedication. Shoddy work—in which the author cheats, cuts corners, copies from others—is quickly detected. The people who do the work have highly developed intellectual powers, and they push themselves hard to reach a certain standard. That the results have almost no practical relevance for students, the public, or even, frequently, other scholars is a central element in the tragicomedy that is often academia.

The students and the professors have made a deal: Neither of them has to throw himself heart and soul into what happens in the classroom. The students write their abstract, overintellectualized essays; the professors grade the students for their capacity to be abstract and overintellectual—and often genuinely smart. For their essays can be brilliant, in a chilly way; they can also be clipped from the Internet, and often are. Whatever the case, no one wants to invest too much in them—for life is elsewhere. The professor saves his energies for the profession, while the student saves his for friends, social life, volunteer work, making connections, and getting in position to clasp hands on the true grail, the first job.

No one in this picture is evil; no one is criminally irresponsible. It's just that smart people are prone to look into matters to see how they might go about buttering their toast. Then they butter their toast.

As for the administrators, their relation to the students often seems based not on love but fear. Administrators fear bad publicity, scandal, and dissatisfaction on the part of their customers.

More than anything else, though, they fear lawsuits. Throwing a student out of college for this or that piece of bad behavior is very difficult, almost impossible. The student will sue your eyes out. One kid I knew (and rather liked) threatened on his blog to mince his dear and esteemed professor (me) with a samurai sword for the crime of having taught a boring class. (The class *was* a little boring—I had a damn cold—but the punishment seemed a bit severe.) The dean of students laughed lightly when I suggested that this behavior might be grounds for sending the student on a brief vacation. I was, you might say, discomfited, and showed up to class for a while with my cell phone jiggered to dial 911 with one touch.

Still, this was small potatoes. Colleges are even leery of disciplining guys who have committed sexual assault, or assault plain and simple. Instead of being punished, these guys frequently stay around, strolling the quad and swilling the libations, an affront (and sometimes a terror) to their victims.

You'll find that cheating is common as well. As far as I can discern, the student ethos goes like this: If the professor is so lazy that he gives the same test every year, it's okay to go ahead and take advantage—you've got better things to do. The Internet is amok with services selling term papers, and those services exist, capitalism being what it is, because people purchase the papers—lots of them. Fraternity files bulge with old tests from a variety of courses. Periodically, the public gets exercised about this situation and there are articles in the national news. But then interest dwindles and matters go back to normal.

One of the reasons professors sometimes look the other way when they sense cheating is that it sends them into a world of sorrow. A friend of mine had the temerity to detect cheating on the part of a kid who was the nephew of a well-placed official

in an Arab government complexly aligned with the U.S. Black limousines pulled up in front of his office and disgorged decorously suited negotiators. Did my pal fold? No, he's not the type. But he did not enjoy the process.

What colleges generally want are well-rounded students, civic leaders, people who know what the system demands, how to keep matters light and not push too hard for an education or anything else; people who get their credentials and leave professors alone to do their brilliant work so they may rise and enhance the rankings of the university. Such students leave and become donors and so, in their own turn, contribute immeasurably to the university's standing. They've done a fine job skating on surfaces in high school—the best way to get an across-the-board outstanding record—and now they're on campus to cut a few more figure eights.

In a culture where the major and determining values are monetary, what else could you do? How else would you live if not by getting all you can, succeeding all you can, making all you can?

The idea that a university education really should have no substantial content, should not be about what John Keats was disposed to call "Soul-making," is one that you might think professors and university presidents would be discreet about. Not so. This view informed an address that Richard Brodhead gave to the senior class at Yale before he departed to become president of Duke. Brodhead, an impressive, articulate man, seems to take as his educational touchstone the Duke of Wellington's precept that the Battle of Waterloo was won on the playing fields of Eton. Brodhead suggests that the content of the course isn't really what matters. In five years (or five months, or minutes), the student is likely to have forgotten how to do the

problem sets and will only hazily recollect what happens in the ninth book of *Paradise Lost*. The legacy of their college years will be a legacy of difficulties overcome. When they face equally arduous tasks later in life, students will tap their old resources of determination, and they'll win.

All right, there's nothing wrong with this as far as it goes—after all, the student who writes a brilliant forty-page thesis in a hard week has learned more than a little about her inner resources. Maybe it will give her needed confidence in the future. But doesn't the content of the courses matter at all?

On the evidence of this talk, no. Trying to figure out whether the stuff you're reading is true or false and being open to having your life changed is a fraught, controversial activity. Doing so requires energy from the professor—which is better spent on other matters. This kind of perspective-altering teaching and learning can cause the things that administrators fear above all else: trouble, arguments, bad press, et cetera. After the kid-samurai episode, the chair of my department not unsympathetically suggested that this was the sort of incident that could happen when you brought a certain intensity to teaching. At the time I found this remark a tad detached, but maybe he was right.

So if you want an education, the odds aren't with you: The professors are off doing what they call their own work; the other students, who've doped out the way the place runs, are busy leaving their professors alone and getting themselves in position for bright and shining futures; the student-services people are trying to keep everyone content, offering plenty of entertainment and building another state-of-the-art workout facility every few months. The development office is already scanning you for future donations.

So why make trouble? Why not just go along? Let the profs roam free in the realms of pure thought, let yourselves party in the realms of impure pleasure, and let the student-services gang assert fewer prohibitions and newer delights for you. You'll get a good job, you'll have plenty of friends, you'll have a driveway of your own.

You'll also, if my father and I are right, be truly and righteously screwed. The reason for this is simple. The quest at the center of a liberal arts education is not a luxury quest; it's a necessity quest. If you do not undertake it, you risk leading a life of desperation—maybe quiet; maybe, in time, very loud—and I am not exaggerating. For you risk trying to be someone other than who you are, which, in the long run, is killing.

By the time you come to college, you will have been told who you are numberless times. Your parents and friends, your teachers, your counselors, your priests and rabbis and ministers and imams have all had their say. They've let you know how they size you up, and they've let you know what they think you should value. They've given you a sharp and protracted taste of what they feel is good and bad, right and wrong. Much is on their side. They have confronted you with scriptures—holy books that, whatever their actual provenance, have given people what they feel to be wisdom for thousands of years. They've given you family traditions—you've learned the ways of your tribe and community. And, too, you've been tested, probed, looked at up and down and through. The coach knows what your athletic prospects are, the guidance office has a sheaf of test scores that relegate you to this or that ability quadrant, and your teachers have got you pegged. You are, as Foucault might say, the intersection of many evaluative and potentially determining discourses: You, boy, you, girl, have been made.

And—contra Foucault—that's not so bad. Embedded in all of the major religions are profound truths. Schopenhauer, who despised belief in transcendent things, nonetheless taught Christianity to be of inexpressible worth. He couldn't believe in the divinity of Jesus or in the afterlife, but to Schopenhauer, a deep pessimist, a religion that had as its central emblem the figure of a man being tortured on a cross couldn't be entirely misleading. To the Christian, Schopenhauer said, pain was at the center of the understanding of life, and that was just as it should be.

One does not need to be as harsh as Schopenhauer to understand the use of religion, even if one does not believe in an otherworldly God. And all those teachers and counselors and friends—and the prognosticating uncles, the dithering aunts, the fathers and mothers with their hopes for your fulfillment, or their fulfillment in you—should not necessarily be cast aside or ignored. Families have their wisdom. The question "Who do they think you are at home?" is never an idle one.

The major conservative thinkers have always been very serious about what goes by the name of common sense. Edmund Burke saw common sense as a loosely made but often profound collective work in which humanity deposited its hard-earned wisdom—the precipitate of joy and tears—over time. You have been raised in proximity to common sense, if you've been raised at all, and common sense is something to respect, though not quite—peace unto the formidable Burke—to revere.

You may be all that the good people who raised you say you are; you may want all they have shown you is worth wanting; you may be someone who is truly your father's son or your mother's daughter. But then again, you may not be.

For the power that is in you, as Emerson suggested, may be

new in nature. You may not be the person that your parents take you to be. And—this thought is both more exciting and more dangerous—you may not be the person that you take yourself to be, either. You may not have read yourself aright, and college is the place where you can find out whether you have or not. The reason to read Blake and Dickinson and Freud and Dickens is not to become more cultivated or more articulate or to be someone who, at a cocktail party, is never embarrassed (or can embarrass others). The best reason to read them is to see if they know you better than you know yourself. You may find your own suppressed and rejected thoughts following back to you with an "alienated majesty." Reading the great writers, you may have the experience Longinus associated with the sublime: You feel that you have actually created the text yourself. For somehow your predecessors are more yourself than you are.

This was my own experience reading the two writers who have influenced me the most, Sigmund Freud and Ralph Waldo Emerson. They gave words to thoughts and feelings that I had never been able to render myself. They shone a light onto the world, and what they saw, suddenly I saw, too. From Emerson I learned to trust my own thoughts, to trust them even when every voice seems to be on the other side. I need the wherewithal, as Emerson did, to say what's on my mind and to take the inevitable hits. Much more I learned from the sage—about character, about loss, about joy, about writing and its secret sources, but Emerson most centrally preaches the gospel of self-reliance, and that is what I have tried most to take from him. I continue to hold in mind one of Emerson's most memorable passages: "Society is a joint-stock company, in which the members agree, for the better securing of his bread to each shareholder,

to surrender the liberty and culture of the eater. The virtue in most request is conformity. Self-reliance is its aversion. It loves not realities and creators, but names and customs."

Emerson's greatness lies not only in showing you how powerful names and customs can be, but also in demonstrating how exhilarating it is to buck them. When he came to Harvard to talk about religion, he shocked the professors and students by challenging the divinity of Jesus and the truth of his miracles. He wasn't invited back for decades.

From Freud I found a great deal to ponder as well. I don't mean Freud the aspiring scientist, but the Freud who was a speculative essayist and interpreter of the human condition like Emerson. Freud challenges nearly every significant human ideal. He goes after religion. He says that it comes down to the longing for the father. He goes after love. He calls it "the overestimation of the erotic object." He attacks our desire for charismatic popular leaders. We're drawn to them because we hunger for absolute authority. He declares that dreams don't predict the future and that there's nothing benevolent about them. They're disguised fulfillments of repressed wishes.

Freud has something challenging and provoking to say about virtually every human aspiration. I learned that if I wanted to affirm any consequential ideal, I had to talk my way past Freud. He was—and is—a perpetual challenge and goad.

Never has there been a more shrewd and imaginative cartographer of the psyche. His separation of the self into three parts, and his sense of the fraught, anxious, but often negotiable relations among them (negotiable when you come to the game with a Freudian knowledge), does a great deal to help one navigate experience. (Though sometimes—and I owe this to Emerson—it

seems right to let the psyche fall into civil war, accepting barrages of anxiety and grief for this or that good reason.)

The battle is to make such writers one's own, to winnow them out and to find their essential truths. We need to see where they fall short and where they exceed the mark, and then to develop them a little, as the ideas themselves, one comes to see, actually developed others. (Both Emerson and Freud live out of Shakespeare—but only a giant can be truly influenced by Shakespeare.) In reading, I continue to look for one thing—to be influenced, to learn something new, to be thrown off my course and onto another, better way.

My father knew that he was dissatisfied with life. He knew that none of the descriptions people had for him quite fit. He understood that he was always out of joint with life as it was. He had talent: My brother and I each got about half the raw ability he possessed, and that's taken us through life well enough. But what to do with that talent—there was the rub for my father. He used to stroll through the house intoning his favorite line from Groucho Marx's ditty "Whatever It Is, I'm Against It." (I recently asked my son, now twenty-one, if he thought I was mistaken in teaching him this particular song when he was six years old. "No!" he said, filling the air with an invisible forest of exclamation points.) But what my father never managed to get was a sense of who he might become. He never had a world of possibilities spread before him, never made sustained contact with the best that has been thought and said. He didn't get to revise his understanding of himself, figure out what he'd do best that might give the world some profit.

My father was a gruff man but also a generous one, so that night at the kitchen table at 58 Clewley Road he made an effort

to let me have the chance that had been denied to him by both fate and character. He gave me the chance to see what I was all about, and if it proved to be different from him, proved even to be something he didn't like or entirely comprehend, then he'd deal with it.

Right now, if you're going to get a real education, you may have to be aggressive and assertive.

Your professors will give you some fine books to read, and they'll probably help you understand them. What they won't do, for reasons that perplex me, is ask you if the books contain truths you could live your life by. When you read Plato, you'll probably learn about his metaphysics and his politics and his way of conceiving the soul. But no one will ask you if his ideas are good enough to believe in. No one will ask you, in the words of Emerson's disciple William James, what their "cash value" might be. No one will suggest that you might use Plato as your bible for a week or a year or longer. No one, in short, will ask you to use Plato to help you change your life.

That will be up to you. You must put the question of Plato to yourself. You must ask whether reason should always rule the passions, philosophers should always rule the state, and poets should inevitably be banished from a just commonwealth. You have to ask yourself if wildly expressive music (rock and rap and the rest) deranges the soul in ways that are destructive to its health. You must inquire of yourself if balanced calm is the most desirable human state.

Occasionally—for you will need some help in fleshing out the answers—you may have to prod your professors to see if they will take the text at hand—in this case the divine and disturbing Plato—to be true. And you will have to be tough if the

professor mocks you for uttering a sincere question instead of keeping matters easy for all concerned by staying detached and analytical. (Detached analysis has a place, but in the end you've got to speak from the heart and pose the question of truth.) You'll be the one who pesters your teachers. You'll ask your history teacher about whether there is a design to our history, whether we're progressing or declining, or whether, in the words of a fine recent play, *The History Boys*, history's "just one fuckin' thing after another." You'll be the one who challenges your biology teacher about the intellectual conflict between evolutionist and creationist thinking. You'll not only question the statistics teacher about what numbers *can* explain but what they can't.

Because every subject you study is a language, and since you may adopt one of these languages as your own, you'll want to know how to speak it expertly and also how it fails to deal with those concerns for which it has no adequate words. You'll be looking into the reach of every metaphor that every discipline offers, and you'll be trying to see around their corners.

The whole business is scary, of course. What if you arrive at college devoted to premed, sure that nothing will make you and your family happier than life as a physician, only to discover that elementary schoolteaching is where your heart is?

You might learn that you're not meant to be a doctor at all. Of course, given your intellect and discipline, you can still probably be one. You can pound your round peg through the very square hole of medical school, then go off into the profession. And society will help you. Society has a cornucopia of resources to encourage you in doing what society needs done but that you don't much like doing and are not cut out to do.

To ease your grief, society offers alcohol, television, drugs, divorce, and buying, buying, buying what you don't need. But all those, too, have their costs.

Education is about finding out what form of work for you is close to being play—work you do so easily that it restores you as you go. Randall Jarrell once said that if he were a rich man, he would pay money to teach poetry to students. (I would, too, for what it's worth.) In saying that, he (like my father) hinted in the direction of a profound and true theory of learning.

Having found what's best for you to do, you may be surprised by how far you rise, how prosperous, even against your own projections, you become. The student who eschews medical school to follow his gift for teaching small children spends his twenties in low-paying but pleasurable and soul-rewarding toil. He's always behind on his student-loan payments; he still lives in a house with four other guys, not all of whom got proper instructions on how to clean a bathroom. He buys shirts from the Salvation Army, has intermittent Internet, and vacations where he can. But lo—he has a gift for teaching. He writes an essay about how to teach, then a book—which no one buys. But he writes another—in part out of a feeling of injured merit, perhaps—and that one they do buy.

Money is still a problem, but in a new sense. The world wants him to write more, lecture, travel more, and will pay him for his efforts, and he likes this a good deal. But he also likes staying around and showing up at school and figuring out how to get this or that little runny-nosed specimen to begin learning how to read. These are the kinds of problems that are worth having, and if you advance, as Thoreau asked us to do, in the general direction of your dreams, you may have them. If you advance in the direction of someone else's dreams—if you want

to live someone else's dreams rather than yours—then get a TV for every room, buy yourself a lifetime supply of your favorite quaff, crank up the porn channel, and groove away. But when we expend our energies in rightful ways, Robert Frost observed, we stay whole and vigorous and we don't get weary. "Strongly spent," the poet says, "is synonymous with kept."

DO SPORTS BUILD CHARACTER?

THE FIRST YEAR I played high school football, the coaches were united in their belief that drinking water on the practice field was dangerous. It made you cramp up, they told us. It made you sick to your stomach, they said. So during practice, which went on for two and a half hours, twice a day, during a roaring New England summer, we got no water. Players cramped up anyway; players got sick to their stomachs regardless. Players fell on their knees and began making soft plaintive noises; they were helped to their feet, escorted to the locker room, and seen no more. On the first day of double sessions, there were about 120 players—tough Irish and Italian kids and a few blacks—and by the end of the twelve-day ordeal there were sixty left. Some of us began without proper equipment. I started without cleats. But this was not a problem: Soon someone who wore your size shoes or shoulder pads would quit, and then you could have theirs.

The coaches didn't cut anyone from my high school squad that year. Kids cut themselves. Guys with what appeared to

me to be spectacular athletic talent would, after four days of double-session drills, walk hangdog into the coaches' locker room and hand over their pads. The coaches rarely tried to encourage them to stay. If a kid couldn't take it, he couldn't take it. There was no water and there were no compassionate paternal talks. There were the two-and-a-half-hour practices twice a day; each of which ended with grass drills. We formed ranks and ran in place; when the coach blew the whistle, we jumped up, spread-eagled ourselves in the air, and went bang onto the hard ground. Then we got up and started running in place again. Some guys went bang and stayed down on the deck panting, which meant that they needed to quit. They brought their dirty practice gear home, got it washed by their mothers, and presented it in a white, fresh-smelling bundle, like a fluffy loaf of home-baked bread, to the coaches the next morning. When I asked one of them why he quit, he said simply, "I couldn't take it."

Could I? There was no reason going in to think that I would be able to. I was buttery soft around the waist, nearsighted, not especially fast, and not quick at all. It turned out that underneath the soft exterior I had some muscle and that my lung capacity was well developed, probably from vicious bouts of asthma I'd had as a boy, when I'd fought for air as hard as any marathon runner, perhaps harder. (The marathon runner has the luxury of stepping out of the race; not the asthmatic.) But compared to my fellow ballplayers, my physical gifts were meager. What I had was a will that was anything but weak. It was a surprise to me, and to everyone who knew me, how ferociously I wanted to stay with the game.

Still, things did not look promising. Sometimes after morning practice I was so dazed that it took me an hour to shower

and get dressed. By the time I was in my street clothes, the locker room was usually empty. Sometimes I wasn't sure that I would be able to find my way to the bus stop and get home, so I went below the bleachers and fell asleep, woke up two hours later, hiked to a convenience store to buy what passed for a lunch, and then went to sleep under the stands again. By four o'clock, when the other players were returning, I was in front of my locker and dressing in slow motion. In an hour I was on the field, ready to go. I cried in my sleep once at the thought that the next day I would have to go back to practice. But I went. I didn't miss a day, didn't fake an injury, didn't duck a drill, and at the end of double sessions—a shock to myself—I was a ballplayer.

Did I love the game? I surely liked it. I liked how when I was deep in fatigue, I became a tougher, more daring person, even a reckless one. One night, scrimmaging, I went head-on with the star running back, a guy who outweighed me by twenty pounds and was far faster and stronger. I did what the coaches said: I squared up, got low (in football, the answer to every difficulty is to get low, or get lower), and planted him. I did that? I asked myself. Me? I liked being the guy who could do that—sometimes, though alas, not often enough. The intensity of the game was an inebriate. It conquered my grinding self-consciousness, brought me out of myself.

I liked the transforming aspect of the game: I came to the field one thing, a diffident guy with a slack body, and I worked like a dog and so became something else, a guy with some physical prowess and a touch more faith in himself. Mostly I suppose I liked the whole process because it was so damn hard. I didn't think I could make it and no one I knew did either. I knew that

my parents were ready to console me if I came home bruised and dead weary and said that I was quitting. In time, one of the coaches confessed to me that he was sure I'd be gone in a few days. I had not succeeded in anything for a long time: I was a crappy student; socially I was close to a wash; my part-time job was scrubbing pans in a hospital kitchen; the first girl I liked in high school didn't like me; the second and the third jumped in behind and followed her lead. But football was something I could do, or at least do halfway. (I was never going to be anything like a star.) It was hard and it took some strength of will and—clumsily, passionately—I could do it.

"Long live what I badly did at Clemson," James Dickey says in "The Bee," the poem about his football days at college. Dickey wasn't much of a player, either, it seems. He remembers his inept lunges into the line and recalls the coaches badgering him, not unlike the way they badgered me: "'God damn you Dickey, *dig*!'" The old coaches have come back to Dickey years later, when he's afflicted by the malaise of middle age. They holler at him to get the lead out and to sprint for all he's worth into the midst of ferocious California freeway traffic, where his son, stung by a bee and terrified, has blindly run. Dickey digs. He leaves his feet—the ballplayer's most desperate maneuver. He makes it. "I have him where / He lives," the poet says, "and down we go singing with screams into / The dirt." And the screams of the coaches turn, finally, into whispers of approval. Dead coaches, like Shag Norton, Dickey's backfield coach, live in the air, the poet tells his son; they live in the ear. They want you better than you are. They scream at you when something must be saved.

I understand, I think. Though I never had much overt

affection for the coaches (or they for me), I knew that the objective of the game on the deepest level wasn't to score touchdowns or make tackles or to block kicks. The game was much more about practice than about the Saturday-afternoon contests themselves. And practice was about trying to do something over and over again and failing and failing and then finally succeeding partway. Practice was about showing up and doing the same drills day after day and getting stronger and faster by tiny, tiny increments and then discovering that by the end of the season you were effectively another person. But mostly football was about those first days of double sessions when everyone who stuck with it did something he imagined was impossible and so learned to recalibrate his instruments. In the future what immediately looked impossible to us—what said Back Off, Not for You—had to be looked at again and maybe attempted anyway. We'd already done something we thought we couldn't: Maybe this next citadel would fall, this next granite block would give way to shape and proportion, with a dose, maybe a double dose, of the effort we'd applied on that miserable unyielding field under the sun that turned your helmet into a boiling cauldron and your brain—truly, it sometimes felt this way—into simmering mush.

When we seemed to get hurt on the field, when we went down and didn't immediately get up, the coaches had a common reaction: "Get up and walk it off." Sometimes, granted, the stretcher had to come out, but not often. It was surprising how many times it was possible to rise like Lazarus after a collision that felt like a couple of bowling balls rolling together. I once tried to tackle a tight end who was six inches taller and fifty pounds heavier than I was. I bounced off and hit the so-called turf so hard that I felt the fillings in the back of my

mouth jump; I passed out for an instant and woke up thinking my back was broken. "Get up. Walk it off. You're all right." I did and I was.

Tim Green, the onetime star defensive end for the Atlanta Falcons, makes a point about playing ball, a point that carries over into other areas of experience. There's one factor at the heart of the game, he says. And that is you have to get up. You get smacked around and knocked to the ground on at least half the plays, but then you have to get up. You have to rise and go on to the next play. "I am defeated all the time," says Emerson, "yet to victory I am born." Football demonstrates that one is defeated, knocked down, time after time, and it also shows that victory is an uncertain thing, whether you think you're born to it or not.

Speaking for myself, I've never had to call on the spirit of grass drills or double sessions or channel an old coach in order to save myself or a child—there's never been that drastic a moment. (Lord defend me from such.) But I do recall what it felt like when, having thrown all I thought I had into writing a chunk of my dissertation, I came back from the job market a complete flop. I had come in with hopes that pointed to the heights: I didn't want merely any academic job, though at the time that would have been hard enough. I wanted one of the dozen or so best ones that every year had about four hundred applicants apiece. If I couldn't get one, I decided, I'd quit and do something else. After the grand belly flop—like a grass drill drop, with no control—I knew that I'd have to work on a level higher by far than I had on anything I'd ever approached. I'd coasted at my ease through grad school, or so it now seemed. So I began living in the library, much in the way that I lived at the football stadium my first summer on the team, arriving in the stacks

early, leaving only to go to the gym in the late afternoon and to eat dinner, then returning until past dark. I built a wall of books on my table as though to cloister myself in like a medieval monk. Did I call on the old spirit of double sessions? Quietly, pretty quietly, I did. I kept it largely to myself, since most scholars don't see much symmetry between what they do and what runners and jumpers and (especially) blockers and tacklers attempt. I read every book in the library on John Keats, the subject of my first chapter, and most of the articles. I wrote and rewrote my first paragraph about thirty times—like those grass drills, over and over and over again. When the summer was through I had a chapter I could be proud of and that I knew would take me where I wanted to go.

Doctoral dissertations are tougher than one might imagine: It's lonely work and no one (sometimes least of all your dissertation advisor, who has other things to do) cares much if you flourish or pucker on the vine. But compared to what others are compelled to endure—severe illness, divorce, the mortal sickness of a child—sitting in an air-conditioned library trying to make sense out of the way other people have tried to make sense of the world isn't all that daunting. But others, I know, have called on their experience in sports to summon larger doses of courage. They've used their old sports experience as a map to take them back to their reserves of strength they had forgotten they possessed. "Diversity of strength will attend us," the poet says, "if but once we have been strong." For many of us, the time of being strong was the time we played a sport. Do sports build character? Of course they do. Who could doubt it?

Sports are many things, but one of the things they are is an imitation of heroic culture. They mimic the martial world; they

fabricate the condition of war. (Boxing doesn't fabricate war; it *is* war and, to my mind, not a sport. As Joyce Carol Oates says, you play football and baseball and basketball. No one "plays" boxing.) This fabrication is in many ways a good thing—necessary to the health of a society. For it seems to me that Plato is right and that the desire for glory is part of everyone's spirit. Plato called this desire *thymos*, and he associated its ascendancy and celebration with Homer. The objective of his great work, *The Republic*, is to show how for a civilization to truly thrive, it must find a way to make the drive for glory subordinate to reason. Plato believes that war is sometimes necessary, but that going to war should be up to the rulers, the philosopher kings, who have developed their minds fully. Some of us, Plato says, have a hunger for martial renown that surpasses others', and those people are very valuable and very dangerous. They need praise when they fight well (for material rewards don't mean much to them), and they need something to keep them occupied when no war is at hand. Sport is a way to do this. Plato would probably approve of the way athletics function in our culture—they let the most thymotic of us express the hunger for conquest, and they allow the rest of us to get our hit of glory through identification.

But there are warriors and there are *warriors*; there are athletes and there are *athletes*. In the Western heroic tradition, the paragon of the humane warrior is Homer's Hector, prince of the Trojans. He is a fierce fighter: On one particular day, no Greek can stand up to him; his valor puts the whole Greek army to route. Even on an unexceptional day, Hector can stand against Ajax, the Greek giant, and trade blow for blow with him. Yet as fierce as Hector can be, he is also humane. He is a loving son to his aged parents, a husband who talks on equal terms with

his wife, Andromache, and he is a tenderhearted father. He and King Priam, his own father, are the only ones in Troy who treat Helen, the ostensible cause of the war, with kindness. One of the most memorable scenes in *The Iliad* comes when Hector strides toward his boy, Astyanax, coming fresh from the battlefield. The child screams with fright at the ferocious form, encased in armor, covered with dust and gore. Hector understands his child in an instant and takes off his helmet, with its giant horsehair plume, then bends over, picks his boy up, and dandles him while Andromache looks on happily. Astyanax—who will soon be pitched from off the battlements of Troy when the Greeks conquer the city—stares up at his father and laughs.

The scene concentrates what is most appealing about Hector—and about a certain kind of athlete and warrior. Hector can turn it off. He can stop being the manslayer that he needs to be out there on the windy plains of Troy and become a humane husband and father. The scene shows him in his dual nature—warrior and man of thought and feeling. In a sense, he is the figure that every fighter and everyone who takes the athletic field should aspire to emulate. He is the Navy Seal or the Green Beret who would never kill a prisoner; the fearless fighter who could never harm a woman or a child. In the symbolic world of sports, where the horrors and the triumphs of combat are only mimicked, he is the one who comports himself with extreme gentleness off the field, who never speaks ill of an opponent, who never complains, never whines. The dual nature of the noble athlete finds a concentrated image in football: When the play starts, the player goes all out, takes chances, is reckless; when the whistle blows, he becomes his civilized self again, doesn't argue or complain, but walks with dignity back to his huddle. Plato greatly admired people who, though possessed

with strong will, could still use their reason and their fellow feeling to temper themselves.

But *The Iliad* is not primarily about Hector. It is the poem of Achilles and his wrath. After Hector kills Achilles' dear friend Patroclus, Achilles goes on a rampage, killing every Trojan he can. All humanity leaves him; all mercy is gone. At one point, a Trojan fighter grasps his knees and begs for mercy. Achilles taunts him. Look at me, he says, so strong and beautiful, and someday I too shall have to die. But not today. Today is your day. At one point a river close to the city, the River Scamander, becomes incensed over Achilles' murdering spree. The hero has glutted Scamander's waters with blood and its bed with bodies. The river is so enraged that it tries to drown the hero. When Achilles finally gets to Hector, he slaughters him before the eyes of his parents, Hecuba and Priam, and drags his body across the plains of Troy. Achilles is drunk on rage, the poem tells us. His rational mind has left him, and he is mad with the joy of slaughter. The ability to modulate character that Hector shows—the fierce warrior becoming the loving father—is something Achilles does not possess. He is as mad now as a wild beast. Achilles, one feels, could not stop himself if he wished to: A fellow Greek who somehow insulted him when he was on his rampage would be in nearly as much danger as a Trojan enemy. Plato would recognize Achilles as a man who has lost all reason and who has allowed *thymos* to dominate his soul.

This ability to go mad—to become berserk—is inseparable from Achilles' greatness as a warrior. It is part of what sets him above the more circumspect Hector on the battlefield. When Hector encounters Achilles for the last time, Hector feels fear. Achilles in his wrath has no idea what fear is, and that is part of what makes him unstoppable.

Achilles' fate is too often the fate of warriors and, in a lower key, of athletes. They unleash power in themselves that they cannot discipline. They leave the field of combat or the field of play and they are still ferocious, or they can be stirred to ferocity by almost nothing. They can let no insult pass. A misplaced word sends them into a rage. A mild frustration turns them violent. *Thymos*, as Plato would have said, has taken over their souls, and reason no longer has a primary place—in some cases it has no place at all.

The kind of intensity that sports—and especially kinetic sports like football—can provoke is extremely necessary for any society: *Thymos* must have its moment. But that intensity is mortally dangerous for society and for individuals, too. Sports can lead people to brutal behavior—I see no way to avoid the conclusion. To any dispassionate observer it is clear that athletes find themselves in more brawls, more car wrecks, more spousal assaults, more drunken-driving episodes than the average run of the population. Sports can teach people to modulate their passions—they can help them be closer to Hector. But they can foment cruelty as well. Athletes, as everyone who went to an American high school will tell you, can be courtly, dignified individuals. But they're often bullies as well; they often seek violence for its own sake. They take crude pleasure in dominating others; they like to humiliate their foes off the field as well as on.

All too often, the players who go all out on the field and can't readily turn it off when they're outside their games are the best players. They're the most headlong, the most fearless, the most dedicated. And when they encounter a modulated, more controlled antagonist in a game, often the more brutal player wins.

The great athlete runs on instinct—everyone knows that. But a by-product of running on instinct is that you lose the habit of thought. Thought is what slows you down, makes you overly self-conscious, and gives the other guy time to beat you to the ball. Listening to most sports figures talk is like listening to the paint dry, and this is not necessarily because they don't have any mental endowments. It seems rather that to develop that kind of spontaneity that sports require, you have to stifle the mental endowments that you do have: The habit of thought will only take you so far as an athlete or as a hand-to-hand warrior. It does happen that great athletes can show an inclination for thinking: Muhammad Ali had the inclination, but not much ability; Bill Russell seems to have had some of both. But this is not common, and for good reason.

Lawrence Taylor was one of the best players ever to play in the National Football League. With his speed and ferocity and his ability to run down the opposing quarterback, he made football into a different, more violent game. But he was often as much in a fury off the field as on. By his own account, Taylor led the life of a beast: Drunk, brawling, high on coke, speeding in his car, he was a peril to anyone who came near him. His coach, Bill Parcells, helped him to cultivate this off-field character, knowing that it contributed to his prowess when he played. If the best players are—or often are—the ones who are the least controlled, the ones in whom at all times passion for preeminence trumps reason, then it is not entirely clear that one can readily say what American coaches and boosters of all sorts love to say, that sports always build character. If having a good character means having a coherent, flexible internal structure where the best part rules over the most dangerous, then sports may not always be something conducive to true virtue.

My own experience in high school confirms this view. Playing football made me more confident; it gave me powers of resolve that I'd draw on later in life, and I'm grateful for those things. But it also made me more brutal. I came to crave the physical stimulation of the game—I came to like hitting and even being hit. When the season ended, I found myself recreating the feeling of football in a string of fistfights and mass brawls. I didn't become a thug—far from it. But I did let the part of me that sought power and standing—over others—go way too far. Having been down that road, the chances of my taking it again are greater, I suspect, than they are for other men. Once the path has been cut, it stays open. I once shocked a colleague, and myself, by admitting that if someone ran a light and smashed up my car (which I loved more than I should), the chances of my popping him in the jaw were probably much greater than the chances of the average professional guy doing so. Once the punch in the mouth is part of your repertoire—once you've done it a few times as an adult—it never really goes away.

There's another major difficulty with sports, especially with sports played by males. When males get together in groups, they often act badly. They appoint by quiet consensus an alpha male and they follow his lead; they become more literal, more obvious; they jostle and compete. And they're also disposed to scapegoating. Homosexuality—or any indication of homosexuality—has tended to send heterosexual male athletes into a horrible spin when they're together in groups. The male sports world has been a dramatically antigay world. Those players who are homosexual have known that they must hide it on pain of humiliation or even physical harm.

In the world of sports, hostility to homosexuals and to any-

thing perceived as unmanly has been heightened to an extreme degree. The player enters a world of brutal distinctions—of rejection and scapegoating—and, not surprisingly, he risks becoming more brutal himself.

Sports are also—it almost goes without saying—an intensely hierarchical world. In sports your identity and prowess are one and the same. When one teammate looks at another, what he sees first is how good the other is. He makes a quick calculation: Am I more or less able than he is? Or are we, perhaps, the same? Sports are about standings, and not just of the team against other teams but within the team itself. Everyone has a place in the hierarchy, and that hierarchy is constantly shifting. This sense of relative human importance is almost completely unsentimental—there's an accuracy of evaluation in sports that presides nowhere else in the world; there's no affirmative action on a football field. Everyone on a team knows who he is better than and who is better than he, and he acts his part. On NBA teams, the alpha dog, the best player on the team, determines what tunes they'll listen to in the locker room and sets the tone for how the players will connect with the coach and how they'll comport themselves on the court with the referees and off it with the public. A world that is so intensely hierarchical is a clear, energizing world where meaning is available all the time. Who are you? I'm the best center in the league, or the second best, or whatever. And I'm working to rise, or to stay on top—or whatever. One of the joys of sports lies in knowing who you are and where you are and what you have to do to ascend. Such knowledge is not available to most people in the world and they often envy it, or they tap into it vicariously by becoming fans.

Yet a world of omnipresent hierarchy is also, by definition, a

world that is low on compassion and kindness. The great spiritual teachers—Jesus, Confucius, the Buddha—taught, perhaps above every other tenet, that we are all the same and that we are all part of one great life. They taught compassion, which is the feeling that you and I and all of us live in a world of suffering and grief and that our first duty is to treat each other with loving-kindness. The world of sport is a pagan world—the agonistic world that came before the great spiritual teachers—in which compassion is not a prominent value. True, professional athletes often take part in the culture of compassion: They show up at children's hospitals and attend worthy fund-raisers. These gestures serve to salve the conscience of a public that cannot rest fully content with a world of unsentimental strife. The public has an allegiance both to such strife and to the tenets of kindness and compassion. Many Americans attend church on Sunday and listen to the loving Gospel of the Savior and then repair home to their television sets, turn on the game, and watch young men try to bust each other's spleens. We must create a variety of fictions to live comfortably with this state of affairs.

From the perspective of the great teachers, it's demeaning and foolish to reduce people to their prowess at one thing or another. When I was at my best playing football, I was counted as one of the pack, a genuine player, and it put some bounce in my step. Now a late-career pickup basketball player, I'm the guy who misses too many jump shots in a row and gets the ball taken away from him by quicker guys—and while I'm on the court, that's all I am. The rest of my identity is eclipsed by it. The great teachers tell us that the only road to happiness is having a sense of common being with all others we see and acting out of

that sense at all times. When you do so, you lose your meager and vain individuality in something larger and you can stop striving, stop desiring to ascend. You can rest. The more ambitious you are, the more competitive you are, the less often the feeling of serene being—in which, as Wordsworth says, "with an eye made quiet by the power of harmony and the deep power of joy, we see into the life of things"—will come your way. The individual who lives in such a spirit, Schopenhauer tells us, is the one who, when he passes another on the street, says to himself, "That too is me." Those who whisper, however subliminally, "That is another," live in the purgatory of individual pride and individual desire. Do sports encourage you to be part of a group, the team? The team, to this way of thinking, is simply an extension of "me," since it is defined by the desire for supremacy over others.

Do sports build character? Sports are what Derrida, in an essay on Plato, associates with something called the *pharmakon*, a substance that is both a poison and a remedy. Sports can do great good: build the body, create a stronger, more resilient will, impart confidence, stimulate bravery, and even foment daring. But at the same time, sports can and often do brutalize the player—they make him more violent, more aggressive. They make him intolerant of gentleness; they help turn him into a member of the pack, which defines itself by maltreating others: the weak, the differently made. One might say that the use of intelligence is needful here. One must think hard and think well and, in Plato's spirit, one must use the mind to give the thymotic drives of the soul full recognition and reasonable play, but at the same time to keep them in check. This is an ideal—Hector's ideal, we might call it—and it is not an impossible

one. But there is something in the drive for glory that despises all reflection. A certain sort of glory seeking must in fact overcome reflection, as Achilles shows. So sports will always be a world of danger, as well as one rich with human possibility.

GLORIOUS FAILURE
2005 Convocation Address, University of Virginia

THANK YOU. I'M very pleased and very honored to be here, and without false modesty, I really feel a certain amount of doubt that I have anything new to say to so distinguished and successful a group of people, but thank you anyway for asking me.

I'm addressing, I know, some of the most accomplished students at the university and also their parents, people who've had great success in one of the most difficult of all arts, the art of raising children. I myself have children and I think I can begin to understand what this day means to the parents and the grandparents and sisters and brothers and uncles who've made the trip to Charlottesville, and from my heart, warmest congratulations for what you've achieved and what is likely to be achieved in the future.

This is, as I say, a remarkably successful group of people, and what I'm going to be talking about is not success at all. What I'm going to be talking about is failure and the necessary role that failure plays in anything that would qualify as authentic

success. I'm going to come out in favor of failure. I'm going to say some good things in behalf of it. I'm going to enjoin you before you leave this university, and maybe sometime afterward, to fail a little bit more.

But before I do that, I want to tell you something. Let me put it this way—it's a narrative, and if you laugh, it's a joke; if you nod your head wisely, it's a story; and if you get up and leave, it's really bad. Here it is. Once upon a time there was a man named Joseph. He was a good husband, a good father, a good provider. He lived well in the world. He was also a religious man. He prayed regularly, gave money to his church; he was upright, good, and strong. He had everything he wanted in the world except for one thing. He wanted more than anything else to win the lottery, so he would pray regularly and he would say, "Oh, Lord, I've been a good man. I've sacrificed, I've prayed. I've held up my end of the bargain. Please, I would like to win the lottery." Years went by. Still no lottery win. Joseph became a little more insistent—"Lord, I've sacrificed, I've prayed, I've done your good works, I've done your bidding in every way. Now, what about that lottery?"

This goes on for years until Joseph begins to get a little bit irritated with the Lord. "Lord, when am I going to win the lottery?" Still nothing. Finally, one day Joseph begins to entreat the Lord again and a voice comes to him as from above. It says, "Joseph."

"Hmmm, yes."

"This is the Lord."

"Finally. Lord, I've sacrificed, I've prayed, I've been an upright and good man. I've done all of your bidding. When am I going to win the lottery?"

"Joseph, be calm."

"Lord, please, when?"

"Joseph, I have one piece of advice for you."

"Lord, what is it? I'll do anything."

"Joseph, buy a ticket."

Buy a ticket. That's the subject of my talk. Well, you laughed, so it turned out to be a joke. I'm very glad about that.

The last time I was here in U Hall, I have to admit the joke was on me. I took my son, whom I'm very proud to have here today, to a concert by a guy named Ludacris, who's a rapper. I like Ludacris a lot. It turned out that none of the other parents were available to take their children to that show. I don't really know why. And I sat up in section 32, right there, and I was enjoying the show, and then suddenly the person who was standing roughly where I am now—that was Ludacris—looked up and said something like this: "I want to send one out to the elderly dude jamming in the back."

And it was strange because I was up there by myself and I looked around for the elderly dude and I didn't see him and then 'Cris—I call him 'Cris because we're kind of friendly—helped me out by having somebody shine a big spotlight up there, so I could look for the elderly dude. But the problem was the light was really in my eyes and I couldn't see him for anything.

You know Oscar Wilde's great line? The tragedy of getting older is not that one is old, it's that one is young. I know what you thought I was going to say—I like Ludacris. I know you thought I was going to say something bad about your music, rap and all that. I know you did. But you know, from a baby boomer perspective, the way we sometimes look at it is this: You gave us Britney Spears and we gave you the Rolling Stones. It's hardly fair.

Well, that was a bittersweet moment that Ludacris provided for me here. I'm pleased to revisit the scene of that semitrauma and fundamentally to have it healed by President Casteen's very generous introduction of me.

But as he was talking about the list of my accomplishments—of which I'm duly proud, I suppose—I flashed on something else that I often have occasion to think about. Those are things that come off my résumé and, as I say, it's a good and fine résumé and many of you who are out there today are compiling résumés that will be better and finer by far. But one of the things I think about when I hear that résumé is another résumé that I have, and that résumé I call my ghost résumé . And what's on my ghost résumé are all the things that went awry, the essays that didn't work, the book projects that fell apart, the writing that seemed like it was coming from the pen of Samuel Johnson on Tuesday and turned out on Friday not to make much sense at all.

I think about my first book, *Towards Reading Freud*, Princeton University Press. The struggle to get that book published, the war to get that book published, is something that I dare say Napoleon would've admired. It was a two-year push, maybe three. But it doesn't say that on the résumé. It simply says, "Princeton University Press." It just says all of the good stuff. There's a whole litany of failures there back behind the accomplishments, and they continue to happen. I continue to try things that don't work, try things that half work, try things that need to be revised five times before they're ever going to work.

When I was a young man I had a myth of my own. It's the myth of arrival, and what that myth said was that at a certain point you get to a place in your career and everything goes well. Everything you do works, because you're a success and that's that. I'm here to tell you that that point does not exist. But I'm

proud of those failures because they made possible what successes I was able to achieve. I surprised myself occasionally, and that felt pretty good. Yeats said, "That which fascinates is the most difficult among things not impossible." And I've always wanted to be fascinated by what I'm doing, and that means I've done difficult things. Or at least things that have been difficult for me. If you do difficult things, take on truly challenging ventures, you will at least occasionally fail. But you'll be fascinated, too. You'll be awake.

I was a student of failure for a long time. I've watched people who are remarkable successes, the people I admired most, going through their lives compiling failure after failure. The first person I encountered in that regard and the one whose work really changed my life was Malcolm X. I remember reading Malcolm X's book. It was the first book that I ever bought with my own money, a book that I read all the way through without stopping, as I recall it. It just fascinated me. I remember Malcolm X as a street thug going to jail in Boston. He lived close to me. I remember him going to jail and getting into arguments in the prison yard and feeling that he couldn't keep up with the arguers. Though he was smart, he had a good mind, he didn't know much. And he knew that the way to learn something was to read, and he went to the prison library and he got out as many books as he could. He said: I went down those pages and fifteen, twenty words were words I didn't know. So I went and I got the dictionary and I started reading the dictionary but I didn't remember the words, so I copied down the words and I copied down their definitions. I copied the whole dictionary. You can't believe what a world opened up to me at that point, Malcolm X said.

He had led a miserable failure of a life, and suddenly he was

an intellectual and a dynamic man. He went on from there to be a preacher among the black Muslims for the Reverend Elijah Muhammad—dramatic, not always right in my view, but surely provocative all the time. He provoked thought—that's what Malcolm did. Everywhere he went, he provoked thinking. He went on to embrace a different kind of Islam in which he held out hope for the brotherhood of all regardless of color. Malcolm X was somebody who looked back repeatedly, looked back on failures as well as successes, and used those failures as an opportunity to do something else. He didn't have one life or two. He had three or four because of the resiliency that he possessed.

Another one of my heroes in the art of failure is Walt Whitman. Walt Whitman at the age of thirty-two was absolutely nothing, absolutely nothing. He was not good at anything. He taught school for a while and he was bad at that and for this reason: He refused to whip his students. He wrote temperance novels of an unreadable badness. He wrote newspaper pieces that really don't hold up anymore. But then suddenly reading Emerson and going to the opera and walking the streets of New York City and writing in his notebook, strange and wonderful thoughts started to come to pass. Suddenly Whitman was writing ecstatically—outside himself—and the result of that amazing faith in his own possibilities amidst failure was the best book of American poetry, from my point of view, ever written, *Leaves of Grass*. He sent it off to the most formidable literary figure in America at the time, Ralph Waldo Emerson, Emerson, somebody who combined all the prestige of every American Nobel Prize winner alive today. Emerson took the volume, read it, and said, "I find it the finest piece of wit and wisdom that America has yet contributed." And he told Whit-

man as much, and Whitman printed it on the spine of the book and sent it out. Good for him.

Whitman went on to live the life that he imagined in *Song of Myself* and in *Leaves of Grass*. In the 1860s, he became a male nurse in the hospitals in Washington. He tended the men, the wounded, Union troops and Confederate both. He took their letters down. He gave them small presents. He made their last moments at least something like bearable. He'd walk in the street in the morning and exchange glances with Abraham Lincoln and I like to think that the two of them recognized each other as having something quite unusual, because if you're going to look for failure in American literature and American history: How many elections did Abraham Lincoln win? Not many. Not many, but he came back every time.

Failure is a big part of education, it seems to me, and we're lucky at the University of Virginia because our most exemplary figures are figures who were not successful all the time, not even close to it. I'm pleased and proud to be wearing my doctoral robes from Yale University, but Yale was a school where I often felt you had it or you didn't, you knew it or you didn't, whereas at Virginia I feel there are many, many chances.

The life of Edgar Allan Poe, Virginia's most famous graduate, was a disaster, right? Alcohol problems, health problems, gambling problems, every deficiency under the sun. For a while, one of the great scholarly debates in Poe studies was whether in fact he had died drunk and in the gutter or not. Whether he died that way or not, it was not unhabitual for Poe to be loaded and half out of his head. Yet he turned out a spectacular amount of writing, not just the short stories but a novel, essays, and critical studies. He was a reviewer like nobody else. He worked ferociously and he opened up a whole nightmare world in his

art, the world of the House of Usher, the world of all those horrible tales. Introduced us to nightmares; in some ways he pioneered the art of psychoanalysis and developed gothic art, which has its resonances in some of the best writing going on today—as well as in *Saw II* through *XXXX*.

I think of Thomas Jefferson, a true cultural and political hero, author of the Declaration of Independence, Statutes of Religious Freedom, founder of the University of Virginia, and yet in many ways a deeply flawed man in his relations to his slaves. The way he treated Sally Hemings and the children he bore with her doesn't bear easy consideration. But I like to think of Jefferson as somebody who on some level, acknowledging his flaws, helped in his way to make people in posterity free in ways that he himself couldn't make the people around him free. When the revelations finally came out about Jefferson and Sally Hemings, the response that I heard from a number of black people, charitable in their response to failure, went like this—it's good finally to be able to welcome Thomas Jefferson into the family.

One problem with success is that people ask you to do the successful things over and over and over again. We all know people who've written the same book, painted the same picture, sung the same song time and time and time again. There's a wonderful moment on a Joni Mitchell album when she says, after somebody asked her to do "Circle Game" one more time, "You know, nobody ever said to Van Gogh, 'Paint *A Starry Night* again, man.'" But the wonderful thing about Joni Mitchell is that she has tried everything in music. She's worked with jazz musicians, she's done folk rock, she's composed on her own. Her originality is simply stunning. Her breadth is stunning. Most of us now know her as the voice of the sixties. She's more

than that. She's a good painter, too. One time I saw Joni Mitchell, it was in New York City and she had a big band with her. That was the experiment of the day. It was simply awful, but I was pleased to pay my enormous sum. I felt like I'd given each member of the band about five dollars in order to continue a career of tremendous failure and tremendous success.

Is it F. Scott Fitzgerald who said there are no second acts in American life? It's possible that in an American life there's nothing but second acts. Hillary Rodham Clinton was in many ways in disgrace for eight years; the remark about cookies was just the beginning of it; the failure of the health care plan with Ira Magaziner; thoughtless remarks; the embarrassment of living with Bill. As they say in Arkansas, he's a dog who won't always stay on the porch. But now she's reinvented herself and become one of the most respected, tough-minded, intelligent, and hardworking—however you think about her politics—people in the United States Senate. A second act in American life. And there surely must be second acts in American life when you can turn on the TV and see Donald Trump standing there in front of you.

One way to think about education and what we're trying to do here is that we want to give a dramatic second chance to people. People come to us having been lovingly socialized by their mothers and fathers, by their ministers and priests, and by their families, and as beautiful as that process of socialization is, sometimes it fails, sometimes it doesn't work. People need to find a new way to talk about themselves and their worlds. People need to find a new thing to be. People need, as it were, a rebirth, often of a secular sort. In my classes, they sometimes learn from Wordsworth how much nature truly means to them and how much guarding the natural world can do. They learn

from Blake what it means to be an energized prophet for social change, or they learn from Jane Austen what it can mean to be somebody who loves the world as it is and lives happily within it.

This need for a second chance, this need for change, is no insult to the parents who've socialized our students the first time through. Parental love is like the sun—it's bright and endless and free and is often never thanked, but provides people with the confidence to take another chance, to do another thing, to start again.

I've talked about a lot of people here in my pantheon—Hillary Clinton and Donald Trump and, more seriously, Thomas Jefferson and Edgar Allan Poe, but I want to end with one particular hero of mine, Saul Bellow, who died this year. Bellow was a simply amazing writer with a huge achievement, but what was the best moment of his life, he tells us, came in the midst of failure. He was in Paris in his thirties on a Guggenheim Fellowship. He had just finished publishing two novels, a little bit sterile, a little bit staid. "I wrote them," he said, "to satisfy the English professors," at which my heart quails a little bit. He was halfway through another novel about two brothers living in a mental institution, as I remember—dismal stuff. "At a certain point," he said, "in the middle of Paris not hearing English anymore, away from my own everyday language, the language became precious and rare and more intimate and immediate to me and I began to write something entirely new, something that was entirely a surprise to myself."

That surprise became a book called *The Adventures of Augie March*, and in it Bellow is successful in creating a new voice. I'll read you a couple of lines from it and you'll see. Here's the beginning: "I am an American," says Augie, "Chicago born—

Chicago, that somber city—and go at things as I have taught myself, free-style, and will make the record in my own way: first to knock, first admitted; sometimes an innocent knock, sometimes a not so innocent." It's beautiful stuff. Then, fifteen hundred manuscript pages later, Bellow, looking back through Augie's eyes, trying to figure out if he's made anything at all or if he's failed again and maybe half-satisfied if he has, says, "I may well be a flop in this line of endeavor. Columbus too thought he was a flop, probably, when they sent him back in chains. Which didn't prove there was no America."

Let me close by asking you to succeed as much as you can, but in the process of succeeding, I hope that you'll generate a really remarkable ghost résumé made of the failures that come from trying to do things that you need to do, that are hard to do, and that are demanding to do. Whether it seems in character or not, it's often the time to start the band, to write the poem, to begin the business, to initiate anything that's new and challenging and difficult.

I told you that story which turned out to be a joke about buying a ticket. But there's one thing I didn't tell you. Tickets are expensive. It's hard to draft that novel, hard to get the band together, hard to learn how to shoot a movie. Tickets are expensive, especially the risky ones, but they're infinitely worth buying. So buy a ticket, buy a ticket, buy one.

Thanks.

THE GLOBALISTS

Members of the Chinese Red Army are boarding our ship. I'm a hundred yards from the gangway, but still I recognize them. They're wearing dome-shaped hats with snap earmuffs. The red stars pinned to the center of the khaki domes, like the Buddhist third eye, the eye of wisdom, are sparkling. We—seven hundred students and forty or so faculty members—sailing with an outfit called Semester at Sea—docked here in Shanghai, China, yesterday. The city is polluted as a cesspool and it's booming. We're told that on a good day you can't see the sun until two o'clock in the afternoon and that it's gone by three o'clock, four tops. Today there's been no sun, period, only smoke and fog so dense that you feel like you could reach out and grab a handful and roll it up like a dirty snowball. It's surprising I can see those stars twinkling Maoist red on the heads of the cadres, but I can.

Hold on, though. Those aren't Red Army troops: They're our students. Obviously they've picked up the hats in the souvenir kiosks in town. Some are wearing T-shirts featuring Chairman Mao; others are wearing straw harvest-the-rice domes,

also bedecked with red stars. Have the kids gone communist? Are they turning pink?

What they're supposed to be doing is getting a global education. They're supposed to be in the process of becoming citizens of the world. That's the objective of our trip, which has taken us to Brazil and South Africa, Mauritius and Malaysia and India, and will hit Vietnam and Japan before we're done. We're off to acquire a "global education." That seems to be the hot term now in higher-ed circles. But when I ask around among my colleagues—well-traveled, dedicated types—they don't seem to have much more idea what global education is than I do. (And I haven't got any idea at all.) I've taken to watching the students to see if they might offer a hint. It'll have to be a visual cue, I'm afraid: Like my colleagues, they don't seem disposed to ready definitions. They're on the ship, most of them say, to see the world and to have a good time.

Pretty quickly I learn that the Red Army togs don't have anything to do with a new Marxist consciousness and commitment to the Little Red Book. The students think the hats and T-shirts look cool, period. They like the screaming red of the stars; they like the dour, doughy face of the chairman as much as Andy Warhol did—and they're too young to have heard Lennon tell them what doesn't happen to people who go around carrying his image.

But what do the Chinese on the streets of Shanghai think when they see Americans decked out in Marxwear? Probably something like what we would think if we saw Chinese tourists marching down Fifth Avenue wagging American flags. We'd figure they were crazy about the U.S.A. We'd think we were the shining apple of their eye. Presumably the Chinese who see the regalia think that our kids are in love with China. They must

feel that the American visitors somehow support—or at least accept—the regime, with its commitment to one-party rule: no freedom of speech, no press freedom, limited freedom of religion, no significant freedom to assemble. The preeminent freedom in China now is the freedom to make money.

Our young globalists needed to think twice about their wardrobes. When classes started again on the ship, there were more than a few sessions about political life in current China and what it meant to appear to endorse it. It was time to talk about the price of political naïveté, and many of us teachers did.

But our students—our budding globalists—brought something besides their naïveté to China and to the other countries we visited. They brought something that, from what I can tell, America excels in exporting. They brought friendliness. Everywhere we went we saw the kids on the street, palling around with local people, trying to speak their language, making jokes, hacking around. They'd talk to anyone they met—rich or poor, old or young. If the people they met knew English, well and good. If not, our kids went to sign language or strained to pick up a few words of the local tongue. The students told their life stories and heard their new pals' tales in exchange. One of my students said he spent three hours talking with the eighty-year-old owner of a dinky restaurant he ate at in Shanghai. "I never laugh so much," she said to him at the end of the evening. "You my crazy American son." Another student told me about meeting everyone on hand in a bar in Malaysia. "We loved them," he said. "And I think they were jazzed we were there."

To my eye, the people the kids encountered in China and Vietnam and India and Brazil and all the other places we went *were* jazzed. Our gang stormed onto the scene, and whatever was fixed and set in the local social configuration quickly be-

came unglued. The students stumbled around in other languages; they ate anything they were served; they almost never slept. And they were persistently, almost insanely open.

Did they get taken? Constantly. At our pre-port meeting before Shanghai, we learned about how young Chinese students would come on in a friendly way and then take foreign visitors off to a "traditional" tea ceremony. Two hours later, their friendly hosts would hit them with bills for seventy-five dollars for a couple of cups of tea and a few grains of rice. Did our students heed the warnings? Of course they didn't. "I felt bad getting ripped off like that," one of them, who didn't have money to spare, told me, "but to tell you the truth, I really liked the girls who did it, and they taught me a lot about China. Anyway. I had fun." People who are morbidly afraid of being taken are among the worst kinds of travelers—suspicious and locked down like clams. They'll get into a half-hour verbal brawl with a taxi driver over two dollars. They'll be so steamed about it all day that they can't enjoy the bronzes in the Shanghai Museum or the street life in Hong Kong. Our kids were never afraid of being taken. When they got mad—everyone who travels gets mad—they were over it in five minutes.

"Sometimes," one of my colleagues said, "our students think that they can replace politeness with friendliness." Well, they did seem to feel that way—if you didn't move fast on that ship, they could run you down. And it was not always a good idea to get between them and the dessert trays, especially when the ship was pitching. Politeness wasn't their long suit.

But having seen them in action on shore and listened to their stories, I'm persuaded that friendliness does trump politeness, and with ease. American friendliness was surely behind a pronouncement we heard a thousand times: "We're not so happy

with American government, but Americans? We like them a lot." The kids provided commercial opportunity to almost all who encountered them (they generally seemed to have more money than was good for them; more money, say, than their worthy professors), but that wasn't the whole story. Living in America, it's easy to forget how stratified many cultures are. The caste system isn't strictly legal in India anymore, but there's no doubt that it's still in play. (Indians I met claimed they could recognize another person's caste at a glance.) In South Africa, even after apartheid, the old racial categories still abide. The first conversation I had there was with a cab driver, a Xhosa, who told a nasty joke about the foreskin of the Zulu running for president. Among the Chinese, your education level seems to determine who you are and how you are treated.

This isn't to say that America's a country without class distinctions. But America is a country where nearly the worst thing you can be is a snob. A rich guy isn't worth much, by our account, if he can't yak a little about baseball or the movies with the guy who mows his lawn or the woman who bags the groceries. (Granted, this is in part because the rich guy may be bagging groceries or mowing lawns a year from now.) The unpardonable American social crime is looking down your nose at someone. The great public virtue is being open and easygoing—the great public virtue is friendliness. Our students brought friendliness abroad in barrels, our equivalent of export oil.

The laureate of this sort of thing is Walt Whitman, who began his own anonymous review of his first volume with the words, "An American bard at last!" Almost every American who looks into Whitman understands his egalitarian side immediately. It's rare, at least in my experience, that non-Americans do. (D.H. Lawrence, for example, seemed to think that Whitman

was out of his mind.) "Walt Whitman, an American," the hobo bard chants in "Song of Myself":

one of the roughs, a kosmos,
Disorderly fleshy and sensual . . . . eating and drinking and breeding,
No sentimentalist . . . . no stander above men and women or apart from them . . . . no more modest than immodest.

"No stander above men and women or apart from them": That's the key phrase. "By God!" he says later in the same section, "I will accept nothing that all cannot have their counterpart of on the same terms." My students read these passages—with the waves slapping away on the side of the classroom—and by and large they bought them. Maybe on some level they already knew what Whitman had to tell them.

But, you may say, the reason that the kids are so open and appealing is that they're innocents. Their naïveté is what's beguiling. And part of what creates that innocence is ignorance. They don't go from place to place pressed to the ground with the burden of the past—in part because they don't know much about that past. They go around grinning, wearing Red Army regalia, with no real clue about the horrors of the Cultural Revolution.

Maybe there's some truth in this indictment. But if so, it makes clear what one objective of a genuine college education now might be—for students and teachers both. Do the students need historical instruction? Sure, so do we all. If we're going to be global citizens, we'd better know something about the biography of the globe. But I wonder if it would be possible for our students to learn as much and still keep alive the quality that

really does make them stand out in the best possible way. They broke a lot of ice on our trip, even if they did drive me half crazy with the stuff they didn't know and didn't always want to know. And truly, I couldn't say I was half as open as they were. I didn't meet as many people, didn't show all of those I did meet what was best about America. Is it possible to combine knowledge and friendliness? Could we educate our students (and ourselves) in the ways of both global innocence and global experience? If we could, maybe we'd be creating citizens of the world, American style.

THE CORPORATE CITY AND THE SCHOLARLY ENCLAVE

WHERE SHOULD YOU go to college—assuming you're a high school student and getting ready for this new phase of your life? Where should you encourage your son or daughter to go—assuming that you're a parent?

As a college professor, I get asked the where-to-go question frequently, and I know that all of us teaching in colleges and universities do too. How should one answer? What is the right thing to say to someone deciding on his or her future? For myself, I'm inclined to respond by posing another question.

Are you looking for a corporate city, or are you looking for a scholarly enclave?

Neither of these kinds of schools exists in its pure form. To the scholarly enclave, even the most ideal, there will always be a practical, businessy dimension. Somebody's got to keep the books and pay the bills. And even in the most corporate of colleges, there will be islands of relative scholarly idealism.

Many, if not most, American high school students have already had a taste of the corporate city. These are students and parents who are emerging from the mouth of that great American dragon

called the "good high school." I won't hide my prejudices: I have a lot of qualms about the good American high school. Most good high schools now look to me like credential factories. They are production centers that kids check in to every day. The motivated, success-oriented students set to work from the moment of arrival, producing something, manufacturing something. And what they produce are credentials. High schools now are credential factories in overdrive.

It doesn't mean that students don't have to work to get those credentials: Of course they do. It takes lots of effort, planning, and organization—and it takes some smarts—to get what students, the workers in the high school factory, are out to get. Students feel that they need to get A's—they need to excel in their courses. They also feel they need to stimulate the goodwill of their teachers and their guidance counselors: Those recommendations are crucial. Students in high school now also need to rack up lots of extracurriculars: They need to do some community service; they need to be president (or, maybe better, treasurer) of a club or two; it's good as well if they can play at least one varsity sport, or, if they are prone to stumbling over their own feet (as I was in high school), they can at least manage a team or keep the uniforms clean.

High school now is about being an all-arounder. You've got to be good at your classes, but you've also got to shine as a citizen and a general hand-waving, high-enthusiasm participant. To do this, you've often got to make yourself into a superb time manager. You give each activity the amount of time and effort required so that you can reach the so-called standard of excellence. You give it that much, but you give it no more. Do I really need to read the whole book to get an A in English, the student asks herself? Probably she doesn't. Do I need a tutor and extra

time to score a top grade in math? Perhaps yes. If so, the money is well spent and so is the time. Will it look better to put in two hours a week volunteering at the hospital or four at the soup kitchen? Does the guidance counselor say that both will look about the same to the college admissions board? Then better to do the hospital: You'll need those extra two hours for prom committee.

High school students need to produce A's. High school students need to produce credentials. No A's, no first-tier college (probably). No credentials, no grandly embossed letters of acceptance—or at least no chirpy e-mail notifications of entrance into the class of 2017.

You'll discern here that I'm not entirely approving of the good American high school and its MO—but on some level I think that I understand what's up. Even if the current mode of high school education—for the good student at the good high school—doesn't especially appeal to a student, what is she supposed to do about it? A fifteen-year-old standing up at a school meeting and saying that she's mad as heck about being slapped on an assembly line, or that she's mad at her parents for slapping here there, or that she's mad at herself—that's not going to do very much. She's going to feel alone and lonely and sad, and anyway she may not even be able to find the words to express her feelings. She probably hasn't read about or even heard the name Mario Savio, who made a speech at the University of California, Berkeley, in 1964. I understand that quite often high school history courses now don't take you all the way up through the period of the Vietnam War, but stop at the end of World War II because "we've run out of time."

Mario Savio stood up at Sproul Plaza at Berkeley and said that as a college student, as a Berkeley student, he too often felt

like a piece of raw material that was getting processed by his university and by his society. He believed that many of his contemporaries felt the same way. And then he talked back to that condition. He said, "But we're a bunch of raw materials that don't mean to be—have any process upon us. Don't mean to be made into any product! Don't mean—Don't mean to end up being bought by some clients of the university, be they the government, be they industry, be they organized labor, be they anyone! We're human beings!" We're not products, Mario Savio says: We're human beings. He says it in a broken-up Bob Dylan and Woody Guthrie sort of way, but he says it. Probably a young guy or girl going to high school now hasn't heard of Mario Savio or listened to his famous lines from Sproul Plaza.

They are lines to which young people will respond differently. Some may say: I love high school. I love the hustle and bustle and the classes and the clubs and the staying up late and the social life and the prom and the messing with Facebook. I love striving for success. I like the game and I like the rewards of the game, and so—give me some more.

Some rising high school seniors may be ready for more of the same—assuming what I've said about American high schools now is right or half right. And if so, they need to apply to and eventually install themselves in the kind of college I call the corporate city.

What do you get there in the corporate city? You get more of the same. Everyone is on the make; everyone is trying to succeed. A tremendous amount of networking goes on because people have come to realize that as the old saying runs, It's often not what you know but who you know. Students still study. But in the old high school tradition, you study only as much

as you need to study to get your A's. If expedient but slightly shady means of A-getting arise, you may even evaluate them using a risk-reward equation. That is, you balance what can be gained against the pains of getting caught. And even if you don't cheat per se, you're always ready to cut academic corners. Do I really have to read all of *King Lear* to ace the test? Probably you don't. At a certain point—tragic inevitability being what it is—you probably know what's going to happen to the king and to Cordelia, too. When in doubt, turn to the Spark Notes or the cyber equivalent thereof.

You'll have to get by on only a little sleep—but there are ways to make that possible, some quite legal, the others semi-legal (legal, that is, for the person for whom the Adderall prescription was originally written, but perhaps not legal for you). You'll be awake and alert for as much as twenty hours of the twenty-four doing a hypercharged version of what you did in high school. You'll be meeting people, connecting with future allies for the wars of life, succeeding in your courses, engaging in lots of activities. In short, you'll be doing more than building your résumé. You'll be putting your résumé on steroids.

Universities that have made themselves into corporate cities are not hard to spot. Most of the students—and many members of the faculty—are buzzing from place to place, always feeling a bit self-important, always feeling a bit behind, like that poor rabbit in *Alice in Wonderland*. The people who represent corporate universities to you—the tour guides and the rest—will talk a lot about new computer initiatives, about partnering with business, and about the creation of young leaders. They'll talk about recent grads who have hit the Silicon Valley jackpot. These are near kids who have made pots of money and—one feels this

by implication—are soon going to spread some around their former school, to which they are extremely grateful. You'll hear the word *excellence* about a billion times.

Now, even in the middle of corporate universities, you will find people who are not playing the game. These are not necessarily people who don't show up at a boring class, who smoke a lot of weed, who read books that aren't assigned, who play in bands with bizarre names, and who wear T-shirts that are distressingly original. Though sometimes they are. But what truly characterizes people who are living in, or who want to live in, a scholarly enclave?

It's pretty simple, really. They are at school seeking knowledge so as to make the lives of other human beings better. They will not tell you this when you ask them about it in casual conversation. But it is true. They want to be teachers and scientists and soldiers and doctors and legal advocates for the poor. They want to contribute something to curing cancer; they want to make sure the classics of Roman literature don't die; they want to get people excited about the art of Picasso and maybe inspire people to make some (Picasso-inspired) art of their own; they want to be sure that when a foreign nation is inclined to threaten (I mean really threaten) the peace of the United States of America, that nation has to think twice and twice again.

Do these people want some recognition? Do they want to get paid? Yes, in varying degrees they do. There are very few people who are entirely unselfish in this world, and sometimes they don't live too long. But the people I'm talking about often put others first. They have a love for humanity in them, and it is this love that chiefly motivates what they do, even if they don't tell you so every five minutes. They want to make the world better and they are honest with themselves about doing

this: They know that any quest that involves status and enrichment is dangerous and that it can take them away from what really matters. They know that the human capacity for self-deception is boundless and they are always on the lookout for the moment when their pride eclipses their love for the world.

How do you find these people, and how do you find the schools where they are plentiful—what I've called the scholarly enclaves? That is, how do you find them if they are what you are looking for? You visit, you look, and you listen. When people start talking about leadership and incentives (and especially something called "incentivizing") and becoming an academic entrepreneur, you are probably in the wrong place. (Whenever people make fritters of English, I daresay that you're in the wrong place.) When people talk about innovation and "partnering" with big-money institutions, I would advise you to run. If you hear the word *excellence* more than twice in a sentence, you are hereby empowered to pop the speaker twice (but very gently) in the nose.

Why is *excellence* a bad word? It's not, in and of itself. But people around universities who use it are people who want to talk about worldly distinction without talking about ethics. *Excellence* means we're smart, we're accomplished, we're successful—and we can be these things without any obligation to help our fellow human beings. When colleges start talking about "humane excellence" or "generous excellence," then I'll want to listen.

You also have my permission—in fact my encouragement—to gently snout-pop people who talk about "leadership." Why is leadership so bad? In itself, it's not. But what people usually mean by a leader now is someone who, in a very energetic, upbeat way, shares all of the values of the people who are in charge.

Leaders tend to be little adults, little grown-ups who don't challenge the big grown-ups who run the place. Grown-ups—people like me—need to be challenged, and we rely on young people to do it. When people say "leaders" now, what they mean is gung ho "followers." As an English professor, I don't really care for Mario Savio's grammar and diction. But was he an authentic leader? Was he someone who offered students a new and controversial way to think of their lives and then to live their lives? Yes, I think that he was. But no college dean or president, now or ever, would use the word *leader* to describe Mario: Most of them reserve the word for followers, for people who follow them.

The residents of scholarly enclaves are harder to spot than the denizens of the corporate university, and I can't give you a definitive field guide to finding them. But I'll say first that they don't talk about being a leader and being an entrepreneur. They talk about working in a lab or developing a questionnaire for psychological research or writing a novel, or getting people who don't belong in jail out of jail, or defending their country against its enemies. And they are not smiling all the time. They are aware of the enormous gap between what humans aspire to and what remains to be done. They tend to take joy in their work, but they never feel that they have quite gotten it right. The people in the corporate university are forever pleased with themselves. They are always succeeding, getting A's that will soon be converted into dollars.

Their view is often that everyone wants the same things that they do. They think that people who claim to work for humanity want wealth and fame too—the achievers are just more honest about the matter. The people who serve the poor themselves want to be rich: They are just too chicken to be candid about their desire and then, in the current vernacular, to go for

it. And who knows, maybe this is true. This view has some important upholders: Freud and Nietzsche and (in his way) Adam Smith feed it, and they are anything but fools. But geniuses are not always right.

The people who dedicate themselves to helping humanity are not, let me say, sacrificing themselves to a life of pain and sorrow. In fact, it is only through unselfish effort on behalf of something larger than yourself that anything like happiness arises. The happiness-through-material-goods-and-success industry has to throw ads at you twenty-four hours a day to persuade you that its way of life is the best one. The happiness industry protests too much. Would it need to be as clamorous as it is about consumer bliss if there really was such a thing as consumer bliss?

Where should a young person now go to college? It depends. Does she want more of the good American high school with its hustle and bustle, its strivings for excellence, its fixation on leadership, its partnering and incentivizing and getting proactive, and succeeding, succeeding, succeeding? Or does she want something else?