

HRL Morning Prayer, September 22, 2006

*Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. Matthew 5:3*

Since this is study card day, I thought I might offer some advice to students and advisors about choosing courses. President Eliot abolished most curricular requirements in the 1870s, and ever since then, students have been exercising their free choice and the faculty has been trying to figure out how to make sure students get educated anyway. When students can choose their courses and the college says good grades are important, students naturally opt for courses they know a lot about already so they will get higher grades. Average grades then rise and students become even more strategic about course selection so they can beat the averages. The cycle is anti-educational, and it is nobody's fault, except ours for making such a big deal out of grades.

In an effort to slow down this race to the bottom, Lowell reinstated curricular requirements as soon as he took over from Eliot in 1909. His distribution system forced students to spread out intellectually. Lowell's curricular structure was actually better than the one our Gen Ed committee came up with last year. It was basically Nat Sci, Soc Sci, and Hum, with a fourth required area thrown in: Philosophy and Mathematics. Those were the good old days, when we could insist that students learn analytic reasoning.

The curricular debates still rage, and are still mostly about how to force students to graze, like cattle on a nutritious diet, across various fields of learning. But rather than treating students like steers on a forced march, we need to make a fresh start.

I have a modest proposal. It is aimed at instilling wisdom more than knowledge.

My structure says nothing at all about what subjects you need to study or what modes of thought you should learn. Nonetheless, if adopted, it will do endless good for our graduates. There is still time, before those study cards get turned in, for students and advisors to try out my ideas.

I proceed from the premise that there has been rather too much talk around here lately about pushing back the frontiers of knowledge, scaling extraordinary heights, and winning the prizes we all are destined to win. Instead, my three-part requirement is meant to cut us all down to size, students and faculty alike.

First, I propose that you may not graduate from Harvard without taking at least one course that makes you profoundly uncomfortable, troubled, sleepless, and disturbed. Now like most people, I generally prefer happiness to unhappiness. But even happiness can be overdone. Take 31 courses that leave you smiling, self-confident, and upbeat if you wish. But under my plan, you will not get your diploma unless you can demonstrate that just one course kept you up at night, shaken because your beliefs have been challenged by what you have been made to read. Or sleepless, perhaps, because you have been forced to question your determined *lack* of faith.

Socrates' dictum that an unexamined life is not worth living is perhaps too harsh. But surely we can agree that such an unexamined life is not worth a Harvard AB! To make this work, all the college libraries will have to move to a 24-hour schedule, and we will have to restore a 24-hour bookstore in Harvard Square too. Maybe even a 24-hour chapel or two! Such costly physical improvements will doubtless be hard to justify, with nothing more than spiritual growth to be nourished. But a college that can help students socialize *with each other* by providing a great pub, a great women's center, and a great

carnival with bumper cars, should *also* provide better support for students to search their own souls.

My second curricular requirement is that you may not graduate from Harvard without taking at least one course with no right answers. For the other 31, Cliff's notes and the Final Club file cabinets may produce passing grades. But one slot must be reserved for a course in which the teachers disagree, or frankly acknowledge they aren't sure of the right answers. Requiring students to take such a course would have the laudable effect of requiring the Harvard faculty to teach them, which might ever so slightly improve the humility quotient of my colleagues.

And third, under my plan you must take a course in which you could not possibly get an A. Now this doesn't sound hard—after all, there are very few 4.0 transcripts here. But that is *after* the fact. What I mean is that you must be surrounded, just for just one thirty-second of your classroom time here, by people who you *know going into it* are smarter than you are and know more than you do. To get that diploma, you have to demonstrate to the Ad Board that you have sought out, just once, the opportunity to know you are ordinary.

As an extra benefit, I have a solution to the vexed problem of honors inflation. *Honors* degrees will be reserved for students who can demonstrate that, in just one term, they have *competed for no prizes at all*, and have taken a course in which they had no hope of getting even a *B*. I expect these rules would once again make Harvard honors a rare distinction.

So there it is. *Blessed are the meek, for they shall inherit the earth*. Humility as a graduation requirement. You may think I'm joking, but do you think that what we will actually wind up with will be as educational as this would be?