

## Adrift in the Sea of Academia

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My college transcript reads like an eye chart. It is smudged with as many Ws and Is as it is with As, Bs, Cs or Ds. The only F remaining by the end of my six-year undergraduate tenure was for Psychology 101, a class I took and failed not once, but twice.

It is fair to say that I arrived on campus ill-prepared, so failing a class never came as a great surprise. I was a first-generation college student, and few of my high school classmates attended college, or had any desire to do so. I was adrift in the vast sea of academia alone and had not yet bought into the philosophy of going to class every day.

If there was a 1 o'clock class that I needed to attend and in the quad outside the humanities building appeared a juggler, an itinerant preacher, or, for that matter, an attractive credit card vendor, the juggler largely won over my need to further my education, especially if class attendance wasn't required. "What will it matter? I can miss this one time." But once would often turn into twice or several weeks or even months.

Like I said, failing Psych 101 the first time came as no major surprise, but the second time—as a mature, grizzled sixth-year senior—was quite a blow to my ego. Or would that be my id? Maybe, if I had passed the class, I'd know the difference between the two.

Before I proceed, I must admit that I was never a scholar equal to my potential. I squeaked through not only high school, but elementary and middle school as well. Scoffer, slacker and "less than he is capable of" were often phrases that applied to me during much of my academic career.

As a kid who moved around a lot—10 schools in a dozen years—my major concern was fitting in. I had no interest in doing anything that made me stand out. During my first stab at second grade, I made the mistake of having perfect attendance. The accomplishment came with a certificate. Such recognition, I quickly learned, got you punched by fifth-graders and I didn't like getting punched. This philosophy applied to every part of my being, from the bottoms of my Converse Chuck Taylors to my Scott Baio (Chachi on *Happy Days*) haircut. Enough to get by was enough in most classes, and that was just fine with me.

That all changed during the spring semester of my second sophomore year. I enrolled for a 300-level class called American Studies mostly because I had been told, (correctly or incorrectly—I could never be sure) that it would count as either a history or humanities credit. The big draw, however, was that it was one of those Tuesday-Thursday classes, which left Mondays, Wednesdays and Fridays free for

jugglers, preachers and coeds.

The first Tuesday class was held in Gottschalk Hall. Built in 1894 and named after Louis R. Gottschalk, a noted historian of the American and French Revolutions, it was one of the older buildings on campus and one of the few that had the appearance of academia as shown in movies such as *The Paper Chase* or even *Animal House*. There wasn't much ivy growing on my campus, which had more of the feel of an industrial park with classrooms. The parking lots were gravel, leaving cars and students continually covered with a layer of dust. The smell of roasting soybeans from the dog food factory next to campus permeated our clothes, hair and skin. Outside of its stellar basketball team, my school, it seemed, also had adopted an attitude that enough to get by was enough.

For that first class, more than 60 students forced themselves into the desk chairs mounted to the risers in the Gottschalk classroom. The wooden, varnished desktops were etched with initials, exotic Greek letters and random obscenities. The seats themselves were worn smooth, especially around the edges.

Enter Dr. John T. Cumbler, professor, with a salt-and-pepper beard, wearing a corduroy jacket, with patches on the elbows, over a dark turtleneck. The author of such engaging titles as *Working-Class Community in Industrial America* and *A Moral Response to Industrialism*, he is carrying a stack of more than a dozen books like a hero sandwich. He slams them on the lectern. He has everyone's attention.

"I . . . am . . . Dr. . . . John . . . Cumbler . . . and . . . these . . . are . . . the . . . required . . . texts . . . for . . . this . . . class."

His voice, pausing between each word, is a cross between William F. Buckley and Garrison Keillor. "I . . . am," he continues, telling us about his academic background, his advanced degrees from esteemed institutions of higher learning, far greater than the one we unfortunately have found ourselves attending. "Your circumstance, or your parents' circumstance, may not have afforded you an Ivy League education, but I can assure you it shan't be denied you in this course."

Dr. Cumbler announced that Thursday's class would meet in another room, which we would find down the hall. He then turned and left the room.

On Thursday, I found the other, much smaller room. It consisted of a large, dark, polished conference table surrounded by a dozen stuffed conference chairs. At the head of the table—partially obstructed by the stack of required texts—sat Dr. Cumbler.

For the next 15 weeks we learned about architecture, city planning and commerce. We were required to read a book each week, and each week we were quizzed. Each quiz figured into our final grade equally. By mid-term, I was carrying a high-B average, and two thirds of the way through the semester it was clear that, barring catastrophe, I was assured of at least passing.

Within days of this personal revelation, Dr. John T. Cumbler was featured in the magazine section of the Sunday newspaper as one of the state's five toughest professors.

If, I told myself, I could get an A from Dr. Cumbler, then maybe, just maybe, I belonged in college. I might not be at Harvard, Yale or Princeton (or *Animal House's* Faber College for that matter), but in some way this might be the same. On some level, some degree-of-separation level, I could chart a path for myself that didn't include working the counter at the Ken-Bowl, disinfecting and doling out shoes.

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I trudged on. While I didn't understand the topic—I still don't—I listened to what he had to say, and I took notes. I reviewed the notes, and I read the required text. My

grades on the weekly quizzes improved, and the only thing standing between me and an Ivy League A was the blue-book exam, which he told us, would contain nothing for which we would find ourselves ill-prepared if we had been doing the reading and paying attention.

I had, for the first time in my life, been doing both.

When I entered Gottschalk Hall the afternoon of the final exam, the building was silent. Through the door's frosted window I could see that the conference room was dark.

The door was locked.

I took a seat, Indian-style, on the floor outside the room and waited.

How rude, I thought.

Okay, so Dr. Cumbler is sick, maybe, but somehow he could have let me know. He had apparently let everyone else know, and here I was waiting. Wasn't he aware that I had better things to do?

Eventually I began to shuffle through my papers. Maybe there's a note posted somewhere, I thought. It had never occurred to me before, but I was sure he probably had an office somewhere, although I had never seen it. Maybe someone there would know why Dr. Cumbler had left me waiting, especially when I had done the required readings and paid such close attention.

As I approached Dr. Cumbler's office, the door was half open and inside, at the desk, sat Dr. Cumbler, amongst assorted papers and a small stack of blue books.

"Mr. Vest," he said, clearing his throat. "A family emergency? A personal crisis? Something legitimate certainly caused you to miss my final?"

"Uhhh?" I stammered. I had been at his final. He was the one who didn't show up. "Uhhh?" I managed a second time. "I was just there. The lights were out and the door was locked."

"Mr. Vest," he said again. "You, sir, did not carefully read the syllabus for this class. If you had read it carefully, you would have noted that the final was this morning, not this afternoon. Didn't you ponder why you were the only one in attendance?"

"But," I stammered. "Uhhh."

"Were you ill prepared?"

"No," I said. "I was ready. I am ready. I had no reason [other than being a dumbass] to show up late. I am prepared. I am. I have not missed a single class, and if you'll only let me take the exam, I'll prove it to you."

It was no longer about the A.

It was about proving that I belonged.

It was about showing Dr. Cumbler—anyone, for that matter—that my lack of success up to this point was not a shortage of ability or intellect, but motivation. I didn't make poor grades to this point because I was stupid. It was because I chose not to try.

"Please, let me try," I said.

He removed his reading glasses.

Now he was the one pondering.

As I fidgeted more than a newbie beauty contestant, I realized that this was not only the first time I had stood up for myself—it was the first time, academically, that I could have. Certainly, I was on foreign turf, but I was on solid footing. I had attended every class, which was something I couldn't even say about the classes in my major—the ones I liked—communications taught by local television and newspaper employees in their spare time. This was different. Dr. Cumbler was a real professor, and this was a real class.

"Mr. Vest," he said. "Close the door."

I did.

"Have a seat," he said.

As I sat down across the desk from Dr. Cumbler, he cleared the other blue books and assorted papers off of his large, wooden desk, placing them on a credenza on the far wall. He then turned back to me. "You do have your blue book, I presume."

He slid the single exam question across the desk. It asked for a detailed explanation of the impact, both direct and indirect, of industrial, commercial and residential architecture on 20th century American culture.

As I wrote, Dr. Cumbler watched, somehow without staring.

His hands, fingers interlocked, rested on his edge of the desk. Over the next hour as the information found its way from my up-until-now unchallenged brain through my spine, arms and hands to the well-sharpened lead of my Dixon Ticonderoga No.2 Pencil, I could see his hands, his knuckles, as I wrote. His hands never once moved.

When I finished, I thanked him, handed him my blue book and left his office.

Over the years, I saw announcements in the university's alumni magazine about the books that he had published. *A Social History of Economic Decline: Business, Politics, and Work in Trenton*; *Reasonable Use: The People, the Environment, and the State, New England 1790-1930*; and *The Changing Landscape of Labor: American Workers and Workplaces*; but other than a photo of Dr. Cumbler accompanying an article about him being presented the John Adams Chair in American history and his teaching in the Netherlands on a Fulbright Award, I never saw him again.

When my grades arrived at my parents' house at the end of the following week, there was much rejoicing. Not only had I garnered an Ivy League A, the significance of which was lost on all but me, but the other assorted Bs and Cs were nearly enough to pull me off academic probation for the first time in my college career.

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That summer, I enrolled in all three summer terms. I always did better in summer school—one class, one subject—for three to five weeks on a nearly deserted concrete campus. It was the weight of four or five different subjects that I struggled, and failed, to juggle.

Most semesters I registered for 12 or 15 hours. By mid-term, I knew the classes I was doing well in and which ones conflicted with my social endeavors. I would quickly drop the offenders and trudge on with the rest. That isn't to say that another course (or two) might not be cast away on the drop date.

Now armed with my success in Dr. Cumbler's course and the knowledge that attending class every day goes a long way in charting collegiate success, I was determined that I was going to take a full load—18 hours. I was not going to drop anything, and I was going to make straight As. I would, I was sure, bring home a report card that would make my parents proud. No more "Isn't it time you started thinking about getting a job? I hear there's an opening in the meat department at Pic-Pac."

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In creating my fall schedule I was confident in the courses I would be taking, especially those in the Communications Department—media ethics, public relations, copy writing and a television criticism course that included watching episodes of *Leave It to Beaver* and *The Andy Griffith Show* in class. Even before realizing that class attendance could be beneficial, I had started making acceptable grades within my major.

In the English Department, my newly aspiring minor, I had a literature course that focused on F. Scott Fitzgerald, which I was sure I could ace, being that he had been forced upon me in high school by one of the few teachers who felt our rabble should be prepared for college. The other 3-hour course, the only subject in which I had any true confidence, was taught by a graduate assistant named Roach.

The Fitzgerald course was taught by a scholarly woman, who dressed the part of a scholarly woman, and who loved F. Scott on a level equal to that of Miss Hatfield, my high school teacher. Between readings of “Winter Dreams” and “Bernice Bobs Her Hair,” she talked about how Fitzgerald once lived within mere miles of our campus and her firm belief that Gatsby’s Daisy Fay Buchanan was based on a Louisville woman he met while stationed there during World War I.

I came prepared for class most days and did my best to keep up with the reading. I had to. There was no doubt this was a serious woman, and any slip up on my part would not be tolerated. She looked like the kind of woman who probably knew Miss Hatfield, which could mean she had been forewarned about my slovenly academic attitude.

Roach, however, would not be a problem. He wore half-buttoned, untucked flannel shirts over faded black concert T-shirts and husky Wrangler jeans. His beard was a mess. His hair was a mess. In short, he was one of my people.

I buckled down and worked harder that one semester than any other. I remained focused, and the results showed in my mid-term grades. I was acing tests left and right. In the Communications Department I had no equal—all As—no question. In both the Fitzgerald class and Roach’s class I had high-Bs, but I was not overly concerned because my admiration for Fitzgerald was growing, and it was Roach’s policy to allow any assignment to be rewritten until we were satisfied with the grade. And I rewrote everything.

On the last day of class, I approached Roach and asked him point-blank if I was going to get an A. “Is there anything else I need to do to get an A in your class?” I said. “It is very important to me that I get an A.”

I don’t remember him giving me an answer—it was more of a nod and a wink, an unspoken communication between two kindred spirits, which was made clear, at least to me, by his Bob Seger and The Silver Bullet Band T-Shirt.

As for F. Scott, I nailed the final. I not only knew the answers to the questions, I knew how she wanted them answered. I wrote in detail about his impact and his influence and even mentioned that he, like me, was a less than stellar student and often misunderstood and overlooked until after his tragic death at 44.

When my grades arrived at my parents’ house I took the envelope, unopened, to share with my latest girlfriend, a grad student, who could fully appreciate the weight of my accomplishment.

“Here, you read them,” I said, knowing that there, for all to see, I was no longer a *ne’er do well*, but a bona fide member of the Dean’s List, a scholar.

Ethics in the Media: A.

Advanced Public Relations: A.

Advanced Copy Writing: A.

The Situation Comedy in 1950s and ’60s Television: A.

English literature: F. Scott Fitzgerald: A.

Intermediate Creative Writing: B.

“B!” I cried. “B?”

I pulled the grade sheet away from her. I flopped down at her kitchen table and

stared at the letters, reading them again and again. When I finally spoke, I said, "There must be some kind of mistake. He must have me confused with someone else. The grades must have gotten transposed."

I didn't know what to do. I didn't know what to say. Couldn't he see that I was to the Pepsi Generation what Fitzgerald was to the Jazz Age? "There must have been some kind of mistake," I said again.

I rifled through the phone book and found Roach's number. I was, for the one and only time in my life, going to call a teacher *at home*. As I punched in each of the numbers, my blood pressure rose. By the time he answered on the third or fourth ring all I managed to say was, "But."

"Hello?" he said.

"But," I said again, blubbering. "But, you said, you said, I could rewrite until I was satisfied with my grade, and I told you I wouldn't be satisfied until I had an A."

"Who is this?" he said.

So much for kindred spirits.

So much for the unspoken bond between Styx devotees.

After telling him exactly who I was, I was certain the error would be apparent. He had, I was sure, given me someone else's B, and my A was being celebrated elsewhere, by someone far less deserving.

"No," he said. "I gave you a B."

"Why?" I said. "I got an A on every paper in your class. I rewrote every assignment, sometimes three and four times."

"Yes," he said, "but I felt like a B was the appropriate grade."

"Appropriate? Why?"

"Well," he said. "It's important that people like you learn that they don't always have to get an A to feel a sense of accomplishment."

People like me? Did he have me confused with someone who was used to making good grades?

I stood there, holding the phone, in disbelief.

I then said something along the lines of "Listen here, bucko," but instead of bucko I said something like butt-munch or maybe it was dickhead, "your syllabus clearly states (After all, Dr. Cumbler had taught me to read the syllabi) that any student can rewrite any paper until he or she is satisfied with the grade."

"Well. If you don't feel the grade is fair, you can always appeal," Roach said as he ended our conversation by hanging up the phone.

I oh-so-badly wanted to egg his car, toilet paper his house or give him a good poke in the nose. None of my childish responses, however, seemed creative enough.

Everyone has that list of things that they wish they had done. That list generally filled with worthwhile things. I wish I had learned to roller skate. I wish I had learned to play the guitar. The trip to Europe. The dismissed romance. It's easy to pick out what would have been the right, or at least better, thing to do. It's easy to say "I better not," knowing it might not be the right thing, but sometimes the wrong thing, that thing you're sure you'll regret later, is the right thing to do.

Who's to say *Animal House* wasn't an instructional video? Otter was right when he said, "I think that this situation absolutely requires a really futile and stupid gesture be done on somebody's part."

And I was just the guy to do it.

But I didn't.

Instead, I stewed over it.

I continue to stew over it.

Roach didn't give me the B because I wasn't good enough. He didn't give me the B because my work was sub-standard. He told me, straight up, on my grad-school girlfriend's phone that my grade was the result of some twisted reasoning on his part that it would somehow do me good. It was his way of making a point; putting me in my place; teaching me some unlearned life lesson. Whatever it was supposed to be, it was wrong. It was unjust, unfair.

It wasn't because I was merely "above average" instead of "excellent"—which would have been more than fair. That would have been accurate; that would have been astute.

When the Tale of Roach reached my brother Tim, whose college years were tarried on a similar concrete campus further north, he quickly relayed that he had once begged a professor for a chance to do an extra paper in a similar quest for parental acknowledgement. The professor said that the extra paper had only confirmed Tim to be a B student and that's the grade he received. That, I believe was fair—harsh and maybe a bit cruel—but fair.

There was nothing fair about my Roach treatment and the student handbook: Academic Grievance Procedure clearly states:

#### Section 1: Introduction

This procedure is designed to provide fair means of dealing with student complaints regarding a specific action or decision made by the faculty or a faculty member. Students who believe they have been treated unfairly, discriminated against, or have had their rights abridged may initiate a grievance (*The Redbook*, Section 6.8.1).

In baseball, you can't protest a called strike. In basketball, you can't protest a foul. They're what are called judgment calls, rulings by an umpire or referee "based on his perception of events and the absence of any objective measurement."

Roach, it appears, made a judgment call, poor as it was.

With the advent of technology, there are now instant replays in football, basketball and baseball. A higher power can review the tape and step in and correct what are called reversible errors in the course of a game. Once the game is over, however, it's over. I know, there is no instant replay in college classrooms, but interestingly enough there is also no statute of limitations on when an appeal should be filed. I've checked.

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Looking back on my college career more than two and a half decades later, I take pride in the A I earned from Dr. Cumbler, who was considered to be one tough professor, then as now. More than the A, however, I take pride in the fact that I didn't tuck tail and run when I learned he was considered to be so.

As for Roach, I'm no longer ashamed of the B.

I am, however, ashamed.

I'm ashamed that at a time when I was coming of age and finally standing up for myself I didn't do something, no matter how uncreative or immature. An old Klingon proverb says that "revenge is a dish best served cold," but it's probably a little late in the game to leave a paper bag full of dog shit flaming on his front porch. The poke in the nose probably would land me in the pokey.

Deep down I know the grade I deserved, and I've come to terms with Roach's gross error in judgment. In my stronger moments, my mature moments, I feel I've come to terms with Roach's slight and I take solace in the grade that I know I deserved.

In my weaker, insignificant moments, huddled in some dark corner of despair, I take refuge in the fact that it's never too late to file that appeal.