Empty Ceremony

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Reflections

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Stephen Brockmann

In the summer before I entered college, Alexander Solzhenitsyn in his commencement address at Harvard accused American culture of obsessive materialism and a total lack of spirituality. Four years later I graduated from Columbia with the certain knowledge that universities and students are more obsessively materialistic and antspiritual than ever.

According to the humanistic ideal—an ideal reinforced by the symbolic continuity of the commencement ceremony linking today’s graduates with all students of the past—students are supposed to be imbued with an intense desire for truth and wisdom. Their humanity is evidenced by an adherence to certain values that have more worth to them than their physical well-being. This humanistic ideal, outmoded in our culture as a whole, has survived at least nominally in our colleges, so that four years of undergraduate education are supposed to lead not only to a well-paying but also to the personal development of students, to the unfolding and nurturing of their intellect and spirit. As a new graduate, however, I must unfortunately report that this adherence to the humanistic ideal is in fact nominal only, and that even the word “spirit,” let alone the concept, is in disrepute on campus.

Our universities and colleges are now little more than highly sophisticated finishing schools where students go to be pre-something—pre-med, pre-law, pre-business. They are not centers for the unfolding of the free human spirit but rather guarantors of worldly prestige, of jobs, of admission to graduate and professional schools. The problem goes far beyond the fact that few students elect to take courses that educate the free spirit. The problem is that students rarely if ever take any demanding courses at all—let alone the traditional classical ones—outside their particular fields of study, except grudgingly in fulfillment of requirements. The vast array of subject areas that once was unified in one all-encompassing subject called philosophy is thereby effectively atomized and compartmentalized.

College has become a dreary, intellectually barren place where students work hard to become whatever they want to be, but where they find no joy and take no risks. Intellectual curiosity is usually crushed by a barrage of requirements, or by fear of ruining one’s GPA, or by the need—becoming ever crueler under the present federal administration—to work part- or full-time while studying.

The Bachelor of Arts is thus a four-year, forty-thousand-dollar certificate of admission to certain occupations, increasingly useless and undesirable in and of itself and increasingly unavailable to lower income students. As the American economic situation worsens and students become even more afraid of not finding acceptable jobs after graduation, their willingness to task risks will probably grow even smaller. Filled with economic uncertainty and faced with a system that tends to classify the intellect and learning in purely quantifiable terms, students become passive and obedient, numb.

American students who numb themselves to their studies may indeed work hard, but what they do has no real meaning for them because they have ceased to be a part of it. Alienated from the traditional and ideal life of the student, they are afraid to commit themselves or become involved in anything, let alone their studies, except on a purely impersonal, nonemotional basis. They are thus politically and socially apathetic; and when they graduate they are not celebrating a beginning—they are celebrating an end, because they will probably never devote themselves to anything even vaguely intellectual again. So much for lifelong devotion to the spirit of learning. The adulthood that students learn at college is purely practical, purely passive. They are educated not to be young but to be middle-aged.

It is wise, then, to remember during commencement that for all the good feeling, self-congratulation, and pomp and circumstance, the ceremony itself is essentially a lie, because we are pretending to be something we are not. Though we go through with the ceremony for the sake of form and for the sake of our egos, we should be honest and admit that we do not truly represent a link in the symbolic chain from Aristotle to Einstein to the future servants of the goddess of wisdom. Rather, when we don our academic robes and mortarboards, ceremonial vestments probably worn by Erasmus and Albertus Magnus and any number of great scholars of the past, we are putting on clothes too big for us, flopping clothes that we, in our puniness, will never be able to fit. Our souls are too small.

Stephen Brockmann was graduated from Columbia College in 1982 and will begin graduate study in German at the University of Wisconsin, Madison, in August.