

54
6

FIVE

Nature and Nurture

"Who ever said life was fair?"

—JOHN FITZGERALD KENNEDY

In any taxation system based on income, especially any that is labeled "progressive," the bulk of the proceeds will be taken from those more than usually gifted (assuming one accepts the notion that pay has some close correlation to merit and achievement and that these attributes are considered "gifts" in the sense both of talents and of unearned good fortune). This is partly a product of practicality and partly a reflection of a widespread moral judgment that those who have been blessed should pay alms in thanksgiving.

But the precise degree to which such expectations are imposed—which is to say, the extent to which income redistribution is regarded as justified—is an outgrowth of other questions to be pursued later in this chapter: To what extent is economic success a product of inherited talent? How important are free will and personal responsibility in determining one's fate? Is the propensity of those from privileged backgrounds to succeed, and of those from impoverished backgrounds to fail, purely a product of social determinism, or do factors of individual choice and merit come significantly into play?

The second big group of questions centers on integration. As noted in Chapter Two, there is a renewed push across the nation to include even severely disabled children in regular classrooms. The deinstitutionalization of mental patients, launched in the 1970s and 1980s and continuing today, reflects the same principle of incorporating people into mainstream society to the maximum extent possible, with society left to learn how to cope with the differences. In really liberal circles, this kind of thinking applies even to criminals. Jails are rejected as mere academies for the teaching of more serious crime, while community-based placements are urged as providing better rehabilitation (punishment is an all but taboo consideration). The handling of the elderly is the one notable exception to this trend. Nursing homes and other kinds of assisted or supervised living remain vastly more popular than

THE HARDEST PART of defending elitism is coming to terms with the random, amoral way in which both society's goods and the means of achieving them are distributed among individual people. Why are some brilliant and others dim? Why are some hale and hearty and others handicapped? Why are some deaf, some blind, some mute? And if "why?" proves unanswerable, at least in any way that resembles social justice, then what posture ought society to take about those at either extreme—the gifted and the shortchanged? This dilemma is of abiding interest to philosophers and theologians. But even for those unengaged by metaphysics, it poses four sets of intriguing questions.

The most basic group of them is economic. Every industrial society has accepted, to some degree, the notion of redistribution of wealth on behalf of the poor, the aged, the infirm, and the incapable. The ongoing debate is over the details: How much and for what? Is the goal merely to ensure survival of those unable to provide for themselves, or should one afford them a measure of comfort, even indulgence? Which of their medical and social needs are to be met? Should one spend on treatments or equipment designed to make them better adapted to society? What about spending to make society better adapted to them, from closed captioning of television programs to rendering buildings, streets, and subway systems wheelchair-accessible? Where possible, ought they be enabled to work, if need be by the creation of makework? Along with this set of questions about what claim the shortchanged may make on society also comes a mirror set about what claim society may make on the gifted.

sheltering aged relatives under one's own roof, even among the most exuberant advocates of general integration, perhaps because the personal sacrifices involved are real rather than rhetorical.

A third set of questions has to do with nomenclature and the social contract. The crippled have become the handicapped and now the differently abled. A wheelchair-bound person has become one who *uses* a wheelchair (that language is deemed to make him or her sound less passive). AIDS victims have become People With AIDS. In one of the most extreme versions, those born deaf have altered from being hearing-impaired to "having a birthright of silence." Every bit of plain speaking offends someone these days. When I metaphorically described the dancing in the ill-fated Broadway musical *Nick and Nora* as "clubfooted" in a review in *Time*, I predicted to the copy editor involved that we would get a letter from some organization for the clubfooted, objecting that this nomenclature implied a deformity—and I was right. My review of Stephen Sondheim's *Assassins* bore a headline that spoke of the killers and would-be killers of American presidents as "loony," which the vast majority of them irrefutably were. This prompted a two-page single-spaced letter from a spokeswoman for the insane, protesting that the reference to the mental state of these deranged shooters was unfair to the crazy. More recently I was struck by a lawsuit filed on behalf of a mentally retarded eighth-grader in Dayton, Ohio, whose guardian wanted the girl to be able to attend a prom limited to high school students. Noting that her daughter was the same age as some others eligible to attend and asserting that the girl could exercise comparable judgment, Thelma Sell said, "Sherrie is handicapped. She's not stupid." If she is not "stupid," then what exactly does mentally retarded mean?

I find personal amusement in the proliferation of groups denouncing "sizism," which means bias against the over-

weight, and "looksism," which means bias against the unattractive. Having been up to a hundred pounds overweight for most of the past fifteen years, and having been married nearly all of that time to a woman who was the same (she has since become a lean and hungry health club fanatic), I know the terrain. Two facts are indisputable. First, whatever their other medical problems, fat people are fat because they eat too much. They may have slow metabolisms and therefore need to eat much less than others. But however much or little they eat, it is more than they need to sustain them at an optimal weight. And second, when prospective employers wonder whether a fat person may be less nimble and more apt to get sick, they are merely showing common sense. It is true that boorish men (and sometimes women) are apt to make remarks about weight to complete strangers. But there are limits to our ability to wish away rudeness, particularly in an area that intersects with the volatile and private realm of sexual attraction.

The fourth set of questions has to do with amelioration and change. If society accepts a duty to make things better for the unfortunate, does it have a concomitant right to do so whether or not the intended beneficiaries seek or even desire the help? In the coldest part of winter, many of the homeless—particularly those with emotional problems—refuse to be housed in shelters. They stay outdoors, where some of them freeze to death. Some schizophrenics of my acquaintance periodically refuse to take medication that helps control their problems because they prefer the way they feel when they are more detached from reality.

The impulse in current American society is to "empower" the afflicted, even to the extent of engaging in the charade that they suffer no affliction but are merely somehow different. At some point this exchange between the more fortunate person and the less fortunate one transits from a mildly condescending pretense to a *folie à deux*.

A striking example is the ongoing assertion among the deaf

that theirs is simply an alternative culture, as rich and varied and valid as anyone else's. The more extreme among them oppose the installation of hearing implements or restorative surgery as an insulting intrusion. They reject having children learn English as early as possible and instead urge emphasizing their own American Sign Language. Perhaps ASL is as vibrant and nuanced a language as its advocates claim; I don't know it, and the handful of my acquaintances who do all learned it as hearing adults, long after mastering English. But I do know two things. First, ASL cannot possibly be as nuanced and subtle as English, which has many, many more words and a greater potential for sensitivity (ASL speakers indicate homosexuals with a swish of the wrist and denote Asians by making gestures around the eyes to indicate a slant). Second, English is the language of American government, commerce, and education, and someone who remains primarily dependent on ASL is probably doomed to stay within his or her "culture," perhaps in the self-perpetuating role of teaching ASL to the next generation. In arguing that deaf children are happier without cochlear implants to help them hear and without early emphasis on English to help them communicate across the hearing barrier, deaf militants are in effect saying that these children are better off asserting equal but alternate status than they are in admitting their limitations and learning as much as they can. One hears echoes of the similar extremism among Afrocentrists and feminists; if we can't have our culture and historical status validated as equal, then let's abandon the whole process of comparison. In my mind, partial failure is always better than delusory success.

If the discontented were engaging in this self-deception on their own as an exercise in the power of positive thinking, it might not seem so troubling. But when they persuade the larger society to go along with them, they promote at minimum a tawdry hypocrisy and at worst a further erosion of the competitive spirit. In some instances, they also cost society an

immense amount of money in pursuit of a sometimes chimerical principle. Three incidents are illustrative.

As mentioned in the opening chapter, in November 1992 a deaf and mute high school student won the right to enter an annual speech contest sponsored by the Veterans of Foreign Wars. (That year's topic, ironically in the circumstances, was "My Voice in America's Future.") She pursued her case in a federal district court and withdrew only after the VFW agreed to admit her and proffered an abject apology. The rules of the contest require entrants to submit audiotapes of themselves delivering their speeches. The tapes are identified only by number during the judging process in an attempt to weed out personal sympathies and prejudices among the evaluators. Instead, the judges weigh two factors: the content of the speech, as written in English, and the oratorical style of its delivery.

The would-be entrant, Shannon Merryman of Bristol, Rhode Island, proposed to meet neither requirement. She demanded that she be permitted to submit a videotape—something no other contestant is allowed to do—in which she would "speak" in American Sign Language. The presentational elements of oratory, the seductive and persuasive and inspirational capacities of the human voice, would perforce be lacking from her submission; even the use of her hands in gesture would have little to do with traditional oratory, for she would be conveying literal information rather than reinforcing her words by emphasis and metaphor. Moreover, Merryman's chosen language of ASL is not English; it is not even a literal translation of English, but has its own grammar. No reasonable person wants to deny the handicapped the right to compete with the rest of the world to the full extent that it is possible. But what Merryman proposed to do was not to compete at the same activity. Rather, she wanted to do something altogether different and have it be treated as the same thing.

After the contest's administrators declined her proposal,

Merryman went public and the political results were predictable. When a sixteen-year-old girl with a disability is pitted as a female David against a Goliath-size organization of older, mostly white, and largely conservative men, in the court of public opinion the David is bound to win. Howard Vander Clute, the VFW's adjutant general and head of its national headquarters, ultimately denied any intention to discriminate and blamed the whole fuss on bureaucracy. "I'm not sure where the communication broke down," he said. "I think the reason it went to court was that someone felt it should have been addressed before."

The organization did salvage a fig leaf to place over its retreat. Instead of a videotape, Merryman agreed to submit an audiotape in which her ideas would be translated by an interpreter. But Merryman vowed to renew her bid to speak for herself, in ASL, in a future installment in the contest. Her mother added, "We don't want to just drop this. We want to see things change so that people will be able to accept people who are not quite the same." In fact, of course most Americans are prepared to do that now. What Merryman was really asking was that people accept her as being "quite the same" when she is not. There are many things deaf-mute people can do. Oratory is not, however, among them.

The second instructive episode dates from the 1970s, when the District of Columbia was in the final stages of completing its subway system, the Metro. For whatever reasons—construction techniques, insensitivity, mere oversight—at least some of the stations were ready to receive physically normal passengers many months before they would be ready to accommodate the handicapped. Officials apologized and offered interim solutions, including unlimited free taxi rides for any handicapped people who requested them. This was on its face a far better deal than actual use of the system, and if the handicapped had been smart, they would have proposed that it be made permanent. It was cheaper, it was safer, and it was

bound to be more convenient because it would be door to door. But no. The handicapped insisted on keeping the system closed to everyone until it was fully accessible to them, prompting one exasperated scholar of my acquaintance (a prominent Ivy League liberal who would strangle me for using his name) to snort publicly about "crippos liberation." (One feels inclined to put in this same category the decision of the Los Angeles city disabled commission to shut down a nude "shower dancing" attraction at a cabaret, not because the entertainment was lewd but because it was inaccessible to performers and customers in wheelchairs. This may, however, have been an instance of puritanism merely masquerading as political correctness.) Of course the handicapped are right to insist on having an opportunity to do everything that everyone else can, including commute to work. But it flies in the face of reality to insist that they ought always to be able to do everything in exactly the same *way* as everyone else.

The third illustrative episode came in August 1992, when the Bush administration rejected Oregon's plan to ration health care. The plan involved numerically ranking treatments and services by their likelihood to prolong or improve life and barring Medicaid payment for roughly the bottom twenty percent. Some treatments, such as therapy for the common cold, were barred because they were not necessary. Others, such as treatment for traumatic brain injury or for AIDS patients believed to be in the last six months of life, were excluded because they were expensive and unlikely to do much good. Some, such as liver transplants for people with alcoholic cirrhosis, seemed to be ruled out as a moral judgment that the patient had brought his problem on himself and a practical judgment that his behavior might well recur. Perhaps the toughest and most unpopular decision was to withhold payment for cancer treatments for patients whose prospects of surviving at least five years were less than ten percent. In the face of cancer, most Americans believe a patient should be

entitled to try anything, regardless of how high the cost or how low the likelihood of success—as was evidenced by the epochal \$77 million jury award in December 1993 to the heirs of a California woman who was denied money for a highly experimental late-stage cancer treatment (which she then financed privately and which failed anyway). Although most of the excluded conditions in Oregon were diseases, at least some, such as foot deformities and certain kinds of epilepsy, were disabilities. AIDS, although a disease syndrome, also has been officially labeled a disability, thus affording its sufferers a broad range of legal protections.

In denying Oregon's proposal, Secretary of Health and Human Services Louis W. Sullivan asserted that the rankings were based on the premise that "the value of the life of a person with a disability is less than the value of a life of a person without a disability." That presumption, he added, would violate the Americans with Disabilities Act. The core issue, of course, is value to whom. The life of a disabled person is worth an infinite amount to him or her; it is the only one he or she has. But its value to society is by definition finite. Even if we do not place caps on medical treatment, we do on subsistence and "entitlement" payments. Oregon officials had the courage to make choices. As Oregon's Democratic congressman Ron Wyden pointed out, the Bush administration chose in a reelection year to be "politically safe." While American society is clearly not ready to confront legislation or administrative regulations that question the value of those no longer sentient at either end of life—severely retarded children and elderly people in a chronic coma—the time may be coming when we face up to a basic economic reality. Almost everything anyone proposes to spend public money on is in some sense worthwhile. But there is not enough money to do everything, and as technology improves, the gap will only widen. Modern medicine does not simply make more people healthy. Its larger effect is to keep more

chronically sick people alive. At some point the elitist impulse must be recognized as the only tenable one: to say, at least by the inaction of withholding treatment, that some lives are indeed worth less to society than others. Ideologues will denounce this as fascism. It is really just candor.

When John Kennedy asked rhetorically about the fairness of life, he knew whereof he spoke. He had been born attractive, intelligent, and wealthy. He grew up in a family of glamour and political power. He survived the war that took the lives of so many of his contemporaries, and emerged a certified hero to boot. His family connections helped him win a Pulitzer Prize (and his employees may have helped him write the volume for which he was honored). He got away with massive amounts of marital infidelity, including an affair with a girlfriend whom he shared with Mafiosi, and he managed to conceal medical conditions that might have raised grave doubts about his fitness for the rigors of the White House.

When John Kennedy asked rhetorically about the fairness of life, he knew whereof he spoke. His father was a philanthropist and both parents were often away. His older brother was killed in war. A sister died in a plane crash. Another sister was mentally retarded. He endured severe back pain and kidney problems. He and his wife lost a newborn child. A taint of alleged vote fraud in Chicago will forever cloud his greatest triumph, being elected President. And he had his brains blown out in front of a watching world at the age of forty-six.

Depending on how you look at things, Kennedy's life and most others can seem either unjustly harsh or unjustly soft. Not surprisingly, most of us have days when we are thrilled to be alive and days when we halfway wouldn't mind being hit by a truck.

One of the classic restoratives for those dispirited days is to catch a glimpse of someone worse off. "I mourned that I had no shoes," the proverb runs, "until I met a man who had no

feet." As a reminder of one's good fortune, such exposure is salutary. For this reason, I used to make a point of taking a vacation somewhere in the third world at least once every couple of years, to refresh my awareness of how fortunate the most workaday, middle-of-the-middle American is by global standards.

The problem in contemporary America is that our awareness of life's capriciousness has translated into guilt whenever things go well. The mass media and the political tactics they have bred (lobbying, demonstrations, press conferences, and photo opportunities) have made us all much more aware of the disadvantaged. We have responded not just with compassion, but also with deep self-doubt. Winners no longer feel they have a right to exult in their victories. Losers no longer feel so responsible for the depth of their defeat, regardless of the facts of the case. Self-proclaimed victims of society have lost sight of the proportion of their fate that reflects free will. Too often, people who grasp that they are not responsible for certain aspects of their problems decide that they can legitimately be irresponsible about every aspect of their problems. Just as often, their betters are prone to let them do so and to commiserate over the sad results.

A pointed example of this social dynamic is the success of the musical play *Blood Brothers*, which has had two long runs in London's West End and which is, as I write, in its fourteenth month on Broadway. In America it has survived as an "audience" show despite what would normally be killing reviews. The premise is that twin brothers are born to an impoverished working-class woman and that just one of them—for contrived reasons—is adopted into a middle-class home. The middle-class boy grows up to be attractive, athletic, wholesome, bright, and impeccably mannered. The working-class boy—who is the *hero!*—grows up scruffy, coarse, idle, and disruptive. He drinks. He steals. He sleeps around. He scorns authority, falls in with thugs, and eventually commits

murder. Every single one of these acts is portrayed not as his own fault or folly, but as the moral burden of the middle class.

I can imagine that readers who are unfamiliar with the show are by now assuming that what makes it popular is its score, or some trick of stagecraft, or some bravura performance while the political message slides by. Believe me, the sermon cannot be overlooked. In fact, as my wildly enthusiastic companion for a matinee—himself a Broadway veteran and TV series regular—readily conceded, the show's execution borders on the amateurish. My friend liked it, he explained, because he believes that it reflects the way the world really is. For half an hour after the curtain fell, he argued passionately that intelligence is equally distributed across class lines and that in most cases only the facts of one's upbringing determine whether one fails or succeeds. He rejected out of hand the idea that however hard the working-class boy's life had been, the choices he made—beginning with rejecting school—were entirely and culpably his own. Perhaps predictably, my exasperated friend called me an elitist.

The hard factual evidence on social mobility in America, like the evidence on most other divisive questions, is capable of being read whichever way you like. During the Reagan years, Democrats are fond of pointing out, the middle class—defined as those with incomes ranging between seventy-five percent and one hundred twenty-five percent of the national median—substantially shrank. In consequence, the gulf between the well-off and the ill-off widened. All that is true. But the reason the gulf widened is that a sizable chunk of the middle class advanced to the upper middle, with incomes beyond one hundred twenty-five percent of the norm. If America moved a bit closer to being a country divided between rich and poor, it was not because the ranks of the poor were increasing.

During this period the median American was surely upwardly mobile. Over the course of a lifetime, the median

American has absolutely been upwardly mobile, because national wealth has greatly increased while the pattern of concentration has shifted only marginally. As for the volume of individual movements up (or down) by amounts considerably greater than the norm, they are hard to quantify. But we know anecdotally that they happen often enough to be considered more than mere flukes. Indeed, we don't need to look much farther than Bill Clinton to find a telling example.

The problem of free will sheds light on an intriguing conundrum about the ideological differences between liberals and conservatives. It is a commonplace observation that liberals believe in the perfectibility of man while conservatives believe in the endurance of original sin. Superficially, that would suggest that conservatives take a more understanding and indulgent view of individual lapses, while liberals take a more harshly judgmental one. In fact, we know, quite the opposite is the case. Much as conservatives may be resigned to the unattainability of moral perfection, they delight in rewarding individual surges toward (or punishing individual retreats from) that state of grace. Liberals, on the other hand, assume that this moral nirvana will be reached collectively rather than by individual striving. In the real world, therefore, liberals tend to treat moral lapses as the collective fault of society.

If the goal of elitists is to distinguish confidently between better and worse cultures, better and worse ideas, better and worse contributions to society, then surely that judging process must extend to distinguishing between better and worse behavior. On the matter of free will and personal responsibility, even lifelong liberals of an elitist bent are forced to find common cause with conservatives. It is not that the down-trodden do not need or deserve help. It is that they will not have better lives until they are prepared on their own to embrace better values, not the least of which is self-reliance.

Much of the erosion in the sense of personal responsibility

among the poor can be traced, I think, to the late 1960s, when the language of "entitlement" began to become pervasive in American culture. That was the era as well of the National Welfare Rights Organization, a now-defunct lobbying group that had lasting importance chiefly because of the use of the word *rights* in its title. As late as the enactment of Lyndon Johnson's war on poverty programs just a few years before, it was generally accepted that welfare and other benefices from the state were not rights but charity, given voluntarily for the physical succor of the recipient and the moral succor of the donor. This sense of a voluntary transaction, one that might legitimately be terminated at any time, surely awakened at least some recipients to the awareness that they were ultimately responsible for their own fate. Once welfare became labeled a "right" or "entitlement," that change in rhetoric inevitably eroded the sense of personal duty to survive and improve.

A comparable effect has resulted, I suspect, from the rhetorical and actual emphasis on criminals' rights, indeed on all individuals' rights vis-à-vis "the state"—which in economic terms always means other individuals, who pay the bills. It is fashionable these days to deride Calvinism as having been a force for smugness of the comfortable and dismissal of the afflicted. But if one strips away the theological component, early Calvinists left us a residue of acute perception. In general, the world is a rational place in which winners on the whole deserve to win and losers deserve to lose. It is only for the exceptions, the lives that are strikingly unfair, that we maintain the mediating devices of social welfare.

In moral terms, it is probably irrelevant whether intelligence is largely a product of nature or largely a product of nurture. Either way, it is an accident of birth for which the beneficiary can claim credit only to the degree that he or she cultivates and disciplines a natural gift. To me it has always been self-

evident that intelligence is primarily inborn. Anyone who has ever witnessed the birth of a litter of kittens or puppies knows that distinct differences in personality—curiosity, venturesomeness, and the like—are evident from the very moment of arrival into the world. If that is so in less complex organisms, how can it not be so in mankind, where personality varies so much more widely? Logic, moreover, impels us to believe either that intelligence is genetically linked or that Darwin was an utter chump. Assume that he was right in thinking that we evolved from a primate ancestor in the direction of intelligence for a hundred thousand generations. How and why should that process have abruptly halted in the middle of the twentieth century, precisely at the convenient moment for the egalitarian left?

The problem with a genetic basis for intelligence—or, more precisely, a genetic basis for economic success, which is what really provokes envy—is that we don't know what to do with it politically. The egalitarian principle underlying most of our social programs, and more pertinently their self-evaluation mechanisms, is that talent is evenly distributed across lines of class, race, and gender and that talent is, or should be, the primary determinant of economic success. If that is so, then a social program can be judged to have succeeded only when life outcomes are more or less equal across these lines. (All but a few extremists are prepared to make some slight allowance for the impact of parenting, neighborhoods, and the like.) If talent is distributed unequally, however, we have no useful means of measuring whether a program is doing any good or, alternatively, whether it amounts to just throwing money at a problem. If intelligence is genetically linked, moreover, then not only the children of the inner cities and rural backwaters, but *their* children as well, may be by and large doomed to economically stunted lives. Indeed, as low-skill jobs either dwindle in relative wages or disappear outright to automation

or to competition overseas, the prospects of this next generation may in fact be even worse.

Some extraordinary people do rise from the ranks of the poor, and a prudent society should maximize their opportunities. What propels nearly all of these surprise achievers, however, is not just brains but an acute sense of being responsible for their own destinies. Indeed, a case can be made that responsible individualism should be considered a component of intelligence. It is the most adaptive practical response to the world in which we live.

Let us assume for a moment that America one day reaches egalitarian heaven, with absolutely equal distribution of wealth and social position across the board. Barring the dead hand of Marxism at the tiller, the economic stratification so deplored by the left would set in again almost immediately—because intelligence varies genetically and because intelligence by and large determines economic success. It is the nature of human society to be stratified. And it is this elitist tendency, far more than theories about heredity, that rankles egalitarians. The idea that life has winners and losers—that something inherent in individuals leads some to create and amass and others to thumb-twiddle and squander—offends egalitarians' sense of fair play. Their outlook reminds me of a nature videotape that I saw being hawked on television as I wrote this chapter. Billed as *Great Escapes*, the tape consists entirely of animals that are normally preyed upon instead escaping from larger or fiercer predators. "If you love underdogs," the announcer intones, "then this tape is for you." The worldview of the tape conveniently omits the bloody fact that carnivorous predators must kill or starve. The way of nature is combat and conquest, not nurturing communalism.

One of the most illustrative examples of how politics distorts debate about nature and nurture is the situation of homosexuals. The topic may seem slightly divergent from the rest of this

chapter. Homosexuality has not been shown to be linked to intelligence, although those willing to be identified as gay in surveys typically report somewhat more formal education than the national average. (This may mean only that professionals and managers feel more secure economically and more willing to absorb the risks that come with being known as gay.) Similarly, homosexuality is not a physical handicap or deformity, although it is a difference that undeniably carries with it some significant social inconvenience.

A generation ago it was widely considered wicked to suggest that homosexuals might be genetically or biologically identifiable; this would imply that they were sports of nature, somehow misconceived or deformed. In those days the benevolent posture was to assert that their orientation was entirely a product of nurture, that they had been psychologically warped through no fault of their own.

Now the pendulum has swung and the widely fashionable view is that gays are indeed genetically different and ought to be accepted as foreordained products of God or nature. To suggest that early upbringing plays any noteworthy part in their adult behavior is to suggest that they are mentally sick or morally deficient and that their lives are "unnatural."

Plainly these analyses are mutually exclusive—although the influences they describe may both play a role in actual behavior. But as with most arguments over nature and nurture, intellectual rigor is secondary to emotional impulse. Whichever rationale one favors, the purpose of articulating it has been to defend homosexuals as natural or to denounce them as unnatural. In truth, the evidence for either view is sketchy and speculative. Moreover, no single explanation is apt to suffice to explain the behavior of hundreds of millions of people in today's world and countless others in centuries past. Indeed, the very category of homosexual is argued by some scholars to be a modern construct. In the ancient and medi-

eval world, they say, a man's sexuality was defined by what acts he performed rather than with whom.

Interestingly, the question of free will has become central to the moral debate over homosexuality. Gay men and women assert that their orientation is not a choice. Conservative critics counter that behavior is always a choice: Having yearnings is not the same thing as acting upon them. At another level, the debate involves a moral equivalent of elitism and egalitarianism. Homosexuals say they should be as free as heterosexuals to act upon their impulses with other consenting adults; this is an egalitarian assertion. Their elitist opponents argue that heterosexuals should be more free because their way is better. On this issue, I find myself siding with the egalitarians, because the opposition to gays seems to boil down to squeamishness, narrowmindedness, and religious intolerance. But for the purposes of this book, the most interesting thing is simply to note how pervasive the language and logic of elitism versus egalitarianism has become.

It would be not merely infuriating to liberals, but discreditingly naive, for me to close this chapter without acknowledging that there are other factors besides intelligence that determine economic success. The playing field is not level. The children of the prosperous live in safer and healthier homes, by and large; they enjoy somewhat more stable family environments; they attend better schools and are surrounded by brighter and better-motivated classmates.

Beyond all this, successful youths may use tactics not altogether unfamiliar to the most unsavory of the poor. Quite often, they cheat. A survey of undergraduates at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, where the academic standards are as high as anywhere and where the bulk of the studies are objective and numerical, found that more than eighty percent of them admitted having cheated in some fashion at least once during college. More than two thirds said

they had committed some form of plagiarism. Nearly half had misrepresented or fudged data in a lab report or research paper. Is MIT a hotbed of immorality? Not by comparison with other schools, alas. A Rutgers University professor who surveyed fifteen thousand students at thirty-one major universities found that sixty-seven percent of humanities majors admitted cheating at least once during their college years.

What are we to make of such admissions? Are the accomplishments to be reassessed as undeserving? Or are the pressures in universities too great, the demands and standards too high, so that the occasional lapse is only to be expected? Are we decaying into a society so forgiving of dishonor, so ready to accept almost anyone as a victim, that women and minority students feel entitled to take advantage and white men feel beleaguered into a perverse form of self-defense?

Or is all this simply a product of an educational system so egalitarian, so anti-elitist that even the elite don't learn what they need to learn?

There is troubling evidence for this latter view. Another survey, conducted among 3,119 students at the eight Ivy League schools, found that fifty percent could not name their own two U.S. senators, fifty-nine percent could not name as many as four justices of the Supreme Court, forty-four percent could not name the speaker of the House of Representatives, and thirty-six percent did not know that the speaker follows the vice president in the line of succession. While a less alarming eleven percent did not know who wrote the Declaration of Independence, fully seventy-five percent did not recognize the phrase "government of the people, by the people, and for the people" as having been spoken by Abraham Lincoln. (It is, of course, from the finale of the Gettysburg Address.)

None of this is quite as jarring, however, as what happened when a Stockholm newspaper gave five stock analysts the equivalent of \$1,250 each and had them compete as investors

for a month. The winning analyst, publisher of a newsletter, pushed his holdings up an impressive ten percent. But the contest also included a chimpanzee, who chose his stocks by throwing darts—and improved his portfolio by fifteen percent.

I view all these as cautionary tales that life is not only unfair but often unprincipled. Oscar Wilde was on to something when he wrote, "The good end happily and the bad unhappily. That is the meaning of *fiction*." Any system that holds the downtrodden wholly responsible for their sorrowful fate is plainly defective. So, equally, is any system that does not demand of people that they make the most they can of their circumstances. In the delicate calibration of elitist toughness and egalitarian compassion, however, elitism ought to win out for two reasons. It directs society's resources where they have the most chance of stimulating growth and change and making a better life for everyone. And it keeps the pressure on every individual capable of self-improvement to be better than he used to be and to think more about that than about how someone else is always and unjustly going to be better still.

SIX

The Museum of Clear Ideas

“The much-esteemed Gibbon and his Virginian colleagues by cheerful error calculated that civilization motored a tidy upward turnpike to culminate in the city of Guess Who’s worldly intelligence. But from A.D. 300, for a millennium, every daughter knew less than her mother, every son less than his father. Now, as we dispute over the exact moment when we engaged this autobahn downward again—hurtling in a tinny Cadillac fueled by idleness, greed and superstition—our great-grandfathers (the ones who could read and write) drape themselves white to hear our diminished chicken-cackle language in the parliament of fools.”

—DONALD HALL, *The Museum of Clear Ideas: New Poems*, 1993

WHAT HAS BEEN the biggest social change in the United States since the end of World War II? A solid case can be made for the economic transition from the Depression, when privation was common and fear of it almost universal, to an era of plenty in which home ownership, two-car households, and retirement pensions are unremarkable norms. Equally, one could argue for the workplace emancipation of women—or, closely allied, the emergence of reliable birth control and the legalization of abortion, which together have allowed women much greater control over their economic as well as social destiny. In terms of human decency, it would be hard to name any social change more meaningful than the opening of doors to blacks. In terms of the literal face of the nation, it would be hard to define anything more potent than the expansion in legal immigration by nonwhite races and the bureaucratic blind eye generally turned toward illegal immigration by those same peoples. For smaller but intensely committed groups of Americans, the biggest if not necessarily most welcome change may seem to be the rise of gay rights or the awakening of environmental awareness or the wide legitimation of bilingualism.

Less obvious in the headlines, but at least as profound as any of these changes, has been the emergence of mass higher education. While all the major social changes in postwar America reflect egalitarianism of some sort (even environmentalists base their appeal on equality of rights among species), no social evolution has been more willfully egalitarian than opening the academy. Despite the seeming elitism of fostering self-improvement and learning, the true effects have been to help

break down the distinctions between the accomplished and the workaday, and to promote pseudo-scholarship based on gender anxiety and ethnic tribalism.

Although political correctness outside the classroom and multicultural and feminist orthodoxy within it legitimately dominate the attention the public gives to universities these days, the really striking long-term changes at these institutions have to do with sheer size. Half a century ago a high school diploma was a significant credential, and college was a privilege for the few. Now high school graduation is virtually automatic for adolescents outside the ghettos and barrios, and college has become a normal way station in the average person's growing up. No longer a mark of distinction or proof of achievement, a college education is these days a mere rite of passage, a capstone to adolescent party time.

Some sixty-three percent of all American high school graduates now go on to some form of further education, according to the Department of Commerce's 1991 *Statistical Abstract of the United States*, and the bulk of those continuing students attain at least an associate's degree. Nearly thirty percent of high school graduates ultimately receive a four-year baccalaureate degree. A quarter or so of the population may seem, to egalitarian eyes, a small and hence elitist slice. But by world standards this is inclusiveness at its most extreme—and its most peculiarly American. For all the socialism of British or French public policy and for all the paternalism of the Japanese, those nations restrict university training to a much smaller percentage of their young, typically ten to fifteen percent. Moreover, they and other first world nations tend to carry the elitism over into judgments about precisely which institution one attends. They rank their universities, colleges, and technical schools along a prestige hierarchy much more rigidly gradated—and judged by standards much more widely accepted—than we Americans ever impose on our jumble of public and private institutions. This is not to say we don't have our own

notions about the relative snob value of various schools; we just don't all share the same notions as consistently or value them as intensely. While there are families who will undertake any conceivable sacrifice to send their children to the most prestigious schools they can get into, there are as many who think the state university will do just fine because it's cheaper.

In the sharpest divergence from American values, countries such as Britain, France, and Japan tend to separate the college-bound from the quotidian masses in early adolescence, with scant hope for a second chance. For them, higher education is logically confined to those who displayed the most aptitude for lower education. We may view these siftings-by-exam with sentimental horror. We may take pride that, of late, some of these educationally elitist countries seem to be moving toward our style of inclusion and repechage. But the changes elsewhere probably reflect pandering populist politics more than economic rigor, just as they would here. These nations know full well that while pursuing their more elitist approach to education, they shared in the unparalleled postwar global economic boom just as much as America—and did so despite having been bombed into devastation, while we emerged from four years of war more or less industrially intact.

In today's United States, the social value of mass higher education is generally considered so obvious as to be beyond discussion. It is reflexively credited with having produced a better work force, a more stable electorate, a more flexible economy, a more civilized culture. It is considered an emblem of fairness. And it has certainly fed the national appetite for belief in betterment. If each generation is supposed to be more fortunate than the one preceding it, no symbol sums up that process of advancement more convincingly to the common man than having the first-ever member of one's own clan cross the great divide and enroll in college. Indeed, the college experience has come to be thought of as so much a

right of citizenship that in February 1994 a New York City high school girl publicly asked her new mayor, Rudy Giuliani, in apparent sincerity, why there could not be scholarships unconnected with grades or merit, so that she and others like her could have the experience of going elsewhere to live on a campus rather than having to commute from home.

While it may be easy to laugh off this girl's demands for subsidized wanderlust, her notion that scholarly benefits should be unconnected to grades was actually embraced by New York's city university system during its "open enrollment" era, and it is de facto policy in many places today, particularly in the proliferating community (nee "junior") college system. This applies even at state universities, the top tier of the public system. Fully a fifth of them are required to accept any in-state high school graduate who seeks to enroll. If college used to be a reward for doing well in high school, it may now be a reward merely for having completed high school; that in turn may be a reward simply for having shown up, or for having grown too tall to be kept back.

The best reasons for skepticism about mass higher education, however, reach far beyond the decline in meaning of a degree. The opening of the academy's doors has imposed great economic costs on the American people while delivering dubious benefits to many of the individuals supposedly being helped. The total bill for higher education is about one hundred fifty billion dollars per year, with almost two thirds of that spent by public institutions run with taxpayer funds. Private colleges and universities also spend the public's money. They get grants for research and the like, and they serve as a conduit for subsidized student loans—many of which are never fully repaid, either because of forgiveness programs to foster community service or, more commonly, because of outright default. While the net amount taken from taxpayers is considerably less than one hundred fifty billion dollars (some expenditures are offset through tuition, endowment in-

come, and so on), it is still vast. And even the gross total is meaningful as an index of the scale of national commitment. President Clinton refers to this sort of spending as an investment in human capital. If that is so, it seems reasonable to ask whether the investment pays a worthwhile rate of return. At its present size, the American style of mass higher education probably ought to be judged a mistake—and one based on a giant lie.

Why do people go to college? In an idealistic world, they might go to develop a capacity for critical thinking, enhance an already grounded knowledge of the sciences and world culture, learn further how to deal with other people's diversity of opinion and background, and in general become better citizens. They might go for fun, for friendship, for a network of contacts. They might go for spiritual enrichment or for pragmatic honing of skills.

In the real world, though, mostly they go to college to make money.

This reality is acknowledged in the mass media, which are forever running stories and charts showing how much a college degree contributes to lifetime income (with the more sophisticated publications very occasionally noting the counterweight costs of tuition paid and income foregone during the years of full-time study). These stories are no surprise to parents, who certainly wouldn't shell out the same money for travel or other exercises in fulfillment that do not result in a marketable credential. The income statistics are, similarly, no surprise to banks, which avidly market student loans and have been known to shower new graduates or even undergraduates with credit cards. And of course the stories are no surprise to students, who avidly follow news of where the jobs are and what starting salaries they command.

But the equation between college and wealth is not so simple. College graduates unquestionably do better on average

economically than those who don't go at all. At the extremes, those with five or more years of college earn about triple the income of those with eight or fewer years of total schooling. Taking more typical examples, one finds that those who stop their educations after earning a four-year degree earn about one and a half times as much as those who stop at the end of high school. These outcomes, however, reflect other things besides the impact of the degree itself. College graduates are winners in part because colleges attract people who are already winners—people with enough brains and drive that they would do well in almost any generation and under almost any circumstances, with or without formal credentialing. The harder and more meaningful question is whether the mediocrities who have also flooded into colleges in the past couple of generations do better than they otherwise would have. And if they do, is it because college actually made them better employees or because it simply gave them the requisite credential to get interviewed and hired? Does having gone to college truly make one a better salesman of stocks or real estate or insurance? Does it enhance the work of a secretary or nanny or hairdresser? Does it make one more adept at running a car dealership or a catering company? Or being a messenger boy? All these occupations are being pursued, on more than an interim basis, by college graduates of my acquaintance. Most readers can probably think of parallel or equivalent examples. It need hardly be added that these occupations are also pursued, often with equal success, by people who didn't go to college at all, and in generations past were pursued primarily by people who hadn't stepped onto a campus. Indeed, the United States Labor Department's Bureau of Labor Statistics reported in 1994 that about twenty percent of all college graduates toil in fields not requiring a degree, and this total is projected to exceed thirty percent by the year 2005. For the individual, college may well be a credential without being a qualification, required without being requisite.

For American society, the big lie underlying higher education is akin to the aforementioned big lie about childrearing in Garrison Keillor's Lake Wobegon: that everyone can be above average. In the unexamined American Dream rhetoric promoting mass higher education in the nation of my youth, the implicit vision was that one day everyone, or at least practically everyone, would be a manager or a professional. We would use the most elitist of all means, scholarship, toward the most egalitarian of ends. We would all become chiefs; hardly anyone would be left a mere Indian. On the surface this New Jerusalem appears to have arrived. Where half a century ago the bulk of jobs were blue collar, now a majority are white or pink collar. They are performed in an office instead of on a factory floor. If they still tend to involve repetition and drudgery, at least they do not require heavy lifting.

But the wages for them are going down virtually as often as up. It has become an axiom of union lobbying that replacing a manufacturing economy with a service economy has meant exporting once-lucrative jobs to places where they can be done more cheaply. And as a great many disappointed office workers have discovered, being better educated and better dressed at the workplace does not transform one's place in the pecking order. There are still plenty more Indians than chiefs. Lately, indeed, the chiefs are becoming even fewer. If, for a generation or so, corporate America bought into the day-dream of making everyone a boss, the wakeup call has come. The major focus of the "downsizing" of recent years has been eliminating layers of middle management—much of it drawn from the ranks of those lured to college a generation or two ago by the idea that a degree would transform them from mediocre to managerial.

Yet our colleges blithely go on "educating" many more prospective managers and professionals than we are likely to need. In my own field, there are typically more students majoring in journalism at any given moment than there are jour-

nalists employed at all the daily newspapers in the United States. A few years ago there were more students enrolled in law school than there were partners in all law firms. As trends shift, there have been periodic oversupplies of M.B.A.-wielding financial analysts, of grade school and high school teachers, of computer programmers, even of engineers. Inevitably many students of limited talent spend huge amounts of time and money pursuing some brass ring occupation, only to see their dreams denied. As a society we consider it cruel not to give them every chance at success. It may be more cruel to let them go on fooling themselves.

Just when it should seem clear that we are probably already doing too much to entice people into college, Bill Clinton is suggesting we do even more. In February 1994, for example, the President asserted that America needs a greater fusion between academic and vocational training—not because too many mediocre people misplaced on the college track are failing to acquire marketable vocational and technical skills, but because too many people on the vocational track are being denied courses that will secure them admission to college. Surely what we Americans need is not a fusion of the two tracks but a sharper division between them, coupled with a forceful program for diverting intellectual also-rans out of the academic track and into the vocational one. That is where most of them are heading in life anyway. Why should they wait until they are older and must enroll in high-priced proprietary vocational programs of often dubious efficacy—frequently throwing away not only their own funds but federal loans in the process—because they emerged from high school heading nowhere and knowing nothing that is useful in the marketplace?

If the massive numbers of college students reflected a national boom in love of learning and a prevalent yen for self-improvement, America's investment in the classroom might make sense. There are introspective qualities that can enrich

any society in ways beyond the material. But one need look no further than the curricular wars to understand that most students are not looking to broaden their spiritual or intellectual horizons. They see themselves as consumers buying a product, and insist on applying egalitarian rules of the marketplace to what used to be an unchallenged elitism of the intellect.

Consider three basic trends, all of them implicit rejections of intellectual adventure, all based on seeing college in transactional terms. First, students are demanding courses that reflect and affirm their own identities in the most literal way. Rather than read a Greek dramatist of two thousand years ago and thrill to the discovery that some ideas and emotions are universal, many insist on reading writers of their own gender or ethnicity or sexual preference, ideally writers of the present or the recent past. They proclaim that they cannot (meaning, of course, *will not*) relate to heritages other than their own. Furthermore, they repudiate the idea that anyone can transcend his heritage—apparently because few if any people of their own heritage are judged to have done so, and they see the very idea of “universal values” in terms of some sort of competition that their group cannot win. This is parallel to the appalling trend in history, scathingly described in several recent essays by that brilliant traditionalist Gertrude Himmelfarb, in which all fact and analysis are dismissed as “relative” and theoretical opinion is enshrined as a liberating and morally superior form of scholarship. Historians have always known, she writes in *On Looking into the Abyss*, “what postmodernism professes to have just discovered”—that historical writing “is necessarily imperfect, tentative and partial.” But previous generations did not embrace the drive to be “imaginative,” “inventive,” and “creative” rather than as truthful as circumstances permit.

Professors who pander to these students often talk in terms of liberation but they reject the most liberating of all intellec-

tual undertakings, the journey beyond one's own place and time. For their part, many students do not want college to liberate or change them. They want it merely to reinforce them as they are, and they are in their way as unimaginative and smug as the white-bread fraternity dolts Sinclair Lewis so deftly sketched in *Elmer Gantry* and *Babbitt*. Often this self-absorption and lack of intellectual humility leads them to demand a curriculum that fails to serve even their base interests. At my own alma mater, Yale, undergraduates have been able to study Yoruba and other African tribal languages of extremely limited economic utility because these pursuits had sentimental or political appeal. But because there wasn't similar pressure for teaching Korean, they were denied the opportunity to enroll in a tongue that might actually have enabled them to get a job. San Francisco State has been offering a minor in gay studies for years, and organizations of professorial ideologues are pushing nationally for majors and even graduate degrees in the field. This may lead to a self-perpetuating career stream in academe. But what happens to an unsuspecting adolescent who minors in gay studies and then has to tell a job interviewer at, say, an insurance company that during the years when he might have been acquiring economically useful knowledge he was instead enrolled in such actual courses as Gay Male Relationships and Gays in Film? I'm not just worrying about the chilling effect of homophobia here. The same caveat applies to all ideologically based and impractical studies, like the feminist dialectics in the humanities that one female Columbia professor of my acquaintance dismisses as “clit lit,” or Stanford's Black Hair as Culture and History. This sort of feel-good learning epitomizes the endemic confusion of the roles of the curriculum with those of the counseling service.

The second trend, implicit in the first, is that the curriculum has shifted from being what professors desire to teach to being what students desire to learn. In the heyday of faculty authority, professors devised set courses based on their view of

the general basis for a liberal education, the essentials in each particular field, and, frequently, their personal intellectual interests. This system clearly served the professors (and nothing wrong with that), but it also served students by giving them teachers who were motivated, even excited, by the topics under discussion. My own college education took place during the Vietnam era, a time of abundance at most colleges because of government subsidy coupled with burgeoning enrollments due to the baby boom and draft avoidance. Professors could indulge their eccentricities; my freshman calculus teacher spent the entire fall term talking about his true love, Babylonian number theory, and I am probably the better for it, if only for a sense of the eons of continuity underlying all the great branches of scholarship.

Nowadays colleges have to hustle for students by truckling trendily. If the students want media studies programs so they can all fantasize about becoming TV news anchors, then media studies will abound, even though most real journalists have studied something substantive in college and that subset of TV news people who are mere personalities get by, of course, on charm and cheekbones rather than anything learned in a classroom. There are in any given year some three hundred thousand students enrolled in undergraduate communications courses. I know this because I was romanced heavily by a publishing house to write a textbook for this field. My interest dwindled when I learned that I should not expect to sustain any passage on a particular topic for even as much as a thousand words because these "future communicators" had short attention spans and didn't like to read. The idea of basing a text on what and how students *ought* to learn rather than on what and how they *wish* to learn apparently never enters the discussion. The market makes the rules, and control of the market has slipped from deservedly imperious professors to baselessly arrogant students. It is one thing to question author-

ity, as the lapel buttons of my youth urged. It is quite another to ignore it altogether, as students often do today.

This shift of curricular power from teachers to students plainly affects what goes on in the classroom. I suspect it also affects scholarship for the worse. While one hopes that professors would use scholarly writing as an avenue for highbrow concerns that they find increasingly difficult to pursue within their courses, anecdotal evidence strongly suggests they don't. In reporting several stories for *Time* on the general topics of political correctness and multiculturalism, I discovered again and again that professors were instead writing to position themselves favorably on the ideological battlefield—or at least to exploit the marketplace for fulmination created by the culture wars.

Of even greater significance than the solipsism of students and the pusillanimity of teachers is the third trend, the sheer decline in the amount and quality of work expected in class. In an egalitarian environment the influx of mediocrities relentlessly lowers the general standard at colleges to the level the weak ones can meet. When my mother went to Trinity College in Washington in the early 1940s, at a time when it was regarded more as a finishing school for nice Catholic girls from the Northeast than as a temple of discipline, an English major there was expected to be conversant not only in English and Latin but also in Anglo-Saxon and medieval French. A course labeled "Carlisle, Ruskin, and Newman" meant, as my mother wearily recalled, "everything ever written by Carlisle, Ruskin, or Newman and also, it seemed, everything ever written *about* Carlisle, Ruskin, or Newman." A course in Shakespeare meant reading the plays, all thirty-seven of them. By the time I went to college, it was possible to get out of Yale as an honors English major without ever having read Chaucer or Spenser; I know, because I did. In today's indulgent climate, a professor friend at a fancy college told me as I was writing this chapter, taking a half semester of Shakespeare

compels students to read exactly four plays. "Anything more than one a week," he explained, "is considered too heavy a load."

This probably should not be thought surprising in an era when most colleges, even prestigious ones, run some sort of remedial program for freshmen to learn the reading and writing skills they ought to have developed in junior high school—not to mention an era when many students vociferously object to being marked down for spelling or grammar. Indeed, all the media attention paid to curriculum battles at Stanford, Dartmouth, and the like obscures the even bleaker reality of American higher education. Or so argues Russell Jacoby, a sometime professor of history at various American and Canadian universities, in his compellingly cranky *Dogmatic Wisdom*. Most students, he notes, are enrolled at vastly less demanding institutions, where any substantial reading list, of whatever ethnicity, would be an improvement. Jacoby admiringly cites Clifford Adelman's *Tourists in Our Land*, based on a survey of the schooling of some twenty thousand high school students, most of them not elite. "When one looks at the archive left by an entire generation," he quotes Adelman as saying, "it should be rather obvious that Stanford is not where America goes to college. Whether Stanford freshmen read Cicero or Frantz Fanon is a matter worthy of a rare show." Well, not quite. For all its intermittent palaver about the individual, the academy is one of the national centers of copycat behavior and groupthink. If a Stanford professor makes a curricular choice, dozens if not hundreds of his would-be peers elsewhere will imitate that choice. Some of them daydream that by doing so they will one day actually teach at Stanford. Most of the rest fantasize that by aping Stanford and its ilk they make their vastly lesser institutions somehow part of the same echelon.

Perhaps it seems pettish to include community colleges and erstwhile state teachers' colleges when talking about the

shortcomings of higher education. Most readers who went to more prestigious institutions think of "college" as meaning only their alma maters and the equivalents in cachet, and many expect (perhaps secretly even welcome) deficiencies at lesser places, because those failings reaffirm the hierarchy. But in terms of public expenditure, community colleges are probably much more expensive per capita for the taxpayer than any serious centers of learning, precisely because they tend to be relatively cheap for the student—and unlike private colleges, they rarely have significant endowments or other resources to offset the gap between the subsidized price and the true cost. Moreover, so long as these schools go on labeling themselves "colleges"—the word "junior" was widely dropped because it was demeaning, a perfect example of both euphemism and grade inflation—and so long as their students think of themselves as having "gone to college," their academic standards will color the public understanding of what college is.

When Vance Packard wrote *The Status Seekers* in the 1950s, he described the role of the better prep schools and colleges as grooming the next generation of the traditional ruling class while credentialing the ablest of those not quite to the manor born. The America he described was unprepared for the radicalism of college students in the 1960s. That political aggression was bred in part by Vietnam and the civil rights movement, but at least as much by social class anxieties among the burgeoning numbers of students whose parents had not gone to college and whose toehold on privilege was either shaky or nonexistent. The current college generation is similarly radical and dismissive of tradition for much the same reasons.

Those whose parents didn't go to college come disproportionately from ethnic minorities who are demanding a rewriting of the curriculum. This, not incidentally, is an effective means of leveling the playing field to their competitive advantage. If your classroom competitor possesses knowledge you don't, you better your prospects if you can get that knowledge

declared irrelevant—and even more if you can get your homeboy hairstyle studied as culture and history.

Those whose parents did go to college are not necessarily any more confident. They have witnessed the economic erosion of the past couple of decades, in which it now takes two incomes for a family to live as well as it used to on one.

Both groups are understandably insistent on keeping the number of places in college as large as possible, for fear of having to drop their dreams. This form of middle-class welfare (even college students not raised in the middle class are by definition seeking to enter it) is shamelessly indulged by state legislators who recognize it as a necessity for reelection.

Other constituencies join in pushing for the maintenance and expansion of public higher education. Faculty and administrators seek to protect their jobs. Merchants and civic boosters serve their interests, both economic and sentimental, by bolstering institutions that bear the name of their town or state. Alumni often combine a nostalgic loyalty with a pragmatic one. They think, with some justice, that burnishing the luster of their alma mater adds to the sheen of their own education as well, even though it was acquired years or decades ago and has nothing to do with the merits or deficiencies of the institution of today.

But none of these social pressures justifies spending one hundred fifty billion dollars a year overeducating a populace that is neither consistently eager for intellectual expansion of horizons nor consistently likely to gain the economic and professional status for which the education is undertaken. Nor can one justify such expenditures by citing the racial and ethnic pressures from those who argue that only a wide-open system of higher education will give minorities a sufficient chance. Whatever the legacy of discrimination or the inadequacies of big-city high schools, a C student is a C student and turning colleges into remedial institutions for C students

(or worse) only debases the value of the degrees the schools confer.

Beyond the material cost of college, there are other social costs implicit in our system of mass higher education. If college is not difficult to get into, students are not as likely to be motivated in high school. If the authority of a teacher's grade or recommendation is not vital because there will always be a place open at some college somewhere, students have yet another reason for disrespecting authority and learning less efficiently. Paying for their children's college education often imposes a massive financial drain on parents during the years when they should be most intent on preparing for retirement, and leaves many of them too dependent on Social Security and other welfare programs. (Any reader who has not yet grasped that Social Security is not an insurance program but is instead, and always has been, a wealth transfer between generations will want to pay especially close attention to Chapter Eight.) This expenditure may make sense when the education has real value for the child being supported. But some parents are wasting their money.

For many adolescents who finish high school without a clear sense of direction, college is simply a holding pattern until they get on with their lives. It is understandable that they should want to extend their youth and ponder their identities (or navels) for a bit; what is rather less clear is why they should do so at public as well as parental expense. At minimum, that opportunity ought to be limited to students who have shown some predisposition to absorb a bit of learning while they are waiting to discover their identities.

My modest proposal is this. Let us reduce, over perhaps a five-year span, the number of high school graduates who go on to college from nearly sixty percent to a still generous thirty-three percent. This will mean closing a lot of institutions. Most of them, in my view, should be community colleges, current or former state teachers' colleges, and the like.

These schools serve the academically marginal and would be better replaced by vocational training in high school and on-the-job training at work. Two standards should apply in judging which schools to shut down. First, what is the general academic level attained by the student body? That might be assessed in a rough and ready way by requiring any institution wishing to survive to give a standardized test—say, the Graduate Record Examination—to all its seniors. Those schools whose students perform below the state norm would face cutbacks or closing. Second, what community is being served? A school that serves a high percentage of disadvantaged students (this ought to be measured by family finances rather than just race or ethnicity) can make a better case for receiving tax dollars than one that subsidizes the children of the prosperous, who have private alternatives. Even ardent egalitarians should recognize the injustice of taxing people who wash dishes or mop floors for a living to pay for the below-cost public higher education of the children of lawyers, so that they can go on to become lawyers too.

This reduction would have several salutary effects. The public cost of education would be sharply reduced. Competitive pressures would probably make high school students and their schools perform better. Businesses, which now depend on colleges to make their prospective employees at least minimally functional, would foot some of the bills—and doubtless would start demanding that high schools fulfill their duty of turning out literate, competent graduates. And, of course, those who devise college curricula might get the message that skills and analytical thinking are the foremost objects of learning—not sociopolitical self-fulfillment and ideological attitudinizing.

I would like to preserve, however, one of the few indisputably healthy trends in higher education, the opening up of the system to so-called mature students (meaning, in practice, mostly housewives). Here is where open admission makes

sense. Anyone who has been out of high school for, say, seven or perhaps ten years ought to be allowed to enroll and perhaps even be offered the chance to purchase a semester of not-for-credit refresher courses. If people of that age are prepared to make the sacrifices and undertake the disciplines of being students again, they are likely to succeed—indeed, at most schools that actively solicit mature students, the older enrollees outperform the younger ones.

Massive cuts in total college enrollment would, of course, necessitate massive layoffs of faculty. In my educational utopia, that would be the moment to eliminate tenure and replace it with contracts of no more than five years, after which renewal should be possible but not presumed. This would allow universities to do some of the same weeding out of underproductive managers and professionals that has made American business more efficient, and would compel crackpot ideologues of whatever stripe to justify their scholarship, at least to their peers and conceivably to the broader public. The justification normally offered for tenure—the potential for a revival of McCarthyism—is so remote from present-day academic reality as not to be worthy of discussion. And just what is wrong with having to defend one's opinion anyway? A college teaching position is an opportunity to think and serve, not a professor's personal capital asset. Apart from the self-interest of professors, it is hard to concoct any other rationale for affording college teachers a tenure protection enjoyed by few other managers and professionals, save civil servants who operate under much closer supervision and scrutiny. Competing for one's job on an ongoing basis could introduce a little more healthy elitism into the professorial lifestyle. Teachers might strive to meet standards more widely held than their own ideology. The risk is that the loss of tenure could make professors even more apt to kowtow to the consumerist demands of students, so as to remain popular and employed. But that is happening anyway.

In truth, I don't expect any suggestion as sweeping as mine

to be enacted. America is in the grip of an egalitarianism so pervasive that low grades are automatically assumed to be the failure of the school and the teacher and perhaps the community at large—anyone but the student himself. We insist on saying that pretty much everyone can learn, that it's only a matter of tapping untouched potential. While we are ready to call someone handicapped "differently abled," we are not ready to label the dull-witted as "differently smart." Even more than in my youth, we cling to the dream of a world in which everyone will be educated, affluent, technically adept, his or her own boss. There is nothing wrong with discontent at having a modest place in the scheme of things. That very discontent produced the ambition that built the culture of yesterday and today. But the discontent of those times was accompanied by discipline, willingness to work hard, and ready acceptance of a competitive society.

Some readers may find it paradoxical that a book arguing for greater literacy and intellectual discipline should lead to a call for less rather than more education. Even if college students do not learn all they should, the readers' counterargument would go, surely they learn something, and that is better than their learning nothing. Maybe it is. But at what price? One hundred fifty billion dollars is awfully high for deferring the day when the idle or ungifted take individual responsibility and face up to their fate. And the price is even steeper when the egalitarian urge has turned our universities, once museums of clear ideas, into soapboxes for hazy and tribalist ones. Ultimately it is the yearning to believe that anyone can be brought up to college level that has brought colleges down to everyone's level.

SEVEN

Noah's Ark, Feminist Red Riding Hood, Karaoke Peasants and the Joy of Cooking

Dear Michael,

As *The Paris Review* enters its fortieth year, thank the literary agents and friends of the magazine who have brought us many of the stories, essays and poems we have published over the years. You, and the others to whom you have introduced us, have enabled *The Paris Review* to keep its standards high.

In preparation for *The Paris Review's* fortieth issue, scheduled for the fall of 1993, we ask you to step up yourselves in our behalf yet again. The issue will be a special one, outstanding in content as well as heft. To make it so, we hope you will keep an eye out for the very best work of your strongest writers. We are also particularly interested in worthy pieces by women and minority writers.

Yours sincerely
George Plimpton
Editor

—Actual letter to my agent, dated October