
Autolycus I

FROM a letter, written to Ted Turner by his father, upon learning that his son, then an undergraduate at Brown University, had decided to major in classics:

My dear son,

I am appalled, even horrified, that you have adopted Classics as a Major. As a matter of fact, I almost puked on the way home today. I suppose that I am old fashioned enough to believe that the purpose of an education is to enable one to develop a community of interest with his fellow men, to learn to know them, and to learn how to get along with them. In order to do this, of course, he must learn what motivates them, and how to impel them to be pleased with his objectives and desires.

I am a practical man, and for the life of me I cannot possibly understand why you should wish to speak Greek. With whom will you communicate in Greek? I have read, in recent years, the deliberations of Plato and Aristotle, and was interested to learn that the old bastards had minds which worked very similarly to the way our minds work today. I was amazed that they had so much time for deliberating and thinking, and was interested in the kind of civilization that would permit such useless deliberation. Then I got to thinking that it wasn't so amazing after all, they thought like we did, because my Hereford cows today are very similar to those ten or twenty generations ago. I am amazed that you would adopt Plato and Aristotle as a vocation for several months when it might make pleasant and enjoyable reading to you in your leisure time as relaxation at a later date. For the life of me, I cannot understand why you should be vitally interested in informing yourself about the influence of the Classics on English literature. It is not necessary for you to know how to make a gun in order to know how to

use it. It would seem to me that it would be enough to learn English literature without going into what influence this, or that ancient mythology might have upon it. As for Greek literature, the history of Roman and Greek churches, and the art of those eras, it would seem to me that you would be much better off by learning something about contemporary literature and writings, and things that might have some meaning to you with the people with whom you are to associate.

These subjects might give you a community of interest with an isolated few impractical dreamers, and a select group of college professors. God forbid!

It would seem to me that what you wish to do is to establish a community of interest with as many people as you possibly can. With people who are moving, who are doing things, and who have an interesting, not a decadent outlook.

I suppose everybody has to be a snob of some sort, and I suppose you will feel that you are distinguishing yourself from the herd by becoming a Classical snob. I can see you drifting into a bar, belting down a few, turning around to the guy on the stool next to you—a contemporary billboard baron from Podunk, Iowa, and saying, “Well, what do you think about old Leonidas?” Your friend, the billboard baron, will turn to you and say, “Leonidas who?” You will turn to him and say, “Why Leonidas, the prominent Greek of the Twelfth Century.” He will, in turn, say to you, “Well, who in the hell was he?” You will say, “Oh, you don’t know about Leonidas?” and dismiss him, and not discuss anything else with him the rest of the evening. He will feel that he is a clodhopper from Podunk, Iowa. I suppose this will make you both happy, and as a result of it, you will wind up buying his billboard plant.

There is no question but this type of useless information will distinguish you, set you apart from the doers of the world. If I leave you enough money, you can retire to an ivory tower, and contemplate for the rest of your days the influence that the hieroglyphics of prehistoric man had upon the writings of William Faulkner. Incidentally, he was a contemporary of mine in Mississippi. We speak the same language—whores, sluts, strong words, and strong deeds.

It isn’t really important what I think. It’s important what you wish to do with your life. I just wish I could feel that the influence of those oddball professors, and the ivory towers were

developing you into the kind of a man we can both be proud of. I am quite sure that we both will be pleased and delighted when I introduce you to some friend of mine, and say, "This is my son. He speaks Greek."

I had dinner during the Christmas Holidays with an efficiency expert, an economic adviser to the nation of India, on the Board of Directors of Regents at Harvard University, who owns some eighty thousand acres of valuable timber land down here, among his other assets. His son and his family were visiting him. He introduced me to his son, and then apologetically said, "He is a theoretical mathematician. I don't even know what he is talking about. He lives in a different world." After a little while I got to talking to his son, and the only thing he would talk to me about was about his work. I didn't know what he was talking about either, so I left early.

If you are going to stay on at Brown, and be a professor of Classics, the courses you have adopted will suit you for a lifetime association with Gale Noyes. Perhaps he will even teach you to make jelly. In my opinion, it won't do much to help you learn to get along with people in this world. I think you are rapidly becoming a jackass, and the sooner you get out of that filthy atmosphere, the better it will suit me.

Oh, I know everybody says that a college education is a must. Well, I console myself by saying that everybody said the world was square, except Columbus. You go ahead and go with the world, and I'll go it alone . . .

I hope I am right. You are in the hands of the Philistines, and dammit, I sent you there. I am sorry.

Devotedly,
DAD

[NB: We'd like to thank J.P. Sullivan for bringing this letter to our attention, and the *Brown Daily Herald* and Mr. Ted Turner for kindly giving us their permission to reprint it.]