

Three Adventures in Education

GRAEME HUNTER

Thomas Dibden went up to Oxford just at the close of the eighteenth century. This is how he expressed the thrill of the occasion:

Who shall describe the inward glow of delight with which the freshman first enters upon college life. Everything about him begets a spirit of independence. He reads, he writes, he reposes, he carouses, as the spirit induces. All that he puts his hand upon is his own. The fragrant tea, the sparkling port, the friendly few (or many) which encircle him, while the occupations of the past, and the schemes of the coming day, furnish themes which alternately soothe and animate the enthusiastic coterie.

Thomas Dibden's lively words fairly prance off the page, describing the great delight of becoming for the first time your own man or woman – outside the parental regimen of home, away from routines and rituals adopted uncritically in your childhood. Suddenly you have the opportunity to cultivate a new self-understanding under the stimulus of new friends, new studies, new experiences. The powerful intoxicant of freedom goes quickly and pleasantly to our head like strong spirits. Not for nothing does Dibden call it “a spirit of independence.” We who are older can remember being at your stage and envy you incoming students, because one of life's most delightful waves is cresting now in you, and surging forward to new, exciting shores.

Of course when you go to college, you leave not only the controls of home behind you, but also some of its comforts. One of Dibden's contemporaries at Oxford reminds us of this when he writes to his sister Jennie (in verse, no

less) about his accommodation:

Up a dark staircase with pain do I clamber
To reach the black door of my desolate
chamber.
Imagine, dear Jennie, a garret so small
That one feels like a nun, bricked up in a
wall
With a window contrived like the casements
of old
To keep out the light and to let in the cold.
With a battered settees, and a parcel of
chairs
That grievously clatter and creak for repairs.

Well, by this standard the Augustine College residences really aren't too bad, are they? And I hope that student's time in Oxford taught him to write better verse and to appreciate the independence his temporary discomfort was buying for him. For, in the better poetry of Dylan Thomas, “time allows so few and such morning songs before the children, green and golden, follow him out of grace.” The beauty of the year that lies before you will be equalled only by its brevity, and we hope you will not only enjoy its gaudy hour, but seize it and use it to lay the foundations for your adult life to come.

But you did not need to come to Augustine College to enjoy the adventure of independence. That is a bait every college and university uses to lure its students. Only the best colleges will tell you that there is a greater adventure to be had here, open to all, but of which not all will take advantage, because you can only enter into it by using your independence WELL. A college is not a holiday resort and only poor ones pretend to be. The word ‘college’ literally suggests a place

where people read together – beginners and experts, students and masters – attempting through reading, writing and conversation to understand themselves and their world. This is the hidden adventure in which you are also invited to participate.

But how can we convince you of that, given that we professors are so often very odd ducks? Although I have no foibles or eccentricities of my own, I am aware that all my colleagues have them. You may wonder, therefore, how I dare to recommend such strange people to you as teachers or, in the still more extravagant term of the middle ages, as ‘masters’.

A century ago many students at New College Oxford were fondly dismissive of their dean, who had the odd quirk of transposing letters and syllables when he spoke. Thus Dean Spooner threatened a disobedient student with sending him away in the “town drain.” He criticized an unfortunate undergraduate for “hissing my mystery lecture.” And in a touching moment during class he asked the students, “Which of you is so dull that you have never thought of leaving everything and going away. Every one of you at one time or another will have discovered in your heart that ‘half-warmed fish’.”

At the University of Toronto more than a century ago one of the professors was so dull and solemn that the students would pump laughing gas into his office before his lectures. He was also a great foe of evolution and one day the students stole a stuffed monkey from a biological exhibit, clothed it in a lecturing gown, and put it at the lectern, pretending to be listening to it intently and taking notes. The professor entered the lecture theatre at the usual time and without a moment’s hesitation said: “Very good gentlemen. I see you have at last found a teacher worthy of your abilities.”

But what should we conclude from the persistent oddity of professors? If they seem strange in their life and manners, could it be because they are following a path in life that is stranger still? If they appear not to be pursuing the things you think most obviously worthwhile, might it be that they have discovered a pearl of still greater price? Perhaps it will be worth a year of your lives to walk among us. Who knows, you may find the journey so interesting, that you wish to prolong it in your subsequent lives.

The thing most carefully to avoid at Augustine College is leaving as you came. That is the only significant failure. In comparison with that, the marks you obtain are insignificant. Do not leave here deaf to the languages of the different disciplines, strangers to the life of the mind. We teach more languages than merely Latin. You will learn a way of speaking about the Bible, about Math, Science, Music, Art, Philosophy, Literature. All these tongues need the greatest care to be learned. Few people can rise to fluency in a single year. But to succeed at Augustine College is to accustom your ear to their grammar and idioms and felicities of expression. The education you receive here is intended to be what the poet Paul Valéry calls, *UN DEBUT DANS LA VIE HUMAINE*. We hope that art will begin to educate your eye, music will attune your ear, that philosophy and literature will teach you to read, mathematics and science, to think. We hope that all these disciplines will complement your study of the Bible and that Latin will enlarge your literary horizon. We hope to unfurl before you the great tapestry of human learning in such a way as to suggest the unity of theme which underlies it.

Not every college tries to do this and yet, it must be admitted, Augustine College is not the only one that does. If we are unique in anything it is in proposing to you a third adventure more

important even than *independence* and *learning*, though best understood as their crown and glory. I have already hinted at the existence of this third and greatest adventure in saying that independence is not an end in itself and that learning, in all its manifold diversity, is really one.

This third adventure is what independence is for. It is what unifies all our attempts to learn.

It is Christ. The greatest adventure in life is to become his disciple. We founded Augustine College because we felt that Christ had been lost amidst secular learning, and that life had become dull, and study unprofitable, as a result.

For Christ is no less the centre of the curriculum than the heartbeat of life. Every point in history

is dated BC or AD, according to whether it precedes or antedates the advent of Christ. And his presence marks every other discipline no less indelibly than history, for the universe itself, whose mystery all study is set to unravel, has at its centre a LOGOS that was before all worlds and that is and ever shall be the Lord.

By the grace of God we are all invited to become what Shakespeare calls “God’s spies” and “take upon’s the mystery of things.” That is the great adventure. We pray that this year none of you will refuse what lies ready to hand: an adventure of independence, of learning and of dedication to the Lord of life and science, Jesus Christ.

Graeme Hunter is a founder of Augustine College, at which he taught Philosophy and Literature; he currently teaches at the University of Ottawa.