

# EXPERIENCE



This is an edited version of a talk given by Eric Mann during orientation at the University of Windsor in 1968, and was first published by now defunct Canadian Union of Students.

ED.

I'm very happy to be here, but also in some ways very nervous.

I'm nervous because I'm looking at a lot of you and thinking back to when I was a freshman. And I'm thinking that a lot of the things I would like to say would be platitudes.

I would say things like "welcome" or "I'm sure you'll have four happy years at the university of Windsor", "that these are going to be the four happiest years of your life", and a lot of other things people say when you come in as a freshman.

One of the reasons I won't say it of course, is because I don't believe it. And another reason I won't say it is because it was said to me and it wasn't true.

And so I start out with a certain amount of trepidation. There is another reason why I'm worried about speaking tonight. This is that I have very mixed feelings about speaking to a group of mixed people, many of who won't agree with a word I say. Now, in one way I guess that's a little o.k. because some of you probably won't agree with anything anyone tells you in the next four years, and you'll have about as little choice as you do this evening.

Now, you at least have some choice this evening because there are no grades being given, but if you walk out, try to walk out quietly. I'll try and explain what may happen to you. My parents never went to college. They spent a lot of time, probably from the time I was twelve and thirteen, talking to me about college. Now they've probably never even seen the inside of a college, but they knew a lot about what it was like.

## QUEST FOR KNOWLEDGE

They told me that if I went to college that would be a place where I would really meet people who are getting together in quest for knowledge, people who are interested in knowledge for its own sake, a place where I would really broaden myself, where I would learn a lot about the world, where I would make the kind of friendships that I could not make in

high school, where, though I didn't like the work in high school, I would find college different, you're really going to like your work in college.

Essentially, in a lot of ways, college was described to me as being very, very different from the lives that my parents were leading, and very different from the kind of life I was leading. College was being held up as a very practical utopia. And so I went to school, I remember being very happy, and walking into a dormitory, at Cornell.

Cornell is built on some hills and valleys, and I remember standing at the top of the hill feeling very much alone, looking into a valley. I said to myself "I'm going to really make it at this place. This is going to be the place where I'm going to find myself." What an expression! Finding yourself.

Well, I don't where it started downhill. Maybe I could talk about the fact that six weeks after the school year started, some of the people got mid-term grades. And so the dormitory I was in, became, in some way, a very scary kind of place, in some way maybe like a jail.

Ed Hogue, class of 64, left after six weeks to go back to Kingston, New York. I thought, well, somebody else will fill that room. We don't need him. We've got a lot of students here. He couldn't cut the mustard. Maybe somebody else can. Goodbye Ed, have a nice life. Then came first semester grades.

I remember first, grabbing my books and running into the library. Man, was I studying, 5, 6 maybe 7 hours a day, taking so many notes. I would write 7 pages of work and then write 10 or 11 pages of notes...

I remember trying very, very hard to do well, and having the sense that this was the place where I would prove that I was intellectual, if not superior, at least talented.

But many problems started to develop. One of the problems was that six or eight weeks into the school year, I found out something; something that took me four years to acknowledge. What I found out was that I didn't like to read and write too much.

Now, for those of you coming here, I hope you like to read a lot, and I hope you like to write a lot, because that's what college is. Stripped of all the rhetoric. You get your books, you read a lot, you listen and you write.

Once in a while, you're not even allowed to talk. But the main thing, is that you'd better like books a lot.

## REALITY FOUND IN BOOKS?

You'd better be committed that reality is found in books, because the whole university system revolves around that concept.

If you like to sing, if you like to speak, if you like to organize, you can do that. But it's called extra-curricular...it's things you do in your spare time. It's not essentially valuable, you see, it's something that's needed in a certain way to keep you busy and interested enough to go back to that essential task of more reading and more writing.

Now, to start with, I think a lot of us would not want to be here, if that was the definition of four years of our life. If you went up to the average person on the street and said, "Hey, I've got something really good for you. Wanna come to a place where you spend four or five hours a day reading and writing? Sound great doesn't it?" "How many people would spontaneously say "Wow" "That's exactly what I've been looking forward to doing for four years. How do I join?" "Oh, you don't join, you have to pay." "Oh, that sounds good. I pay to read and write for five or six hours a day. H-MMM that really sounds exciting."

Clearly the university was not based on a voluntary system. We weren't there because we found it rewarding. We were there for a whole series of different reasons. But very few of those reasons came from inside ourselves.

At Cornell, the reason was pretty clear why you went there, because when you got out you could say you went to Cornell. It really didn't matter what the hell you did for four years. You were paying to say you went there. And people competed to see how they could go there with the least amount of effort.

Cornell, you see, is a big fraternity school. And I remember sitting with one of my friends in the dormitory saying "We don't want to join the fraternity because fraternities limit your individually. Fraternities cut you off from other people. Fraternities are racially selective, they're economically selective. They're against everything we stand for." My friend said, "You're absolutely right."

We walked home together arm in arm and two days later we were both in fraternities. The reasons were somewhat clear. We did have the option not to join - at least at Cornell - again, the analogies are not quite the same here, but I'm trying to get at some basic points.

There 53 fraternities. Most guys joined fraternities, and so you joined. You joined for a very basic reason.

## PROTECTION FROM HUMANITY?

Joining a fraternity protected you from the job of being a person. Instead of saying "Who's Eric Mann" and hearing "Well, I'm a lot of different things. I'm rather complicated. You'll have to get to know me," by joining I could say "Tah Delta Fi". Now Tah Delta Fi may not mean anything to you, University of Windsor may not mean anything, I.B.M. may not mean anything, and yet when you think about it, Buick, such and such a church or such and such a street mean something - they are ways we define our selves.

They avoid the problem of being something. In fact they say, "Don't you want to know who I am?" I drive that car. Don't you want to know who I am? I wear silk ties... Don't you want to