

The Valedictorian Speech I Never Got to Give

By Terry FORBES

"Soap and education are not as sudden as a massacre, but they are more deadly in the long run."

—Mark Twain

One thousand, four hundred and sixty days. Thirty-five thousand and forty hours. Two million, one hundred and four thousand, and four hundred minutes. That's how long we have spent in university. Nine hundred hours of class time. Close to two thousand sheets of paper. Two thousand, nine-hundred and twenty cups of coffee. Twenty-one highlighters. Nine full floppy disks. Paper cuts, carpal tunnel syndrome, blurred eye sight, permanent back and neck damage from backpacks full of texts. And money! Fourteen thousand, six-hundred and forty dollars worth of tuition alone. Probably around sixteen hundred dollars on books.

And now, what?

Now we emerge, blurry-eyed from four years of education to do what? Join the ranks of the unemployed?

Or perhaps you are a masochist and plan to endure "post-graduate" education.

Or perhaps you are the most sadistic of us all and plan to teach—inflict the same pain and torment which you were subjected to on others, like an abused boy beating a dog.

Wherever we go from here, whatever our separate paths are, at least we will always share the four years of anguish that was our undergraduate education.

Summer did offer some reprieve from the stress of school, but it also gave rise to a most particular phenomenon called working to work. Summer jobs where we worked like dogs only to earn money to pay the tuition necessary so that we could work some more. It's a ridiculous concept, but somehow we bought it.

I'm not sure who said that the college years are the best years of your life, but he was obviously self-educated. I'm sure in the years to come, research will uncover the harmful long term effects that all this sleep deprivation and long periods of inactivity will have on us. And for all the copious notes we have scribbled, for all the times we've whored ourselves by laughing at our professors' inane, pathetic jokes, are we actually better people for the time we've spent here? Or was this just a necessary evil?

Term papers, deadlines, professors' sarcasm, classes that made time stand still, wrestling with the registrar's office, dealing with student loans, struggling through the worst weather conditions imaginable to get to class only to find out it's canceled, three-hour examinations under the incessantly buzzing lights of the sports centre, interlibrary loans, endlessly weaving through the parking lots looking for a space like rat in a maze—are these the things that are going to be looked back upon fondly?

Ted Hughes once wrote, "Life isn't all beer and skittles; but beer and skittles, or something better of the same sort, must form a good part of every Englishman's education." He wrote that in 1857. I didn't even know they had skittles way back then, but the point is well taken.

Perhaps the real lesson here is, "the most valuable result of all education is ability to make yourself do the thing you have to do, when it ought to be done, whether you like it or not; it is the first lesson that ought to be learned,; and however early a man's training begins, it is probably the last lesson that he learns thoroughly" (Thomas Henry Huxsley, 1877). Maybe university really does prepare you for the real world; perhaps the worst is yet to come.

But somehow I don't think so. I think no matter what our plans are, no matter how much debt we're now in, no matter how much an appetite for self-punishment we have, at least we'll never have to relive the past four years (and in the case of Adam Arsenault, the past seven years).

So I leave you with the eternal words of some guy named Oliver Goldsmith:

Let schoolmasters puzzle their brain
With grammar, and nonsense, and learning;
Good liquor, I stoutly maintain,
Gives genius a better discerning.