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Insomnia and the Pious Parchment Pile

IT has been brought to my attention that millions of people are suffering from insomnia. This strikes me as a waste since I have developed a simple, drug-free, solution.

The first step in this treatment involves the acquisition of a Pious Parchment Pile (PPP). Pious Parchments are documents that one ought to read, but they are usually as heavy going as a walk through molten asphalt. For instance, I recently received a heavy book—Pious Parchments weigh more than 2 pounds—from the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching entitled *College: The Undergraduate Experience in America*. This is a perfect example of an important treatise turned out by a prestigious institution on a subject of interest to every college professor. This report finds that undergraduate education is in terrible shape and that students work hard to pass examinations, not for pure joy. Also revealed are discoveries that there are conflicts between teaching and research, conformity and creativity, and academic requirements and extracurricular activities. There is no way to finish reading such a document between 9 a.m. and 5 p.m. Interruptions by irate students, irrelevant deans, and even obnoxious salespersons are welcomed to obtain relief from such a monograph. After dinner reading is also difficult: a survey of 537 educated middle-class adults found that the reading of Pious Parchments induces sleep within 37 ± 2 seconds.

The next step in solving the insomnia problem is to arrange the PPP at one's bedside. Once a sizable pile is achieved, one can be secure from fear of an attack of insomnia. If at 3 a.m. one awakens, tosses in bed, and realizes that sleep will not return, there is now no reason to become tense, gnash teeth, or resort to drugs. One simply takes up the Parchment that is on the top of the PPP and proceeds to read. Two outcomes are possible, both beneficial: either one falls asleep promptly (the most common outcome) or one actually finishes the document, thereby becoming one of the few people in captivity who have ever done so. People with severe insomnia have occasionally gone to a second PP.

Upon reading *College: The Undergraduate Experience in America*, one finds that it has as a not-so-well-hidden agenda the idea that training for careers is stifling undergraduate education and that vastly increased liberal arts and a heavy infusion of history, ethics, and community values are needed. A curriculum built around the academic framework of "language, art, heritage, institutions, nature, work, and identity" is recommended. A thesis simply solving an exciting physics problem would fail to qualify, since theses are recommended to include historical, social, and ethical perspectives. The document recommends that senior students prepare summaries of their activities as campus citizens—participation in student government, clubs, and cultural events, and, most importantly, voluntary service. To go through each recommendation is to become appalled at their increasing fuzziness and inconsistency, but mostly at the apparent lack of commitment to an intellectually exhilarating experience. Developing "good guys" and "civic minded women" is all very well, but the greatest contribution that can be made by undergraduate training is to expose students to deep intellectual experiences and to show them how to do a job, almost any job, extremely well.

Majors are designed to expose students to a body of knowledge and to learn to apply disciplined reasoning to that knowledge. Good educators are usually trained to squeeze an adequate number of courses into tight schedules. Dilution by courses in "community values," "morals," and "heritage," most of which push one person's set of values in preference to another's, would produce cultured dilettantes. Scientists can benefit from learning more liberal arts, and liberal arts majors can benefit from learning more science, but neither can benefit from the substitution of moralizing for tough intellectual courses. This Parchment would best be read from an airplane speeding at treetop level, in which case the clichés tend to blur and appear as real thoughts.

Considered on balance, Pious Parchments such as *College: The Undergraduate Experience in America* cannot cause too much damage so long as they are not taken seriously, and they do have some redeeming social value in that they can help hardworking educators and grubby scientists get a good night's sleep.—DANIEL E. KOSHLAND, JR.