

Paintings from the West
Kenyon College Commencement
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Jim Borgman

[After introduction by Reed Browning, Provost: Something that is often overlooked in my resume: Getting my job straight out of Kenyon allowed me to be the first cartoonist ever to pay back a student loan.]

My first traumatic experience at Kenyon was the day early in my freshman year when I walked from Manning Hall to my Color class at Bexley and had a recent project returned to me graded A. I was a blue-collar kid from Cincinnati and the grade momentarily wiped away my insecurity about being on this imposing hill of academia. My next class that day was History 11-12, a survey course that was giving me fits, taught by an ominous professor who haunts my soul still. A recent tough test on political philosophers was being handed back that day, but my earlier grade had me convinced my stars were lined up right and I waited hopefully.

When I finally looked inside the cover of my blue exam booklet, I saw as though it were branded there a searing red F. In my memory I see the page actually smoking. The comments I found there are written on my brain forever: "Where this is not totally incomprehensible," it said, "it is absolutely absurd."

I was whiplashed. Reeling, I swept up my ashes and hauled them to Ascension where (I'm not making this up) the professor of my Old Testament course returned to me a 12-page paper marked with a crisp A.

I remember sitting under one of these very trees that evening wondering if they would someday rename the college after me, or if, on the other hand, I had no business being here whatsoever.

It is precisely the same feeling I have standing up here now. I am at once terribly honored that you've invited me, and at the same time wondering if someone is going to realize that, hey!, this guy draws big noses on people! -- and toss me out. And I must ask you a question: How does it feel to work hard for four years at an institution like this and then have them send you a cartoonist to help sum up that experience?

Life sends us a lot of mixed messages like that, doesn't it? A few years ago a group of editorial cartoonists was invited to lunch with President Reagan at the White House. We were all feeling very honored, of course, until we noticed that Garry Trudeau wasn't there ... and then we began wondering if it wouldn't have been a bigger honor not to have been invited.

We sat around the big oval table where the Cabinet meets and tried awkwardly to say witty things to the president who, I am convinced to this day, thought we were trucking executives. I was seated way at the end of the table, farthest away from the president in the chair of, like, the Secretary of Agriculture or something, but it turned out to have been a good spot -- in all the photographs it looks like I'm at the head of the table. Around me sat such luminaries as John Poindexter, Donald Regan and Ed Meese. One of my friends said he stuck bubble gum under the Secretary of Defense's chair.

Anyway, we're all very nervous and excited, thinking, "This is where it happens! This is where they, you know, solved the Cuban Missile Crisis and stuff!" and suddenly in this hermetically-sealed White House room right next to the Oval Office, we hear this long, high-pitched electronic beep which just pierces the air. The room went dead silent. I thought to myself, "In six minutes hundreds of nuclear warheads are going to destroy Moscow." We sat there several long seconds until finally the president calmly stuck his finger into his ear and adjusted his hearing aid and the sound stopped.

Meanwhile all the garage doors in Washington are going up and down.

In cartooning we have something called the Pinocchio Theory which holds that anyone who runs for political office will begin to look like his caricature. Their features actually rearrange themselves. (Wouldn't you love to have seen that happen with Paul Simon?) My biggest revelation from that day at the White House was in realizing that Reagan has come to look precisely the way we have been collectively beaming him up on our television sets. There was nothing surprising at all about seeing him in person! I almost set my Pepsi down on him and adjusted his antenna.

But I didn't come here today to talk about politics.

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A couple of months ago my family and I took a trip out west and that vast, strange landscape had me thinking about those early landscape painters like Albert Bierstadt and Frederick Church. They went west when few European Americans had been there before and tried to capture a sense of those spaces and that unique western light on canvas. I found myself thinking about those people back in the East for whom these canvases were eventually

brought back, and what their reactions might have been to these amazing scenes of places they hadn't known existed on earth. Places that some of them would set out for, to establish new homes.

When I was at Kenyon I felt, (though I couldn't have articulated it then) that I had found a very deep part of myself here, my true self. I understood and came to belong on this gentle, rounded hill and learned how to be myself here on my plot of land, how to live with integrity and how to carry my values. And when I sat where you are sitting today, I think the low rumbling in my heart was trying to ask the question: Can I still be my true self Out There, beyond Kenyon?

I feel like I'm returning to Gambier today with canvases under my arm to show you, like those early western painters did, the bit of landscape I've seen in the dozen years since I left here and entered the more-or-less real world. You deserve the opportunity to ask the question of yourself that must have been pounding in the hearts of those easterners as they considered the prospect of pioneering their way into those strange landscapes: Can I be me, this same Me, out there?

Insofar as I am standing here as this year's model of a Successful Kenyon Alum, I think it's worthwhile to show you one "canvas" called Success and Expectations. More of my friends from Kenyon have tripped over those two words than any others. Friends who've gone on to perfectly fascinating personal journeys after Kenyon have been badgered by the thought that they were expected to be somewhere else by now, to have done something more compelling.

Sometimes it seems people expect more of us than we are able to deliver. For example, I was standing by the elevators at the Enquirer building one day when an older gentleman got off on my floor and began to wander around lost. I asked him if he needed some help.

"Do you work here?" he asked, looking me up and down. I was dressed in my usual uniform: jeans, sweatshirt and gym shoes.

"Yes, I work here," I said.

He seemed surprised. "What do you do?" he asked.

"I draw the political cartoons," I answered.

He looked me up and down again and finally said, "Do you mean to tell me Borgman doesn't even draw his own cartoons?!"

My work involves watching politicians, and I've learned a lot from them. One of their tricks in the Expectations game is something called Spin Control. Spin Control is exercised after, say, a candidate debate, when the politicians meet the press and interpret the results of that occasion in their most self-flattering light. You will soon see the technique of Spin Control applied much nearer to home in the Class Notes section of the alumni magazine, to which you are about to become a life-time subscriber.

Typically, you will read of someone who sat next to you in Poli Sci,

"Scott Upwardly Mobile (K'88) writes, 'Just back from a long visit to the sunny southwest where I caught up with Patti Jacuzzi and Clint Mercedes. The firm is doing well, but sure miss those nights at the Cove. Any Kenyon grads in the Hamptons area give me a ring!'"

Nowhere will you read,

"Just got out of the Betty Ford Clinic where I caught up with some of the guys from Omega Pi. Am hoping to catch on with the new video center at the mall. Hello to ex-wife Suzee Meatloaf (K'88) and the kids in Yuma!"

Success and Failure are all Spin Control. Kurt Vonnegut says that in life there are no successes or failures, only results. The interpretation of your journey is up to you. You are accountable to yourself alone. Some people get attention for living their lives artfully; and some do not. To my knowledge justice does not enter into it.

Here is a warning: For the next several months or years you will find a surprise waiting on your doorstep as you leave your home each morning. It is a large ball of glop called Expectations. It is called By Now I Really Should Be Something. It is called This Isn't As Well As They Expected Me To Do. It is called I Am Not Living An Epic Life. As you encounter it, promise me you will give it a good swift kick across the lawn. I kick it out of my way every day still.

One more image I'd like to leave you with as you begin your pioneering adventure, is the image of a tiny animal called the pygmy shrew. I was watching a National Geographic show one day when the narrator told me about the pygmy shrew, an animal as big as my thumb. This little creature's digestive system is an evolutionary fluke. It processes food so quickly that the shrew must eat its weight in food every two hours to live!

I knew I had found a soulmate. Because as a person with 300 deadlines a year, this is what my life feels like. Every day I begin the hunt for ideas to use in my work. And every day when I've sweated my way through another "meal" I look up from this fevered task and I realize.... that I have to start hunting again.

And so I have become well-acquainted with the creative process in the real world. Adjusted a bit, it's not so different than the way you banged out your scholarly research here through some long nighters. The creative process can survive in that climate out there.

You and I are the pygmy shrews of the world. At Kenyon we've received a steady diet of the world's biggest and most compelling ideas. Our metabolisms have evolved to the point where we will always need a lot of ideas to stay really alive, but the world furnishes us with a lot of mundane movement. That appetite for analysis will deprive you of some bliss. For example, I often think, enviously, how much fun it must have been to have been wealthy and shallow during the last eight years in America. But along with encouraging our appetite, Kenyon taught us how to hunt down ideas when we're hungry for them. There is not a class I took here which does not continue to inform my work and my life in the most surprising ways. Nothing in life is wasted.

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So, as your returning landscape painter, my best guess for you who will break camp here, leaving this safe and loving community behind, is that, yes, you can still be yourself Out There. You'll find that your values are surprisingly mobile. Integrity, self-authorization and creativity will ride comfortably on your back.

Finally, if I remember my political philosophers correctly, it was John Stuart Mill who said... or was it Jeb Stuart Magruder? To tell you the truth, Mr. Baker, I still don't know what those guys were talking about. Anyway...

I will say this: The congratulations you receive today are not for the success you'll someday have, but for the success you already are, right now.

Congratulations!