



June, 2011

Dear Seniors, in Freedomland at last and Seniors no more,

If you can stand it, here are a few last thoughts that might make you happier when you get to those institutions of higher learning about which you and your advisor talked so nearly endlessly.

1. DON'T EXPECT TO ENTER A PARADISE in which all of your dissatisfactions with life magically vanish. It sounds obvious, but lots of kids have scorned their institutions for failing the Paradise test. This scorn is a waste of time--often just a way of protecting yourself by hanging on tight to the rancor you've built up against home, parents, life in general and yourself for failing at Paradise too. As Joe said to Pip on a different occasion, *Give it up, old chap!* Find out ways around what's bad about the place and the people in it, so you can get at the good stuff they have to offer. Look for that good stuff. Pry it out. If X's taste in jokes is awful, see if she can play squash.

2. In a strange new place, it's tempting to locate some comfortable hole (your room, maybe) and stay in it while you wait for wonderful friends to find you and for the Education Show to begin. Nonetheless, it's better to think of your education--and life, maybe--not as something that happens to passive you but as an enterprise: something you go out and do.

So: make a comfortable place of your own, a small circle of pals, but seek those pals out! Go looking, too, for what's out there beyond the well-worn confines of your personal comfort zone. Increase your range: that's what college is for. Literally and metaphorically, DON'T STAY IN YOUR ROOM.

3. GET HELP WHEN YOU NEED IT. If you're not dealt a good advisor by the system, get a professor you like to advise you, too. Find out his or her office hours, go there, and start talking. Keep trying until you find a prof who likes talking to students: they exist.

4. Axiom: half of your college education comes not from coursework but from the friends you make there. Ergo: JOIN THINGS. At registration you'll see dozens, hundreds, of groups trying to sign freshmen on. Sign! Be in a play, work for the newspaper, anything. You can quit later if you want— but you'll meet people and get out of your room.

Also: ISSUE, AND ACCEPT, INVITATIONS. The slightest pretext will do for striking up a conversation. Most people don't know how to manage it, and are often (if warily) grateful for a simple opening. Remember, too: just because you have a cup of coffee with someone doesn't mean you have to remain stuck to them for the rest of the year.

5. Axiom: two great teachers can make the whole four years worthwhile.

Ergo: FIND GREAT TEACHERS. Ask upperclassmen, advisors, other professors, who they are. Fight your way into their courses, go talk to them, write your thesis with one. They will not only write you letters for grad school but will be stars you come to steer by.

Great teachers have something distinct to impart, and therefore may be thorny or enigmatic. Don't ask to be made comfortable, ask to be taught. A prof. who is too nice to squelch student bores in his class or take issue with dumb remarks isn't acting as if he had something to teach.

6. GET OFF CAMPUS SOMETIMES. Even the greatest university has an insulating effect. It's very refreshing to go out into the part of the world that lies around it. Who lives out there? What are their lives like? If there are cornfields, go for long walks in them. Drive around with someone. Go swimming somewhere. And volunteer for something: tutor local school kids, work for a health-care clinic. Kill tunnel vision. Drink the water and breathe the air.

7. MAKE A FUSS. Remember, you're paying this place to serve your needs. If their rules and requirements don't fit your case, make noise about it. Prove to Professor Z. that you'd be a live wire in her course even if you haven't had the prerequisite. Turn up at office hours and start talking. Think of it her way: how many kids does she get who are lively in the head and fired up about her class? Even if it doesn't work, you've made a connection.

Also: Try not to fall into the role of spectator in class. You can watch TV forever when you're old. Talk! Argue with the teacher, with other kids--make them argue back. Ask questions. Provoke. Make friends with kids who sound interesting. If you don't like what's happening, make something else happen instead. Habits like these, formed in class, hold up well in the world outside.

8. KEEP YOUR BULLSHIT METER IN GOOD WORKING ORDER. In the next few years you'll be urged again and again to identify yourself with various ideologies, attitudes, fashions, careers. Be this, join us, talk this way, scorn those other jerks. When you hear this kind of thing, think twice. Find a slot and fit into it if it really fits you, but remember that you also carry within you the power to desire, to imagine, to breathe life into things you create yourself. It's not just artists that invent things, you know. Ideas, armies, families, conversations, seacoast towns, all need a creative energy flowing into them if they are to fully exist.

9. TO THY OWN SELF BE TRUE is still a better idea than "I'll be anyone you want if only you'll like me."

That's it. Go forth and prosper. Be nice to your parents once in awhile, love one another, and let us know what happened next.

Yours,
Erin Davis