

# Rhetoric versus or, How one Mann learned to stop

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They told me that if I went to college that that would be a place where I would really meet people who are getting together in quest of 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 know where it started to go 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 at the end of mid-term, a very small percentage of the people were asked to leave. 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. You get some more books, you read them, 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?

You'd better be committed to the idea 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 wouldn't 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? Sounds great doesn't it?" How many people would spon-

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

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 complicated. You'll have to get to 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 ourselves.

They avoid the problem of being somebody. 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 know who I am? I wear work shirts.

You can identify yourselves in many ways. But the main point is that these labels allow people to avoid having to be somebody. And in a certain way this makes it easier, because we don't have to worry about each other.

Like, I know you by, "That's the guy with the silk shirt, and silk tie in that fraternity, or that is the girl who is the history major. Or she is going out with that guy and looks like that." And of course, looks are very important, because we all know we are living in a society where what things look like are considered more important than what things really are.

And so we see how certain things begin to be built in; about how we look at people, how we look at ourselves.

O.k. I went back to second semester. I started making little charts. "Well, if I get a ninety in this, no a 95 then I can afford a 70 in this, no a ninety in this and I can afford 75 in this. That will give me an average of 85. Boy, that sounds good. I think I'll get an 85 this semester.

So I would work out my projected goal, and I had the fantasy that this time things were going to be different. I remember that my first average was 79.8.

Now at Cornell, 79.8 was a very dangerous average to have because 80 was the lowest possible grade to have because that made you sort of smart. With anything below 80 you were then run of the mill. At 80 they would say, "Hey, he's a pretty good student". Now I went through a big identity crisis wondering if I should tell people that my average was really 79.8, because 79.8 was very different from 80. Eighty is smart and 79.8 is "Oh, I see".

## SECOND SEMESTER

So sometimes I would say to people very bravely, "I got 79.8" and just imagine that they were looking at me very differently or sometimes I would say "80" and then feel differently inside. And so either way I felt that I lost.

And either way I felt that somehow a set of numbers had been developed to define who I was. So now once again I was being defined. I was Eric Mann, Tah Delta Fi, 79.8. Now the second semester was worse than the first.

In the second semester, it was warm, and somehow I couldn't get into that 5 or 6 hours a day. Somehow I really liked the springtime. I really liked to walk around. But there is a problem with that 5 or 6 hours if you like to walk around, and that is one of the most amazing things about college is that you're never finished.

There's no such thing as leisure. In fact the week is just one big tread-mill. So that you find, at least many of you, I think will find, that there's no such thing as being finished with your work.

Plus there's always additional books to read, additional course material and often the course material is more than you could read in one week.

You're always ahead in this and behind in that. You finally get caught up on this and you find out that you're behind in that and when you get caught up in that, you're behind in something else. You have to figure out, "Well, let's

see. If I don't show up for this, and I say I'm sick, then I can have the time to catch up on that," and the process continues. And if you don't work, which happens frequently, you find that you can't enjoy your leisure.

You find that when you take an afternoon off, there's this cloud hanging over your head. "I am three weeks behind in Ec.-101."

Well, that's o.k. If you're not going to do your work, at least enjoy your afternoon. "Sure. But I'm three weeks behind in Ec.-101. What am I going to do?" So I found that I never enjoyed either work or leisure.

So I did the only logical thing. I went to sleep. I found myself sleeping eight, then eight and a half and then ten hours. Then ten hours plus a nice two hour nap in the afternoon.

I found myself so tired that I was tired when I woke up.

You know, I would wake up in the morning after having ten hours sleep; I would think about my work, think about what was ahead of me, and plan on having my afternoon nap. It was really very scary. What I was beginning to find was that I was beginning to feel less and less proud of myself.

While I was thinking less and less of myself, I discovered that there were only two basic options. One was more sleep and the other was finding out ways to feel more and more of myself.

And soon, after freshman year, because I had been president of my dorm my fraternity told me that it was good for the house for me to run for Treasurer of Inter-Fraternity Council.

Now Treasurer of I.F.C. is a very important position. What the treasurer actually does; well, I forget actually, but I remember it was very important because I was told to run for it.

I think, in fact, what's important about being treasurer for I.F.C. is that you go up to people and say "I'm treasurer of the I.F.C." In fact that's the only thing important about being treasurer for I.F.C.

Again, it's a substitution for being a person. I was now Eric Mann, Tah Delta Fi, 79.8, Treasurer for I.F.C. I was building up a series of things that again were trying to compete because on one hand I was weighing those things, on the other hand it was something that was much more basic, which was with all those numbers and all those titles I still didn't like myself very much. And not only that, I began to like myself less.

After Treasurer for I.F.C. I ran for President of I.F.C. the next year. I lost but luckily enough I won Vice-President for I.F.C.

Vice-President is not as good as President, but it's better than Treasurer. The most important thing about being Vice-President of the I.F.C., is that it gets you into quill and dagger.

A lot of you won't know what quill and dagger is. Quill and dagger results when the Vice-President of I.F.C., football players and other people who do meaningless work all get together and create an honorary society.

Now why do you need an honorary? It will clearly decide who's cool. And without an honorary, who would know who's cool?

And so, I found myself going to these parties.

We all walked around with quills and daggers in our ties and went with girls who were sort of extensions of the quill and dagger.

We all walked around saying "I'm cool, you're cool, how's it going?" You know?



You are going into battle . . .

. . . but you'll probably fall asleep at your post