

Metanoia by John Valk

Searching for the Ultimate

Autumn comes early in New Brunswick, earlier than where I grew up. The days can still be quite pleasant, but clearly the intense heat of the summer has passed. A new season is upon us.

Renewed bustle on campus indicates that something else is upon us. A new academic season has begun. And, newness, more often than not, brings excitement. My youngest son started preschool last week. He was excited.

What will the new academic year bring us? What lies ahead? Those questions have crossed the minds of not a few students, staff and faculty. What the new year will bring, however, may depend on what one is looking for.

I was struck by something I read the other day. In a *Globe and Mail* article (Sept. 8), Linda Ehrichs lamented the lack of stimulating conversation in our living rooms. What there is of conversation, she explained, is largely banal consensus shaped primarily by our relationship to the television set. Dialogue revolves around things offered in the marketplace, and the word argument has taken on negative connotations.

In her lament, Ehrichs made a comments about education. What she said did

not ring unfamiliar, but it did sound disheartening.

Education, it seems, is epitomized in earning a degree, a piece of paper that allows passage from the life of learning to a life of acquisition. It is a cue to stop thinking and start making money.

It is unlikely that President Armstrong, other administrative staff or faculty advisors made those kind of comments as they addressed incoming students. Rather, they emphasized, if nothing else, that the intent of an education at UNB is to prepare students for the future; to help them make positive contributions to the welfare of self, society and nation.

I identify with that. Yet, Ehrichs' comments are unsettling. Is her depiction really what education has come to represent; a rite of passage to acquisition? Is this the general perception; a ticket to the good (middle class) life: Are university services, such as career planning, transition to the workplace, math and computer skills, simply aids to better assist students to plug into the marketplace? Is this how we measure our welfare?

I was struck a second time when I read a Philosophy

Department brochure. After carefully explaining what philosophy was all about, it made specific mention of philosophy's practical value. Now, why was there a need to do this? Does the "love of wisdom" not have obvious practical value, even if we cannot buy anything with it? Do we today need to make a case for studying the wisdom of the past?

In the educational literature, one reads more and more of the need for educators to give attention to matters dealing with meaning and purpose in human life. Has it neglected to do this? I don't think so. But the quote by Ehrichs perhaps suggests that a certain kind of meaning and purpose has been emphasized. But, we may now no longer be satisfied with such a truncated emphasis.

Of course, this whole area, when we think about it, deals with spiritual or religious matters. Public education generally has great difficulty here; it prefers to leave these matters to the private realm. Secular education, it is argued, ought to be religiously neutral.

For those perceptive enough, this is clearly not happening. Secular education is laced with religious presuppositions, as ironic as that might sound. If education is what Ehrichs

perceives it to be, then the religious presuppositions espoused are those of the marketplace and of material acquisition. So much for neutrality, or openness to other perceptions of what education ought to be.

This Sunday evening (Sept. 18) another perception of meaning and purpose in life vis-a-vis education will be addressed. At 7:00 PM, there will be a Convocation Worship Service in Memorial Hall. This service—of music, song and word—is a calling together (that's what "convocation" means) of faculty, staff, students and friends to mark the beginning of the new academic year. It will encourage everyone present to affirm that education, when all is said and done, has real meaning only when considered in relation to God, each other and the planet we live on, and in that order.

That's no pretense of religious neutrality. It's simply being honest. It is also an exciting discovery of the ultimate.

In this new autumn season, what will the new academic year bring for you? Well, it depends what you're looking for.

The Brunswickan

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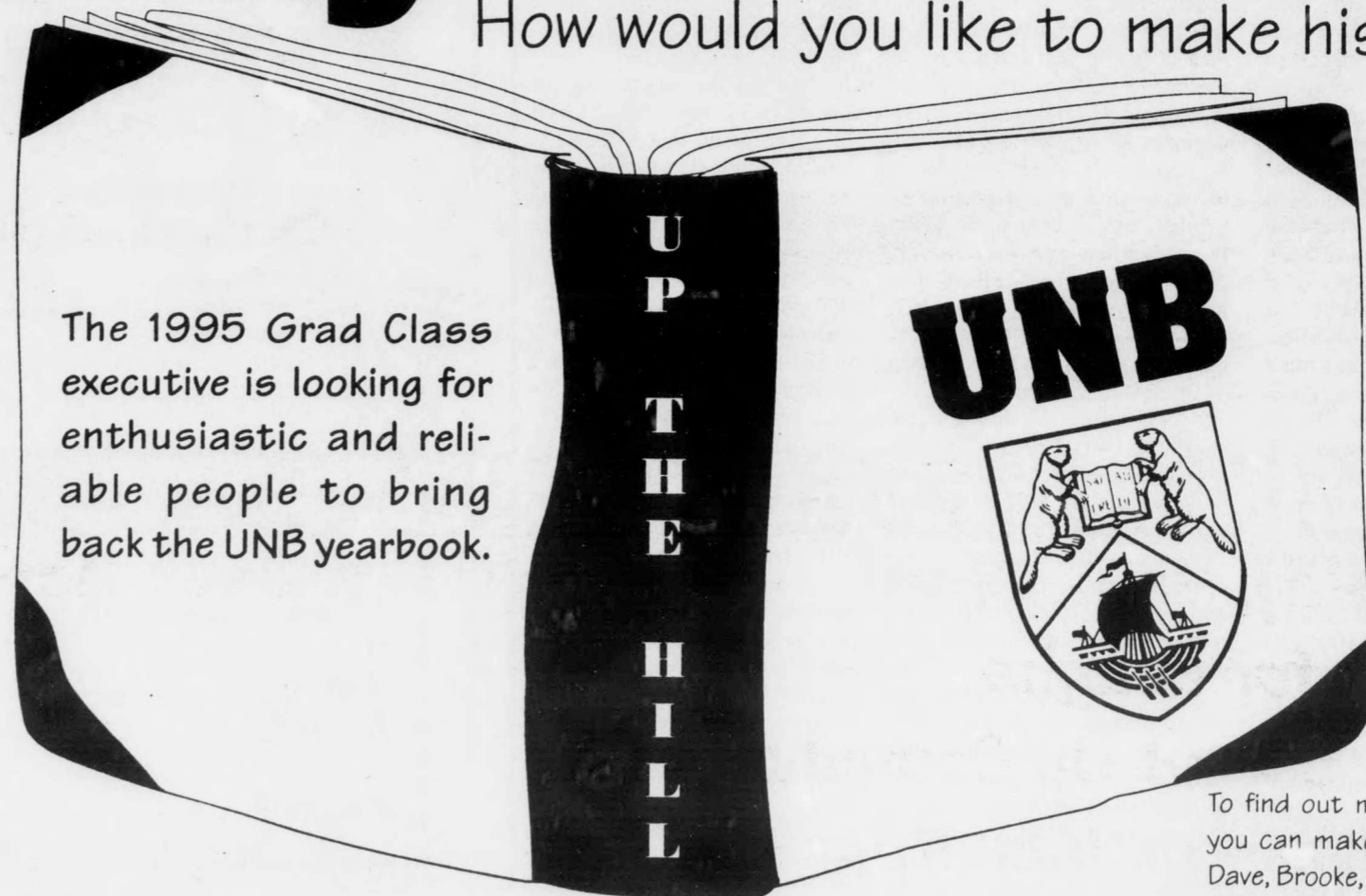
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