THURSDAY, MAY 31, 2007

The Graduate

A couple of weeks ago I became the first person in my family to graduate from college. Moreover I was accepted to my top choice Ph.D. program for the fall, fully funded, and I am 21 years old.

But I have a confession to make. I used to be one of the students you commiserate about on this site. When I did make it to class at all, I generally fell asleep. I was typically wearing pajama pants and had a generally disheveled appearance. I cheated when I thought I could get away with it and never once had to face the music. Whether or not this was due to instructors not noticing or not wanting to deal with it I’ll never know.

I came up with some of the most incredible excuses to get out of having to turn in certain assignments, many of which got me either excused or at least an extension. Other times I simply feigned illness, family tragedy or used my involvement with sports as a reason that my coursework continually took a backseat. When I didn’t find an assignment or class especially compelling I did only what I needed to do to get by and generally wasted many a talented educator’s time with barely passing drivel. All my life everyone around me had told me that I was smart and I believed it. Considering myself smarter than practically everyone else had become, in many ways, a core part of the way I viewed myself. My problem was the only way I saw fit to use my intelligence was to manipulate the system so that I could continue to be lazy.

Part of my problem was that I couldn’t see beyond my own nose in terms of what value any of the material I was being offered might have. To me, schooling was compulsory and I was just going through the motions and waiting for it to be over so my life could finally start. I think this is the case with many of students referenced here.

But what I came to realize was that my life started the moment I decided to take responsibility for its direction. This was my life, this was my education and this was my future. Did I want to be just another mediocre person, still just going through the motions of living and wondering whatever became of my potential at age 40? Suddenly, for the first time in my life, I had incredible power to do incredible things. An absolutely fascinating world opened up and it was mine for the taking, limited only by how hard I was willing to work for it. Rest assured, I worked my ass off, aided by wonderful professors who went well out of their way to reach out to me.

To the students who read this, there is absolutely no joy to be found in choosing to be mediocre. What you do here and now does set the foundation for what you will continue to do throughout your life. If you can find nothing to inspire you here where your only job is to learn from masters, how do you honestly expect to survive 30 some years of the work force without it being a soul crushing experience? Wake up. Your only life is passing you by and you’re barely present to notice it.

And to the professors who didn’t give up on me even when I routinely disappointed them, and the professors who aided and encouraged me through my transformation: thank you.

More than you know, thank you.