

Thomas G. Palaima REGULAR CONTRIBUTOR

Educational grazing on the Forty Acres

Life is full of the unexpected. Just ask St. Paul. If you can't reach him, ask Mort Meyerson.

In the Acts of the Apostles, we are told that Paul, then known as Saul of



Tarsus, had an epiphany on the road to Damascus. I had an epiphany, too, this last semester, in Gebauer Hall on the University of Texas at

Austin campus. It was not as life-altering as St. Paul's, but it affirmed for me where I think meaning is located in our lives and what we should be doing during the crucial four years of college education that prepares our children for their lives as adults and citizens.

As commencement ceremonies wind down on the Forty Acres, I wonder what it means to announce that a UT degree is really worth \$89,110 (American-Statesman, May 13). This is the average 2001 salary of more than 2,000 UT graduates going back to 1980. My own first reaction was that the fates had been cruel to me. It was my misfortune to graduate from Boston College in 1973. So my salary still hasn't reached the UT degree-holder average. This is where my epiphany comes in.

On March 19, a group of about 30 students, professors and graduates of the School of Liberal Arts sat down with our dean in Gebauer Hall to talk with Mort Meyerson, former head of Electronic Data Systems and Perot Systems. Meyerson is one Liberal Arts alumnus who radically skews the degree-dollar-value statistics.

In the course of our discussion, Meyerson, who describes himself as an accidental philosophy-economics double major, expressed bewilderment that students in Liberal Arts felt these days like second-class citizens. He used a true Texan metaphor for his own educational experience. He grazed broadly in order to find out as much as he could about human life and human nature. He could not imagine 18-year-old students setting their hooves on campus already certain that they wanted to feed entirely in one pasture. Nor had he anticipated how our current emphasis on financial success has created fears that deter students from what is for many of them their greatest opportunity to find out what future roads they might

want to travel and how best to enjoy the journey while helping others.

Meyerson has described in the business magazine *Fast Company* how his own browsing, exploratory education shaped his values as a human being and gave him important CEO talents. His Liberal Arts education, he felt, prepared him to deal with inevitable change, to identify what made employees and customers of a successful corporation happy and to articulate — and answer — one essential life-guiding question: "To get rich, do you have to be miserable?"

I absorbed that evening the surprisingly keen anxieties of prominent students in Liberal Arts and continued to notice the same paralyzing fears in students of all majors and schools throughout the spring semester. I am thankful that when I went to Boston College as the first person in my extended working-class family to go to college, more attention was paid to what Meyerson thinks is important: the arts that make us, as citizens of the most powerful and wealthiest country in the history of the world, truly free and fully capable of understanding the world around us, our place in it and our responsibilities to it and to all other human beings.

I share Meyerson's healthy respect for money and financial security. But we have both learned through hard experience that the ability to be happy in the face of life's many cruelties and disappointments depends on understanding the message of the Book of Job, Hesiod's "Works and Days," and Sophocles' "Oedipus Tyrannus." Life is going to mess with you. You had better be prepared in your heart, mind and soul, because when it really messes with you, your portfolio won't help you.

At commencement time I believe that what parents really want when they demand that their children specialize early in college is a guarantee of their happiness. But I know of no career training that will make Bob Dylan's beautiful wish come true.

*May your hands always be busy,
May your feet always be swift,
May you have a strong foundation,
When the winds of changes shift,
May your heart always be joyful,
May your song always be sung,
May you stay forever young.*

Nor, I suspect, does Mort Meyerson

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