Acad. Quest. (2009) 22:37–46
DOI 10.1007/s12129-008-9088-0

ARTICLES

An Education Lived

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Published online: 29 January 2009
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The road, named after Isaac Barrow, onetime fellow of Trinity College Cambridge, is, even today, illuminated by gas lamps. A row of cherry trees, magnificent in blossom, adorn the street; behind them large brick houses, indeterminate in age, neither uniform nor overly diverse in style, line the way, settled comfortably in front of well-tended flower gardens.

Thirty-two Barrow Road, anchoring the point at which the street makes a right hand turn, makes no special gesture of differentiation. Only the careful observer making it his business to follow the turn and pursue the progress of the wooden fence that runs the length of the garden might note with modest interest a second, smaller octagonal building in the corner of the garden, and wonder briefly what might lie within...

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Venice: timeless sloshing of dark waters on worn stone; glittering chandeliers; dark Tintorettos; fragile, long-stemmed glasses on dull gold trays; voices in Italian, English, Russian glancing off polished marble. Then some whispered words, and a hand on my shoulder urging me across the room, and through a mirrored corridor into a smaller chamber, and towards the single occupant—a wizened figure, seated silently in a darkened corner. “Forgive me,” almost whispered my father (the only time to my knowledge I

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have heard him speak those words), "but might I have the honor of introducing my son David?" A barely perceptible nod, a hand raised a few inches, then nothing more. It seemed to be enough. Years later would I come to understand something of the force of that encounter—the enduring presence in my father's thought that was, and is, the poetry that had once flowed from that raised hand that belonged to Ezra Pound:

A blown husk that is finished
        but the light sings eternal
a pale flare over marshes
        where the salt-hay whispers to tide's change

(*The Cantos*, from CXV)

* * *

Jean-Jacques Rousseau understood it best: the most absolute authority is that which remains invisible. I cannot recall ever asking myself if I might be late for school, if a piece of homework might remain undone, if an outing with a friend might find me tardy in my return, if the volume on my little record player might be raised above a most subdued level. Several thousands of days, the patterns were immobile: breakfast was eaten in silence to the backdrop of the BBC radio news, while Daddy read the *Times*.

Off to school (we will return there shortly). Back from school—a bowl of cereal with my mother (taking a break from her work as a scholar of diplomatic history), then upstairs for homework. In the background, Weber, Wagner, Bach, Berlioz, and the rest. Never an afternoon of uncertainty: my father was reading, listening to music, and would do so until 5:55 P.M. exactly, when a bellowed, "It's news time," would summon us all (sister and brother from our homework, mother from her study, Old English sheepdog from her late-afternoon snooze) to watch the BBC news. Then, a glass of single malt for him, and, when deemed age-appropriate, a glass of sherry for me. Time then for reading the *New Yorker* and the *TLS* while mum made the dinner. Then table talk—well, we listened, he spoke.

After dinner, more homework—then reading for pleasure and, if "there was something actually worth watching," an hour or so of TV. (The "TV room" was deliberately designed to be extraordinarily uncomfortable—a thin cushion on a wooden bench.) We had a small black and white telly for most of my childhood; the choices were modest—BBC 1 and 2 (the third channel,

ITV, was regarded as trash). On Saturdays the routine was similar, with the exception that school was over at lunchtime and the treat of the week—an afternoon with school friends—constituted the principal pleasure of the school year. Sunday was dominated by a long dog-walk, often on the old Roman road that snaked its way through the Gog Magog hills, and the *Sunday Times* and *Observer*, religiously read from cover to cover.

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The walled town of Carcassone, the gaunt cathedral of Albi, the wind-swept rain and dank mist high on the rocks of Montségur. I was too young to take in the rich narratives that were wrapped around each site, but words stuck—the Cathars, the collective suicide (remember Massada?), the work of the "mad-brilliant" Simone Weil. Family holidays in Normandy, Bruges and Amsterdam, Paris, Bologna, Sicily, Crete—rented car, comfortable hotels, and my sister, who once dared to remark, "Not another cathedral." There were silences too—my father and I together mountain walking high in the Swiss Alps, the Tyrol, the Dolomites—shooing large cows with their sonorous bells from the winding paths, following the painted markers from hour to hour. Music and high mountains brought—still bring—inner quiet to us both.

Hiking boots and walking sticks in the Alps, suits and ties for concerts and operas in Salzburg, the Met, Covent Garden. Meetings with Boulez, Menuhin... Practicing my clarinet—never enough—and performing Brahms's Fourth Symphony with the Cambridge Youth Orchestra in Ely Cathedral with my parents in the audience (as ever, I was told the truth—the brass drowned out the woodwinds, my own contribution thus inaudible). Mountains, music, and... chess—the triad of passions shared—and a rare moment of demonstrable paternal pride as David managed a draw against England's ranking grandmaster, who had minutes before defeated my nervous father and some twenty other players in a simultaneous chess tournament.

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Home: inside the front door a small anteroom for coats and umbrellas. A second door to a foyer: on the left, an ink drawing of Berlioz by Michael Ayrton—onetime friend of my parents—and in front a bust of some obscure surly Hellenic figure. To the left of the foyer, the living room. A wall of

books—the treasures—a volume from Kafka's library with the vigorous K scrawled inside the cover; the first proof of Heidegger's *Sein und Zeit*; a modest-looking volume in the Freud collection, inside a card from Dr. Freud congratulating my grandfather on his wedding day; the collection of translations of Homer—by Pope, Hölderlin, and many more. And my father's high-backed reading chair—his home every afternoon, when he was not traveling, for the last forty-two years. Other chairs for the rest of us, a coffee table sagging under innumerable art books and a statuette of King David, and of course the record player well supplied with hundreds of classical recordings—many of exquisitely obscure composers. The view from the room was onto the garden and to the octagonal building beyond—that strange construction that is my father's library.

To the right of the foyer, the dining room—a large round dark walnut table, and against one wall, a bookcase of my father's own works in their various editions and translations. Against the other wall, an upright Broadwood piano that had once been the playroom instrument of the young Charles Darwin. Of all the family treasures, it was this piano that has perhaps pride of place: my father has always reserved his greatest respect for those masters in domains of thought furthest from his own—mathematics and science especially. Guests would inevitably be regaled with the tale (some length in the telling) of how the Steiners ended up with the Darwins' piano.

Dinner parties were held here: while enjoying the results of my mother's mastery of French and Viennese cuisine, guests would listen to my father expound on his latest, often idiosyncratic, views of the world (did we know that a thousand people a week were "trying to get into South Africa"?). If he asked questions, it would be to press our guests to explain (and often force them to defend) their areas of expertise or professional commitments. I remember feeling sorry for any number of doctoral students—deep into their areas of expertise—confronting withering questions about the importance of their work, or trying to defend themselves against rapier-like animadversions. At times, the arguments with more senior guests would erupt into brutal exchanges of intellectual fire: special paternal ire was reserved for those brave enough to take on his quixotic political views, especially if they dared to promote liberal niceties in the face of his "Platonist-anarchist" instincts. Of course, there were more than a few shafts of brilliance, and stories that have stayed with me: when Simone Weil ("Yes, David, 'the one who wrote about the Cathars'") watched Hitler's troops marching up the Champs-Élysées after

the fall of France, she shared with her utterly despondent fellow Frenchmen the thought that "this is a great day for Indochina."

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My school, the Perse School for Boys, was established in the seventeenth century, but it was not a famous boarding school like Eton, Winchester, or Harrow. Rather, the Perse was a direct grant day school: at eleven years old, candidates for entrance into the school took an examination—essentially an IQ test. Those selected paid a very modest tuition fee. Those boys who came from families of modest means paid nothing: their fees were provided by the state (via a direct grant). The fact that most upper-class and even upper-middle-class families preferred to send their sons to "public" schools (so called because entrance was and is through a public examination) meant that the great majority of pupils at the Perse School were from modest economic backgrounds (my best friend's father had worked his way to the ownership of a small clothing shop). A small percentage of children came from true working-class homes, and about the same number from academic families like my own.

In many respects, the school was typical of academically demanding boys' secondary schools in the England of the time. We wore purple, black, and white-striped uniforms, and serious misbehavior incurred corporal punishment delivered by means of a willow cane from no less than the headmaster—a brutal, bitter Australian who prided himself on being more British than the British. In class, we sat in wooden desks that retained their inkwells, in groups of thirty-five students. At the end of each semester we were ranked 1 to 35 in every class. School started at 8:30 A.M. and went until 4:15 P.M. (12:15 P.M. on Saturday). During the eight years I attended the Perse, the lunch menu never varied, and I can recite it still. Suffice to say that toad in the hole, suet pudding, bangers and mash, and cod in batter still hold horrors for me.

On Monday afternoons, we could choose between social service and one of the cadet corps in the Army, Navy, or Royal Air Force. I "rose" to become a flight sergeant in the Air Force, possibly the first New Jersey-born boy ever to attain this rank at an English school (my father was appointed at the Institute for Advanced Study in Princeton when I was born). On Tuesday and Thursday afternoons we played rugby, field hockey, or cricket depending on the season. Those who excelled at sports were the school heroes—they got to

wear different blazers, were the first to be elected prefects, and established networks that would one day take many of them into positions of some prominence in the city of Cambridge. Low-grade anti-Semitism was a constant presence—remarks made before and after classes, scathing glances as the six Jews (in a school of six hundred students) were summoned each morning after prayers to hear the announcements. Suffice to say that none of us was included in any of the "in" crowds.

The course of studies was typical of the schools of the time. In our first six years (to the age of sixteen) we studied about ten subjects in preparation for O level (Ordinary level) exams. I studied English, French, Latin, Greek, mathematics, physics, biology, chemistry, music, history, and geography. (I tried to give up Greek, but when I informed my father of this, he responded with more than simply the use of words that this was not an option.)

For the most part, those first five years of school were made up of long gray days of brute memorization and hours of homework. I recall reading and rereading lists of rivers in South America, agonizing over math and science lessons never truly understood. The O level exams were set by examinations boards—there were about six of them, most notably the Oxford and Cambridge Board, whose exams we duly took. The curriculum and examinations went hand in glove. Each year, for example, the board would announce the set texts for the English exam—usually about a dozen—from which the teacher would pick those that we would prepare in depth during the exam year (Shakespeare's *Henry IV, Part 1* and *As You Like It*, Austen's *Emma*, poetry by Hardy, three tales by Chaucer). In history, the teacher chose three periods of English history and one of European (Roman Britain, the Norman Conquest, the Tudors, and seventeenth-century Europe). In Latin, French, and Greek we translated from and into the second languages. As for the sciences, math, and geography, I look today at the examination booklets and remember only pain.

Two lucky accidents served to take this education out of the realms of the ordinary.

First, the Perse had, years earlier, been home to a remarkable teacher of English who had invented something called the "mummery system." The English classrooms had as a result been converted into mummeries—small theatres complete with stages, costumes, lights, and sound. Four mornings a week, half the class would perform scenes from Shakespeare while the other half would watch and then critique. On some of these days, we would instead

have to recite poems or engage in debates with our classmates. On the fifth day we would discuss other readings or study grammar. I owe much to those many hours of oral presentations—it gave me the skills I would one day use in the Oxford Union Society, and a life-long ease with the demands of public speaking. More importantly, acting Shakespeare gave us a familiarity with those plays that went well beyond what was available through reading alone.

The second piece of luck was our history teacher, one "Charlie T," a gentleman of indeterminate age, whose grimy ancient gown trailing halfway down his torn tweed jacket belied a mind of brittle precision, extraordinary passion, and relentlessly demanding standards. Only once in the seven years in which I studied with Mr. T. did I see him use notes (during a lecture on some military campaigns in Turkey). His memory for detail rivaled any I have ever encountered, and his ability to weave these details into compelling accounts left an indelible impression. Several of Mr. T.'s students would later become noted historians—one of international renown. While my pre-O level years—marred by dyslexia—passed with no sign of academic distinction, Charlie T.'s teaching produced a hint of better to come.

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Into the teenage years, girls were a foreign country. Subsequently, they began to educate in unconventional ways. Building on the mummery system, the Perse supported major theatrical performances. The first production I took part in was *Androcles and the Lion*, which fortunately called for young ladies, summoned from a nearby school, clad in Roman costumes (night-gowns were the happy proxy). Further enlightenment awaited in Latin camp: a week of work culminating in the performance of Plautus' *Rudens* ("The Rope"). Two characters in particular—Ampelisca and Palaestra—suggested that time spent memorizing Latin lines could be profitable in ways that transcended the academic. The study of foreign tongues was further motivated by French camp—two intense weeks in Tours mastering the subjunctive tense in delightful company: an invitation to visit the glories of Florence followed. A visit to Israel led in turn to Paris—halcyon days in the old Jewish quarter.

In the early seventies travel in Europe was inexpensive and intoxicating—a single purchase of the famous Eurorail Pass opened the continent for a

month: Prague, Milan, Venice (an enduring favorite). While family vacations gradually surrendered to the reality of teenage tastes, there were important exceptions. My father took me to my first Wagner *Ring* cycle in Bayreuth—a famous production led by Pierre Boulez in the pit and Patrice Chéreau as director. In that first year of the production the Germans loathed the whole thing (picture the Rhine maidens as Victorian whores standing on a hydroelectric dam), while the French in the audience cheered their heads off. My father, French by birth but conservative in certain matters, incurred the hatred of both sides during the long intermissions by lecturing the respective partisans on their respective provincialisms. I drank deeply of that very particular Wagnerian elixir, and have been attending the festival—or trying to—ever since.

Otherwise, the long days of holidays were consumed by reading punctuated by walking the sheepdog. I read the classics as they were then understood—Austen, Brontë, Chaucer, Conrad, Dickens (not a favorite), Eliot, Hardy, Lawrence, Milton (sampled, and put aside for years to come), Mann, Kafka, Tolstoy, Dostoyevsky, Turgenev, Flaubert, Zola—and many authors of the second rank. I recall Trollope, Webster, Spencer, “modern” novelists of every hue—Fitzgerald, Roth, Updike, Nicholas Monsarrat, Storm Jameson (a close family friend), John le Carré—and so many others lost to memory.

The house was the world: my father in the living room, my mother in her study, my sister (always a brilliant student, now a professor of classics at Columbia) in her room reading; the rose bushes, the weeping willow, the poplars at the end of the garden that soared into the sky, insects buzzing around plum trees; the hours of Wimbeldon on the telly; cups of tea and cookies; goulash, veal scaloppine, coq au vin, Dover sole, lamb chops for dinner; visits to and from a small number of school friends; always a book. It was austere, immobile, privileged.

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After O levels, about a quarter of the boys dropped out of school. The remainder had to choose just three subjects to study for the next two years—studies that would lead to the A level (Advanced level) examinations. A levels, with their enforced specialization, embodied perhaps the greatest difference between education in England and in the United States. The

sacrifice in my own case was that from the age of sixteen onwards I was never again to receive academic instruction in science or mathematics. The reward was work in English literature, history, and Latin (my three chosen subjects) that matched the coursework in the junior and even senior years of a strong American college. The nature of the teaching changed, too, in deference to the demands of the forthcoming examinations. In these last two years of school, classes were somewhat smaller, assignments were often intellectually interesting, and students showing promise were singled out for extra attention. When we studied Tudor history, for example, we did not read textbooks but rather the most important works of scholarship—G.R. Elton, J.J. Scarisbrick, Conrad Russell—and primary documents. I can recall today many of the arguments made by Henry VIII's lawyers as they tried in vain to persuade Rome to annul his first marriage.

For the first time in my school life, a teacher called me David rather than Steiner (in our early grades, it was not clear our teachers knew our first names). Once again, there were set texts and set periods, but now we were expected to write essays that probed, argued, analyzed, and persuaded. In the spring before I sat for my A levels, life more or less revolved around exam preparation—I remember spending weekends in my mother's college office, which offered both cool temperatures and complete quiet. I have never worked so hard. The memorization of long passages of Shakespeare, Lucretius, Seneca, of ee cummings (regarded of course as clever trash by our English teachers, who couldn't understand how he had ended up as a "set text" for that year) of dates, more dates, of tactics in the battle of Marston Moor and the ill-fated cavalry of Prince Rupert—all of this constituted my daily company for day after day and week after week. The preparation was physical, too—a good friend and I wisely began to go running to build up stamina—after all, we were to face some eight days of multiple examinations, each consisting of searching essay questions with an hour or so to write each response.

Given my O level results, my A levels came as a welcome surprise to parents, teachers, and me. In the very clearly defined British hierarchy, those results made it possible to study for an additional year to take the special examinations then required for entry into either Cambridge or Oxford—the holy grail of a British education. I joined some twenty-five other boys in intensive training (the right word, I think) for the Oxford entry exam. Rather than being devoted to a particular set of texts or periods, these exams asked

general questions about literature and history, requiring us to mold whatever knowledge we had into essays that were intended to indicate our fundamental abilities as serious students. I remember reading literary criticism for the first time, contemplating the debates between J.H. Plumb and his critics about the nature of historical scholarship, comparing translations of Virgil.

One would imagine that my parents—both teaching at Cambridge—might have played an active role in this last phase of my schooling. Not so: to some degree it was simply too late to change the habits of a decade—schooling was left to the school, its peculiar demands and rituals just too distant from the university world. But more deeply, my father knew that his presence was simply too strong, his intellectual impatience too great, to make an effective instructor. He may (my memory is hazy here) have read an essay I wrote on the wheel of fire as a symbol in *King Lear*. My mother, a wonderful teacher, sensed that I was in good hands with Charlie T., although she did make some suggestions for extra readings.

I was sitting in the prefects' room at the Perse, sipping a cup of tea, when a knock on the door announced a visit from the headmaster—he wished to see Steiner. As I stepped into the courtyard, he informed me that I had secured a place at Balliol College, Oxford, to read PPE (philosophy, politics, and economics). I remember little of the rest of that day, except, that is, for the reaction of my father. I told him the news; he looked at me gravely. Then, to my surprise, he put down his book, got out of his chair, turned down the music, and left the room. He returned with his rather moth-eaten Oxford scarf, wrapped it around my neck, and said in a voice I had never heard before, "Another defeat for Hitler." Then he offered me a glass of sherry, even though it was not yet time for the evening news.