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History Through Osmosis

by Sean Carswell

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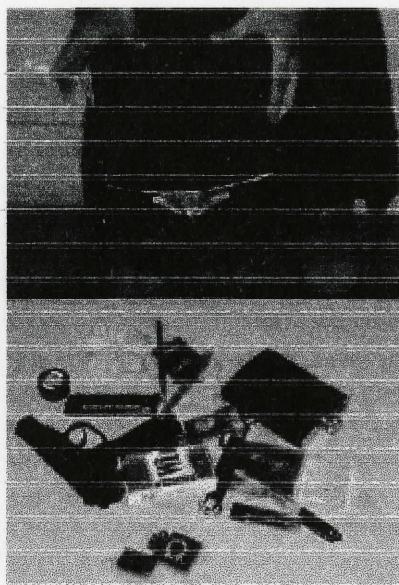
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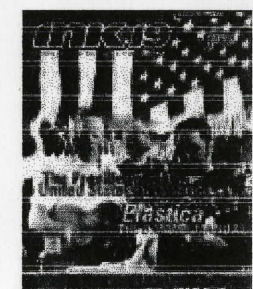
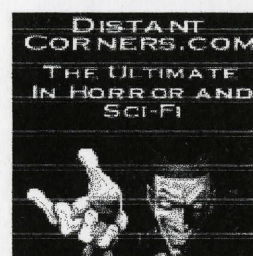
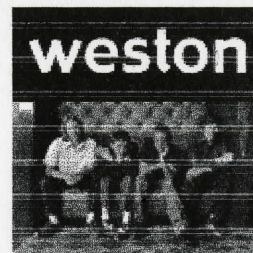
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When I think of the dreams I had in high school, I generally think of real, stage five, rapid-eye-movement dreams. I've forgotten those dreams, just as I've forgotten my adolescent aspirations. When I think of time spent in high school - actually *in* high school, not the block of time surrounding my high school years - I think of sleeping. I slept a lot in class. Some classes I slept in almost all the time, but for various reasons. I took an Economics class in my senior year. It was a first period class, which was hard enough to get through to begin with, but I'd also worked enough jobs by my senior year to know that Economics, for me, basically amounted to shit jobs and minimum wage until I could work my way up to living hand-to-mouth (something that pretty much held true). Plus, Economics was one of those classes in which the teacher taught straight out of the book and gave the standard textbook



Phil Bailey

Model: Heather Keller



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tests, so I could sleep until test day, read the chapter, and pass the test. For the most part, the teacher let me sleep, but one day I guess he got a wild hair up his ass and woke me up. "If you're just going to sleep in my class every day, why do you even show up?" he asked me. I shrugged and forced myself to stay awake for awhile, then forgot his question and fell back asleep. The next day, for reasons completely unrelated to Economics class, I skipped school. I skipped a lot of school back then, too. Basically, the county allowed students eighteen absences a year, and I took all eighteen. It made school a lot more bearable taking one day off in every ten. So my one day in ten came up the day after my Economics teacher scolded me, and I skipped. The next day, when I went to first period, the teacher apologized to me in front of the class. "I didn't mean to suggest that you shouldn't show up to my class," he said. "I just want you to stay awake." I had no idea what he was talking about at first, but I realized that he'd been cool enough to apologize to me, so I made the effort to stay awake. For that day, at least.

Some teachers wouldn't let me sleep. One teacher once woke me up by slamming a yardstick against my table. I'd been lost in such a deep, pleasant nap that the bang of the yardstick scared the hell out of me. I jumped up, knocking my chair into the table behind me. I raised my fists like I was ready to fight. The rest of the class laughed at me. I realized what had happened to me, felt like an asshole, and stayed awake for the rest of the semester. My junior year history teacher, Ms. Campbell woke me up a few times at the beginning of the school year, then quickly learned the folly of her ways.

Ms. Campbell (her real name, by the way.

I only change names to protect the innocent, and Ms. Campbell is definitely guilty) was another teacher who taught straight out of the textbook, but she was particularly terrible about it. She lectured every class period, but her lectures basically amounted to her reading the textbook word for word. When she got done reading a chapter to the class, we would answer the questions at the end of the chapter, then we'd take the test that came with the teacher's edition of the textbook. I figured this out early on and made myself sleep in her class. I made myself sleep because I was angry. I was angry because she still taught us things like Columbus discovered America and the movement into the west was our "manifest destiny." Columbus didn't discover America. Even if you could discover a place that has over seventy-five million people (because I've been thinking about discovering France), it doesn't change the fact that Columbus never got past the West Indies. He never set his greedy, slave-driving, imperialist foot on the continent. And just because one Italian bastard showed the queen of Spain that he could destroy an entire culture and take all their gold, and just because this led to a bunch of other greedy bastards doing the same thing, it doesn't make for a manifest destiny. I'm willing to bet that Ms. Campbell couldn't even use manifest in a sentence without throwing a destiny in right behind it.

I was also angry because, when I was awake, I'd read ahead. I'd read about crazy bastards like Boss Tweed and the rest of Tammany Hall. Then I'd ask questions about the whole political boss system, and Ms. Campbell would have no idea what I was talking about. I'd read about the Homestead Strike of 1892 and ask how Andrew Carnegie could be both a

humanitarian and a guy who sent thugs to shoot at his steelworkers; or I'd read about the Spanish American War and ask how we could kill a bunch of people in Cuba and somehow come out of it owning the Philippines; or I'd want to know more about the Haymarket Riots and the anarchists who were hung as a result, and Ms. Campbell would have none of the answers. What was even worse, though, was her lack of curiosity about history in general. I couldn't understand how she came to teach it. So, to quell my anger, I tried sleeping. When Ms. Campbell responded to this by waking me up, I responded by reading ahead, planning out smart ass things to say, and saying them when she got around to reading those parts. Pretty soon, she let me sleep again.

A dozen years passed. I went on to attend four different colleges, obtain two degrees (because I don't want to give the impression that all my sleeping and skipping school led to bad grades. I graduated high school in the top ten percent of my class), and teach at two colleges and a junior high school. Time has afforded me a little perspective on Ms. Campbell, teaching in general, and learning.

The days and weeks before going into my first teaching job (at Northern Arizona University), I thought about teaching all the time. I learned not only all the material I was supposed to teach, but also all of the background information surrounding it. I was prepared to not only teach the works of an author, but to give his life story and present it to the class in a fresh and original way. I had all kinds of ideas and plans for my classes. I really believed that I would reach kids and change their lives. I did real well for the first two weeks. Then I got my first paycheck, and I realized that I

made less than half of what I'd been making waiting tables. The only way I could make teaching worth it was to work fewer and fewer hours until my paltry check added up to a decent hourly wage. I didn't do that. I still focused all my energies into teaching. I was a sucker. I knew this. I know this now. Everyone knows that teachers are drastically underpaid. That's not the problem. The problem is that teachers like me still put forth an effort for a shit wage. This is a basic error of supply side economics. Teachers like Ms. Campbell or the guy who shows a movie every class period have the right idea. With teachers like that, you get what you pay for. It's teachers like me, who constantly give the school board a bargain, who fuck up the system.

After teaching two years at Northern Arizona University, my contract expired, so I moved back to Florida. Subsequent economic misfortune led me to teaching a year of junior high school. During that miserable year, I learned a number of valuable lessons that basically amounted to one lesson: don't teach junior high school. But one day while at that godforsaken job, I sat around the lunchroom with five other English teachers. We were chatting about some shit when I mentioned something about Jack Kerouac. Four of the five other English teachers at that table didn't know who Jack Kerouac was. Now, I don't necessarily expect the readers of *Ink 19* to know who Jack Kerouac was, but he wrote one of the coolest, most powerful, and influential novels in American history, *On The Road*. An English teacher not knowing who Jack Kerouac was is like a nuclear physicist not knowing who Einstein was, or like a punk rocker not knowing who the Sex Pistols were. Or like Ms. Campbell not knowing anything about history. At that moment, besides the whole don't-teach-

junior-high lesson, I learned that, all those times during school when I thought my teacher didn't know what the fuck he was talking about, I was right.

Before I go too far with this, though, I'll concede that everyone knows that the education system in America is fucked. Basically, every time some politician wants to raise taxes, he takes a little money out of education, puts that money somewhere else, then asks for more money for education. The more money for education inevitably gets turned down, and things continue to suck from there. Public education is only good for teaching us all to sit down, shut up, and deal with the fact that we're not getting a goddamn thing out of this whole experience. But there's something more.

One semester at NAU, I taught a sophomore level class in academic writing. I'd developed the syllabus myself, and one section of the class revolved around the Vietnam War. All of the articles I taught in this section outlined the ways in which the history of the war was being re-written to make US involvement look more favorable. These articles basically examined things like *Rambo* movies or the culture of Vietnam before French imperialism. I wasn't teaching the My Lai massacre or anything like that. Even so, when the university administration found out about this, they told me that I could not teach this section of my class anymore. They said it was too controversial. I taught this section again the next semester, mostly out of belligerence. My boss found out and gave me a different class assignment for my last semester at NAU. This made me realize that if teachers teach obvious but controversial things, they lose their jobs. If Ms. Campbell came out and said, "Columbus was directly responsible for the

deaths of over a quarter of a million Arawak Indians," she wouldn't still be teaching at Merritt Island High School. But that's not the most important thing.

It is much more relevant that I know now about Columbus and the Arawaks. I know all about Carnegie and the Homestead Strike, and sometimes, when I get drunk, I make people listen to me spouting off about Boss Tweed and Tammany Hall. By the same token, I guarantee that millions of people who never took my academic writing course still know that the history of wars is written by the victors. We all know these things because we got off our asses and educated ourselves. When the food sucked in the high school cafeteria, we learned that we could bring our own lunch. By the same token, when education sucks, we can also learn that a vast, intelligent, verifiable pool of information is still available to everyone smart enough to learn how to get a library card. Classes are overcrowded, teachers are underpaid, and every day the funding for school gets to be a little less. Every day, public education gets a little worse, but that's no reason for us to quit using our minds. We shouldn't fail ourselves just because public education has failed us. Then again, if you've stuck with me this far, you probably already know that.