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# Social Anomaly



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Tuesday, April 05, 2005

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## Full circle, after a fashion.

Kelvin De'Marcus Allen, [in today's News & Observer](#), puts his finger on one of the most disturbing things about institutional education in America. Not only are students not learned even the basic facts about the world (much less how to synthesize, hypothesize, reason, or debate ideas), but they are being inculcated into believing in compliance as a virtue, that good students don't have

to ask questions in class, that good students don't daydream, or dream at all for that matter; that they don't speak up or buck trends or do anything, really, besides smile and perform well on tests.

There are rare exceptions to this, of course, within the madness that our government schools inflict upon us. Six years ago (six years!), I spent the best six weeks of my life on the campus of Salem College at the North Carolina Governor's School, a program for rising high-school seniors (I was actually heading into my freshman year at NCSU; the homeschooling had completely weirded up my academic schedule). Of all of the friends of mine that I've had for "years and years," only two really date back further than GS.

It was six weeks long -- only six weeks, the amount of time I have before I leave North Carolina for Fort Collins -- but I still trip over myself, wanting to refer to it as a year. Unusual things happen when you stick four hundred bright, motivated, confused adolescents in the same place for six weeks and encourage them to ask questions. (Incidentally, I became known at GS that summer as the student who asked impertinent and incisive questions, a talent I've tried to hone ever since). I fell in love hard for the first time, questioned my faith and found it real (although not particularly grounded), made friends I still hold on to, developed some mostly-useless mathematics ([I derived all of this and a little more on my own one afternoon](#)), read voraciously, breathed deeply, and shattered a few illusions, too.

A friend from GS and I were discussing the other day what made that situation so unique -- what unique combination of ingredients came together to form an environment that both of us still long to recreate (despite the fact that we both had incredibly stimulating college careers which put most people's to shame) -- was it the particular age of the students, was it the faculty, was it something in the air or the water? Something there allowed us to come out of our shells of conformity and intellectual comfort and begin questioning things, begin sharing intellectual and emotional insecurity, begin to see how similar and different we really were, begin to understand something about our fellow students. There were unique bonds formed there that almost

transcend description.

One memory sticks out from that entire summer, though. I was in the dining hall, waiting in line, reading... I don't know, something or other, and a friend of mine comes up to me, very excitedly. She hands me a book, points to a spot on the page, says to me "Seth, you have to read this." (To this day, that moment is one of my reference points for personal understanding and relationships -- an articulation of a goal to know someone well enough that you have confidence they will relate deeply to some abstract thing -- a philosophical passage, a piece of music, a work of art).

I don't remember the passage, but it was a selection from one of Kierkegaard's journals -- a passage that communicated profound fear and profound longing, a soul striving deeply and yet somehow at rest.

Maybe it's maturity and maybe it's arrogance, but I've begun to understand that a bit lately. It's the "now, but not yet" of the Christian Kingdom that anticipates a more perfect future while reveling in the work that has already been completed.

Kierkegaard, in his *Fear and Trembling*, describes searching for a "knight of faith," and, paradoxically, anticipates not seeing on his face the "little heterogeneous fractional telegraph message from the infinite" that we might expect from one intimately connected with the mysteries of eternity, but rather anticipates seeing him as being startlingly imminent in his relationship with the world:

In Kierkegaard's own words: "With infinite resignation he has drained the cup of life's profound sadness, he knows the bliss of the infinite, he senses the pain of renouncing everything, the dearest things he possesses in the world, and yet finiteness tastes to him just as good as to one who never knew anything higher, for his continuance in the finite did not bear a trace of the cowed and fearful spirit produced by the process of training; and yet he has this sense of security in enjoying it, as though the finite life were the surest thing of all. And yet, and yet the whole earthly form he exhibits is a new creation by virtue of the absurd. He resigned everything

infinitely, and then he grasped everything again by virtue of the absurd. He constantly makes the movements of infinity, but he does this with such correctness and assurance that he constantly gets the finite out of it, and there is not a second when one has a notion of anything else. It is supposed to be the most difficult task for a dancer to leap into a definite posture in such a way that there is not a second when he is grasping after the posture, but by the leap itself he stands fixed in that posture. Perhaps no dancer can do it -- that is what this knight does. Most people live dejectedly in worldly sorrow and joy; they are the ones who sit along the wall and do not join in the dance. The knights of infinity are dancers and possess elevation. They make the movements upward, and fall down again; and this too is no mean pastime, nor ungraceful to behold. But whenever they fall down they are not able at once to assume the posture, they vacillate an instant, and this vacillation shows that after all they are strangers in the world. This is more or less strikingly evident in proportion to the art they possess, but even the most artistic knights cannot altogether conceal this vacillation. One need not look at them when they are up in the air, but only the instant they touch or have touched the ground -- then one recognizes them. But to be able to fall down in such a way that the same second it looks as if one were standing and walking, to transform the leap of life into a walk, absolutely to express the sublime and the pedestrian -- that only these knights can do -- and this is the one and only prodigy."

Summer, just around the corner, always reminds me of those less and fully self-conscious days at GS when we embraced the paradoxes and found them fully real, when we asked questions and could smile at not coming to final answers.

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- What's your name when you're at home?

-- What's yours?

- When I'm at home?

-- Is it different at home?

posted by Seth @ [2:14 PM](#)

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