

# The Bum's Rush or a Professional Charge?

**M**ark Twain writes, "Soap and education are not as sudden as a massacre, but they are more deadly in the long run." Soap can but education cannot be packed into a suitcase because it hasn't ended; "commencement" means beginning. A continuing process, education isn't blocks of knowledge but linked learning that should be part of you, connecting beyond Chowan. With what more than a bar of soap and a college degree should you re-enter the world? You're glad you use Chowan. Don't you wish everyone did? Not smelling like Pepe le Pew may win entry, may help gain a job, though probably not at the salary envisioned, but it's softsoap to you and to Chowan to think that its degree, any college degree, if viewed only as a ticket, is enough for a fulfilling and secure life. That sheepskin will not keep you warm on a cold night. How can you extend the life of your degree into the degrees of your life? Leave with a professional attitude, demeanor and code. You could do worse than adopt actor Humphrey Bogart's blunt creed: "You're either a professional or you're a bum."

A professional not only has knowledge, skill and assured competence but exemplifies character, dedication and standards in work. Though, unlike his film characters from mean city streets, Bogart lived in a four-story limestone house near Riverside Drive in New York (S. Bogart 20), the son of a prominent doctor and a famous illustrator who attended the prestigious Phillips-Andover Academy, like Mark Twain, he grew up with the Puritan Work Ethic, the notion that work itself is ennobling, that it is of a piece with one's life and, for some, one's relationship to God. As Mark Twain, according to critic Bernard DeVoto, pulled himself back from the verge of insanity by plunging into work after near bankruptcy, the death of his twenty-one-year-old daughter, the discovery of illness in another daughter that later took her life before his, the early death of his beloved younger wife, so Bogart thought that, if only he could work, he could recover from the cancer that killed him in January 1957. Work, he said, is therapy (S. Bogart 169).

Proud to be an actor and dedicated to that profession\* ("I take my work seriously" (S. Bogart 174)), he was not all-work, Bogart averred that the world was "three drinks behind," and a friend said, "The trouble with Bogie is that, after 2 AM, he thinks he IS Humphrey Bogart." But no matter how late he was out, he was always on the set at 5 or 6 AM knowing his lines and ready to work until 6 that night and to rehearse as long as needed (S. Bogart 173). Which part of that statement describes Chowan students Wednesday and Thursday nights and which the mornings after? As authors assert the importance of constantly writing and those in education stress the value of learning for its own sake, Bogart believed in the importance of simply working. His advice to young actors, "Keep working . . . Eventually, it you're any good, somebody will see you" (S. Bogart 169), echoes John Steinbeck's statement: "Eventually I shall be so good that I cannot be ignored. These years are disciplinary for me" (Qtd. by Parini 93), a striking contrast to a high school senior's recent response to a teacher's query that she expects to head a major corporation in five years. Bogart became a film star at 42. Twain was 49 when *Huckleberry Finn* appeared. Orson Welles, declared a genius at 23, declined from there.

You've just received your bachelor's degree! Where are you going? As in a recent "Non Sequitur" cartoon, "Realityland, where an entrance sign reads, "Go to work. Pay taxes. Go back to work" (Wiley N&O). Complementing this sign are a man sitting against a dark wall holding a placard labeled "Laid Off" and a comment by a graduate in last week's paper, "The only thing a diploma guarantees a card-carrying Generation Xer in the 1990s is a job working the deep fryer at Whammy Burger or, in later years, as a greeter at Wal-Mart" (Kernels *Virginian-Pilot*). YOU determine what your diploma means.

Look at your degree and yourself realistically; that parchment reflects you and Chowan. Are you proud of it, of yourself, not just pleased to leave? From now on, you are linked. Part of you became you while you were here; going, you carry part of this college and its people with you. The degree is worth what is put into it and gains worth as efforts continue. Give it meaning in and with your life. Like Jesus' fishes and loaves, education is the meal that keeps giving, but you must participate, or you go hungry. Ralph Waldo Emerson says, "Tis the good reader that makes

the good book." The book is your life; your degree is one foreshadowing page. If education is, as Ambrose Bierce defines, what "discloses to the wise and disguises from the foolish their lack of understanding" (34), then we can all continue learning.

Education engenders integrity (sustaining principles), integration (life and work merged into a whole person), and empathy (regard for others) as guides to better, not trouble-free, lives. Life is tough. Last month Mark Richard told a Chowan audience about becoming a writer that *will* can be as important as talent. Writers more talented may quit as those determined and dedicated remain and attain. While Emily Dickinson argues we can't appreciate "the palm without the Calvary," joy without pain, Twain warns, if we lose our illusions in the strife, we "still exist and compromise, hold your dreams and principles. About deserting them, Bogart says, "It's a hell of a guy who bets against his own principles" (S. Bogart 142). If so, who, then, ARE you? Approaching all with integrity formed of yourself and what you have learned, you won't betray yourself or your degree. Integrity begets integration, as principles of life and work become one; seeking understanding of this oneness, as education impels you, begets empathy for others met on the way. If, as Woody Allen says, eighty percent of life is showing up (Cited by S. Bogart 172), doing after arriving is equally important. Even though, like Kafka's Hunger Artist, none but the artist knows, the professional reaches highest every performance. Aspire but don't fall in a manhole. As Bogart was advised by an actor who was shorter than he appeared on stage, "Just think tall" (S. Bogart 166-167). Richard describes writing as akin to holy mission. Education and work can be too. Santiago in *The Old Man and the Sea*, who thinks Joe DiMaggio the epitome of the best at what he does, strives to be the best fisherman he can be because what he does is what he is, his life. He is a professional. Suffering is part of his lot, but so is satisfaction.

From birth to death are both pleasure and suffering, struggle and reward; no one escapes hurt. College grants respite from some pain, leads to unexpected pleasures, and offers not final answers or escape from stress but a nurtured intellect and maturity to help cope with life, the unending quest for answers that lead to more questions. You came as an adult four years ago, for four years paradoxically extended childhood, shielded somewhat from adult responsibilities, and now face them as you, not unlike Adam and Eve, armed with gained insights and knowledge, enter that unmapped and not always friendly world east of Eden. Of THOSE new-born adult children, Mark Twain notes that, though the main disadvantage THEY escaped was teething, we owe Adam and Eve a great debt of gratitude for they lost us "the 'blessing' of idleness and won for us the 'curse' of labor." Pangloss in Voltaire's *Candide* says people were put in the Garden of Eden to work, proving we were not bored for rest (1010); another character declares, ". . . work keeps away three great evils: boredom, vice and need" (100), another that "it is the only way to make life endurable" (101). Bogart adds a positive reason: ". . . learn your trade . . . confidence comes from knowing the ropes" (S. Bogart 171).

*Candide* tells us to tend our individual gardens. Make yours grow; as you care well for it, care as well for others; and you will prosper. Good luck!



DR. JOHN DAVIS, Associate Professor of English, Department of Languages and Literature, delivered one of the commencement addresses.

Popular professor selected to present one of the graduation addresses

"The degree is worth what is put into it and gains worth as efforts continue. Give it meaning in and with your life."

The procession approaches McDowell Columns by the center walk.

