

Midnight study oil flickers at UNL

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by Nancy Stohs

As an ardent perfectionist, constantly imposing above-average goals upon myself, it was only natural I should grow to expect the same standards in return from the outside world. That this naivety made for frequent let-downs was natural, too, and a price I was usually prepared to pay. I wasn't prepared, however, for how high that price could sometimes go!

The idea of college, for instance, had evoked certain associations since childhood. Associations like studying, intense competition, books, grades, intellectual and cultural development, self-sacrifice and other stereotyped conjurings. In fact, the idea of Abraham Lincoln walking 20 miles daily to class, or the 19th century Harvard law student "burning the midnight oil" was not nostalgia to me—but after all, what every college student was like!

So—with unspoiled visions of an academic paradise awaiting me, I arrived a UNL freshman. And the great earthquake arrived soon afterward. "Study? Who studies?"

I'd met the girl in the elevator that first day. She looked nice enough. "All I wanted was advice on where to study, not a smart remark," I glared. Little did I know that her remark was only mildly indicative of a general negative attitude on campus toward studying, an attitude that was also subtly contagious.

I couldn't even make a new acquaintance, for example, without such concepts creeping deviously into my mind. Take, for instance, the classic greeting "Hi-I'm-so-and-so-What's-your-name-What-class-are-you-in-Where-are-you-from-and-What's-your-major?". Always believing that honesty is the best policy, I answer, "Journalism and

history, with a triple minor in psychology, English and philosophy." A cold, blank stare. My honesty that day was the worst possible policy.

"Wow—you're kidding," my inquirer remarked. "That's really hard stuff. I mean, won't you hate all that studying?"

At first, of course, I politely protested: "Oh, no, I chose those fields on my own. I mean, I've always loved to write, and—" Another blank stare—I hadn't reached her.

Next time I found I had inserted a light tone of embarrassment into my answer. And soon enough . . . "Oh, but that's just what it is now. I may end up changing it yet . . ." Well, considering I'd only had 12 years of schooling to decide what I wanted from life and that my present schedule included freshman requirements only, that does seem a rather hasty conclusion for one's academic future.

From then on, my original expectations crumbled quickly. And looking back, I can see how ironic the whole situation was. Here I was,

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attending a state university where 20,000 students who dished out millions of hard-earned dollars in tuition for a good education, wouldn't even utter the word "studying," except in contempt, dismay, or sympathy. I give three illustrations.

The first: "Dont study too hard!" is the most frequent campus counterpart for "good-bye." Generally it comes after those rare moments



when someone asks: "What are you doing tonight?" and one has the courage to admit the raw truth—STUDYING. The implication, of course, is that there is something inherently dangerous about the act of studying. Perhaps it's like swallowing aspirin, that after so much dosage, the subject will drop over dead at his desk.

The second: "Bookin' again tonight?" (this one a greeting) and its obvious implication, "Gosh, you study a lot. Is there something wrong with you?" As if to see a person one night with a book in his hand is enough, but two night, and in a row is outrageous!

One instantly feels as if he should apologize. He replies: "Well, only a little," or "Yeah, I've got to look impressive, anyway."

On the surface, I concede, it is just another silly game of small talk or meaningless conditioned responses. But its effects are large.

When a person finally does sit down to study, what does he invariably feel? Relief? Intellectual stimulation? Self-satisfaction? No. Guilt is what he feels. An overwhelming sense of guilt that he is "studying too hard" and denying himself the good times in life that everyone needs. So, he closes his book and calls up his friends who, incidentally, are beginning to feel guilty themselves. And the weaker person, to avoid such a feeling, soon finds himself making up excuses not to study, somewhat similar to the Kentucky Fried Chicken lady who refuses to cook because of an ingrown toenail. Like I say, it's subtly contagious.

Finally, the pre-test remarks. One of the biggest mistakes one can make is to mention to everyone else when he has a test. For immediately he is flooded with condolences like: "Oh, you poor girl" or "Oh, you do? Gooooood luck" or "You're kidding—calculus? I'd be terrified!" (After, of course, the usual series of instructions the night before on how not to study too hard.)

The student remembers vaguely the 10 hours he stayed up to study, that he had memorized the test material frontwards and backwards, and that he loves to take tests but conformity says he should be terrified. And by test time, that's all he can remember.

Sometimes I get a faint urge to scream at the top of my lungs: "But I like to study! I love school!" But to do so would be social suicide. For if one likes to study, he is obviously a non-conformist, and therefore anti-social. So, I continue to play dummy to the status quo and secretly

hoping that someday my shining white knight will ride by and say: "I hope you get a lot done tonight!" or "I hope you find your studying worthwhile and interesting!"

But the prevalent anti-academic attitude can be seen in the typical student's actions, as well as his words.

Again to be blunt, it's as if every one of the 20,000 students on campus forces himself to suffer through the entire week, just so he can make up for it on the weekends with parties, booze and sleep. In fact, there is even the curious ritual at the end of each week known as the "FAC," translated by the natives as "Friday Afternoon Club." An "FAC" is a party typically accompanied by several kegs of beer and designed to help one recover from the dreadful, unbearable events of the week, such as tests and papers. Of course, no one mentions the alcoholism from which one may have to recover someday. But, no matter, everyone does it (as seems to be the code of the college student) and so one might as well go along.

But as if some can't even wait for the weekends, Thursday night has been unofficially set aside as "bar night," and young men and women rush to their favorite campus tavern for a little song-singing, a little laughing and much guzzling. Even those with tests the next morning manage to make it out for a short, two or three-hour "study break" with the gang.

I tried them all. Exactly once. So what did I finally do?

Well, as they say: "live and learn." Figuring I'd lived more than my share already that semester, I decided it was time I tried a little learning. Yes, I committed the cardinal sin, I non-conformed.

And that's why I am here now, staying home to study, on a Saturday night, no less, proudly admitting it. I politely ask my screaming neighbors to hold it down, to look busy when a friend drops by and above all, enjoying every minute of it.

And in confessing my excommunication from the human race to various acquaintances, I've found that I am by no means the only one on campus who does such harebrained things. Even the golden-voiced conspirators in the dorm halls apparently pull off fairly good grades when no one else is looking. An academic paradise it may not be, I finally concluded, but "burning the midnight oil" still exists in its own right at UNL. It's just a bit harder to get it.

