

# What's the purpose?

## GRE test succeeds only in torturing students

I've suspected for a long time that part of the purpose of a university education is to gradually increase the students' resistance to diverse forms of torture.

I've endured a 5-credit-hour economics class, taught by a man who looked as though he'd rather be kicking the students than teaching them. I've taken tests written by semi-literate graduate students, and worse ones written by tenured professors.

I've put up with a biannual round of financial aid catastrophes, most of which have been caused by stupidity other than my own. I've seen tuition increases come and come again. I have persevered, and I have endured, much longer than most reasonable people would.

But this time I've had it. They've really gone too far. I took the GRE this weekend, and it was truly cruel and unusual. I blame it on the bureaucrats, if only because I despise their kind, and they make a useful scapegoat for all sorts of horrors.

It all started with some magnanimous bureaucrat over at the financial aid office. It (the bureaucrat) revoked all of my federal financial aid this year because I'm getting a dual degree. As near as I could make out from the mass of forms and rubber-stamped letters, the fact that I am graduating with two degrees means that I am no longer making satisfactory progress toward completion of the first one.

Anyway, this bureaucrat was the catalyst. In my newfound poverty, I qualified for a GRE fee waiver.

What the hell, I told myself—it's free. And one of these days I might want to go to graduate school. So I filled out the little bubble sheets to register for the exam, slapped a 2x2 mug shot of myself on the admission ticket and showed up at the allotted time, after a torrid one-night stand with a GRE prep book and a sample test.

I was ushered into a room with an unnaturally cheerful proctor and a bunch of sleepy students. The room was cold. The proctor told us that the



**Jennifer Mapes**

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room would get colder as the day progressed, and that there was nothing they could do about it. To add to the discomfort, the chairs in the room were of a diabolical design. They had a spoon-like profile and were made of a slick plastic.

I was not prepared for the discomfort, but I was well-prepared for at least one aspect of the test, and that was the probable outcome. Past experience has assured me that on any standardized test, I will do reasonably well on the verbal sections, not too bad with the analytical sections, and that I will inevitably embarrass myself with the math.

The first section was math. I knew it would make me feel like an idiot. I muddled through as best I could, thinking that the last time I felt comfortable with a math problem was back when Sesame Street taught me to count to 10 in Spanish.

The next section went under the heading of "analytical." I attacked the first few problems with an earnest

desire to figure them out. But my analytical skills are notoriously erratic, and I was soon putting more energy into an analysis of the possible relevance of these problems to anything I might attempt to do in my lifetime.

An example: Captain Doh must plant three patches of garden with six crops. Beans can't be planted next to corn, and if the maple tree is to the right, then the daffodils should be facing the house. The Captain is very tall, and he sneezed three times while planting tomatoes. Which of the following must happen before the Captain kills his chickens?

- a) Hillary Rodham Clinton's hairstyle must change.
- b) The corn must be planted in Central Asia.
- c) The author feels that most indigent cultures have been abducted by aliens.
- d) Purple.
- e) It cannot be determined from the information given.

I used answer "e" a lot. Technically, it's correct.

Even the verbal sections gave me trouble on this test. I knew what the words meant. But the passages used to test my reading comprehension were so dense, dull, and badly written that even the most dedicated scholar would lapse into a coma by the third sentence.

At the end of the day, I was exhausted and indignant. My head hurt, and my eyes wouldn't focus.

The tests are written by dim-bulb bureaucrats whose neckties have been cutting off oxygen supply to their brains for decades. The test was excruciatingly long and given under extremely uncomfortable conditions.

I think I failed the exam. At the very least, I failed to see what it could possibly have to do with my chances for succeeding in graduate school.

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# Media turn sinner to saint since death

**Arianna Huffington**

*"A statesman is a dead politician, the saying goes, and we see this tendency to vilify in life and glorify in death fully demonstrated in the case of Ron Brown."*

"a magnificent life force," "an inspirational leader," "a renaissance man of politics," and a man who "could accomplish anything because he didn't believe he couldn't do it."

But then, even Richard Nixon got an eulogy from President Clinton.

Would it not transform our public discourse and the coverage of public figures while they are alive if even as we raise legitimate questions about their conduct, we also acknowledge their qualities and contributions? Could we not praise what is praiseworthy at the same time investigate what needs to be investigated and condemn what needs to be condemned?

This may be too much to ask of political opponents. But what about those covering our leaders? The Wall Street Journal, which had been scathing in successive editorials about Ron Brown, acknowledged after his death that "one had to admire his evident, steady success..." The man the Journal had described as "the Beltway wheeler-dealer" was now being lauded as "skilled, articulate... a personal force... a player." Wasn't he all those things even as he was a Beltway wheeler-dealer?

But the effect of every media feeding frenzy is to magnify the transgression until it eclipses everything else — until nothing else, and especially nothing good, can be seen.

Maybe the solution is to have an obituary writer play a part in every political scandal story. Is the scandal so enormous that it eliminates everything positive, or can there at least be a sidebar about the rest of the person's life?

If Thornton Wilder set out to write the stories of the 35 men and women who died on the Dubrovnik mountainside, they would be fully human stories — with the light and the shadow sides showing, and no doubt some flaws and imperfections that would not be included in the eulogies.

Isn't it time we grew up and recognized that our public figures, like the rest of us, are not hewn from a single block?

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In his masterful novel "The Bridge of San Luis Rey," Thornton Wilder traced the lives of the five people who, on Friday noon, July 20, 1714, converged on the bridge between Lima and Cuzco at the precise moment it collapsed and flung them to their death in the gulf below.

"Why did this happen to those five?" asks Brother Juniper in Wilder's novel. "If there were any plan in the universe at all, if there were any pattern in human life, surely it could be discovered mysteriously latent in those lives so suddenly cut off. Either we live by accident and die by accident, or we live by plan and die by plan."

On Wednesday morning, April 3, 1996, 35 lives — 35 histories — converged at Tuzla for a journey that would end in twisted wreckage scattered along a Dubrovnik mountainside.

The answer to the question "Why did this happen to them?" — both on the bridge in Peru and on the mountainside in Croatia — will continue to elude us. But if we believe there is an answer and that we are not living in a random, indifferent universe, a new dimension of significance is added to our lives, our public lives and even the way we treat our public figures.

The tragedy has thrust this new dimension, however fleetingly, into our normally two-dimensional national conversation, which tends to reduce public figures to caricatures.

At the moment, death is the great divider when it comes to how we cover people in public life. A statesman is a dead politician, the saying goes, and we see this tendency to vilify in life and glorify in death fully demonstrated in the case of Ron Brown.

Only months before Brown died, The New York Times had called on the president "to ease the commerce secretary back into the private sector." Al Hunt had pronounced him, in the Wall Street Journal, "unable to distinguish between public service and private gain." Eleanor Clift had predicted his imminent resignation on "The McLaughlin Group." And Michael Duffy had ominously proclaimed in Time that "Brown's days are beginning to feel numbered."

And these were his friends — and neutral observers in the press.

As for his enemies, they fully expected his indictment before the year's end for a host of conflict-of-interest and ethical violations, following the Justice Department's investigation into allegations of financial misconduct.

Then, in a blinding flash on the Dubrovnik mountainside, the sinner turned into a saint and the denunciations into hosannas.

In the days since his tragic death, Ron Brown has been extolled by friend and foe alike as

# Neat Legislature

## Nebraska senators listen to public opinion

I guess it was a pretty important year in the Nebraska Legislature.

Everyone's talking about it — breathing a sigh of relief that they finally took some time to figure out that nasty property tax problem.

Oh yeah, and they raised the speed limit too.

After spending almost every day of the past three months at the State Capitol as the Daily Nebraskan's Legislature beat reporter — I'll let you in on a little secret. I really don't know what the hell a property tax is.

Still, I did my research. Reading committee report after committee report trying to piece it all together — toward the end of the session, I finally started to sort of get it.

But I still think all I really need to know about taxes in my life right now is that a \$2.99 Whopper Value meal costs \$3.18.

And considering more than one state senator came up to me over the last 12 weeks and said they didn't really understand what was going on with the issue either, I don't feel so bad.

Yeah, yeah, passing the property tax relief package was an important step for the Legislature to take. It will affect a whole bunch of people in a whole bunch of ways. I'm just not sure exactly who and exactly how.

You and I both know that you didn't read a single story with the cute little "Legislature '96" bug unless the words "speed limit," "brewpub," "abortion," "same sex marriages" or "cornhusker" appeared in the headlines.

Those are issues that were before the Legislature this session that will have you and a friend talking during calculus — not how high the Malcolm school district's property-tax levy would be.



**Ted Taylor**

*"... passing the property tax relief package ... will affect a whole bunch of people in a whole bunch of ways. I'm just not sure exactly who and exactly how."*

Those issues, and forgive me for being so bland, made the 1996 session as "neat" as it was. Neat for a college student and a young person in general.

(There will be plenty of armchair quarterback reviews of the 60-day session, but I guarantee you won't see the word "neat" in any of them.)

I say neat because in short time, we all will be able to make the trip home a little faster, thanks to the higher speed limit; buy really cool license plates that will show everyone our "Husker Spirit," thanks to the spirit plate bill; and possibly be able to drink Whooping Wheat beer in the comforts of our own home, thanks to ... you guessed it ... the brewpub bill.

Those are the neat things you and I will probably remember the most about the 1996 session.

But the session will also be remembered for two bills that didn't get very far, but far enough to get people talking — and protesting — about possible state laws.

I know I will never forget the committee hearings on proposed legislation that would ban abortions in the state and another that would require the state to recognize a marriage of two people who are in love — but happen to be of the same sex.

Neither of those bills made it to the first round of floor debate, and they probably never will.

Those two controversial bills may not have had the same continuous media coverage as the speed limit and property tax bills, but the small amount of time they were in the spotlight was more than enough to implant an opinion in every citizen (ie: student) in the state.

Which only goes to enhance my earlier description of the 1996 session: Neat.

Neat to me because while I'm speeding down I-80 in my car with the cool Cornhusker spirit plates and a keg of Whooping Wheat in the back seat, I can actually carry on a conversation about the Nebraska Legislature.

Young people should take heed that the 1996 Legislative session was about much more than property taxes, the state budget or even the speed limit.

Whether they meant to or not, some senators finally turned the Unicameral into a sounding board for public opinion rather than a factory churning out the same old generic policies.

And that's pretty neat.

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