

THE ORGANIZATION KID

*The young men and women of America's future elite
work their laptops to the bone, rarely question authority, and happily accept
their positions at the top of the heap as part of the natural order of life*

BY DAVID BROOKS

Illustrations by Tim O'Brien

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A few months ago I went to Princeton University to see what the young people who are going to be running our country in a few decades are like. Faculty members gave me the names of a few dozen articulate students, and I sent them e-mails, inviting them out to lunch or dinner in small groups. I would go to sleep in my hotel room at around midnight each night, and when I awoke, my mailbox would be full of replies—sent at 1:15 A.M., 2:59 A.M., 3:23 A.M.

In our conversations I would ask the students when they got around to sleeping. One senior told me that she went to bed around two and woke up each morning at seven; she could afford that much rest because she had learned to supplement her full day of work by studying in her sleep. As she was falling asleep she would recite a math problem or a paper topic to herself; she would then sometimes dream about it, and when she woke up, the problem might be solved. I asked several students to describe their daily schedules, and their replies sounded like a session of Future Workaholics of America: crew practice at dawn, classes in the morning, resident-adviser duty, lunch, study groups, classes in the afternoon, tutoring disadvantaged kids in Trenton, a cappella practice, dinner, study, science lab, prayer session, hit the StairMaster, study a few hours more. One young man told me that he had to schedule appointment times for chatting with his friends. I mentioned this to other groups, and usually one or two people would volunteer that they did the same thing. "I just had an appointment with my best friend at seven this morning," one woman said. "Or else you lose touch."

There are a lot of things these future leaders no longer have time for. I was on campus at the height of the election season, and I saw not even one Bush or Gore poster. I asked around about this and was told that most students have no time to read newspapers, follow national politics, or get involved in crusades. One senior told me she had subscribed to *The New York Times* once, but the papers had just piled up unread in her dorm room. "It's a basic question

of hours in the day," a student journalist told me. "People are too busy to get involved in larger issues. When I think of all that I have to keep up with, I'm relieved there are no bigger compelling causes." Even the biological necessities get squeezed out. I was amazed to learn how little dating goes on. Students go out in groups, and there is certainly a fair bit of partying on campus, but as one told me, "People don't have time or energy to put into real relationships." Sometimes they'll have close friendships and "friendships with privileges" (meaning with sex), but often they don't get serious until they are a few years out of college and meet again at a reunion—after their careers are on track and they can begin to spare the time.

I went to lunch with one young man in a student dining room that by 1:10 had emptied out, as students hustled back to the library and their classes. I mentioned that when I went to college, in the late 1970s and early 1980s, we often spent two or three hours around the table, shooting the breeze and arguing about things. He admitted that there was little discussion about intellectual matters outside class. "Most students don't like that that's the case," he told me, "but it is the case." So he and a bunch of his friends had formed a discussion group called Paidea, which meets regularly with a faculty guest to talk about such topics as millennialism, postmodernism, and Byzantine music. If discussion can be scheduled, it can be done.

The students were lively conversationalists on just about any topic—except moral argument and character-building, about which more below. But when I asked a group of them if they ever felt like workaholics, their faces lit up and they all started talking at once. One, a student-government officer, said, "Sometimes we feel like we're just tools for processing information. That's what we call ourselves—power tools. And we call these our tool bags." He held up his satchel. The other students laughed, and one exclaimed, "You're giving away all our secrets."

But nowhere did I find any real unhappiness with this

state of affairs; nowhere did I find anybody who seriously considered living any other way. These super-accomplished kids aren't working so hard because they are compelled to. They are facing, it still appears, the sweetest job market in the nation's history. Investment banks flood the campus looking for hires. Princeton also offers a multitude of post-graduation service jobs in places like China and Africa. Everyone I spoke to felt confident that he or she could get a good job after graduation. Nor do these students seem driven by some Puritan work ethic deep in their cultural memory. It's not the stick that drives them on, it's the carrot. Opportunity lures them. And at a place like Princeton, in a rich information-age country like America, promises of enjoyable work abound—at least for people as smart and ambitious as these. "I want to be this busy," one young woman insisted, after she had described a daily schedule that would count as slave-driving if it were imposed on anyone.

The best overall description of the students' ethos came from a professor in the politics department and at the Woodrow Wilson School of Public and International Affairs, Jeffrey Herbst. "They are professional students," he said. "I don't say that pejoratively. Their profession for these four years is to be a student."

That doesn't mean that these leaders-in-training are money-mad (though they are certainly career-conscious). It means they are goal-oriented. An activity—whether it is studying, hitting the treadmill, drama group, community service, or one of the student groups they found and join

in great numbers—is rarely an end in itself. It is a means for self-improvement, résumé-building, and enrichment. College is just one step on the continual stairway of advancement, and they are always aware that they must get to the next step (law school, medical school, whatever) so that they can progress up the steps after that.

One day I went to lunch with Fred Hargadon, who has been the dean of admissions at Princeton for thirteen years and was the dean of admissions at Stanford before that. Like all the administrators and faculty members I spoke with, Hargadon loves these students, and he is extraordinarily grateful for the opportunity to be around them. "I would trust these kids with my life," he told me. But he, like almost all the other older people I talked to, is a little dis-

quieted by the achievement ethos and the calm acceptance of established order that prevails among elite students today. Hargadon said he had been struck by a 1966 booklet called "College Admissions and the Public Interest," written by a retired MIT admissions director named Brainerd Alden Thresher. Thresher made a distinction between students who come to campus in a "poetic" frame of mind and those who come in a "prudential" frame of mind. "Certainly more kids are entering in a prudential frame of mind," Hargadon said. "Most kids see their education as a means to an end."

They're not trying to buck the system; they're trying to climb it, and they are streamlined for ascent. Hence they are not a disputatious group. I often heard at Princeton a

verbal tic to be found in model young people these days: if someone is about to disagree with someone else in a group, he or she will apologize beforehand, and will couch the disagreement in the most civil, non-confrontational terms available. These students are also extremely respectful of authority, treating their professors as one might treat a CEO or a division head at a company meeting.

"Undergrads somehow got this ethos that the faculty is sacrosanct," Dave Wilkinson, a professor of physics, told me. "You don't mess with the faculty. I cannot get the students to call me by my first name." Aaron Friedberg, who teaches international relations, said, "It's very rare to get a student to challenge anything or to take a position that's counter to what the professor says." Robert Wuthnow, a sociologist, lamented, "They are disconcert-

ingly comfortable with authority. That's the most common complaint the faculty has of Princeton students. They're eager to please, eager to jump through whatever hoops the faculty puts in front of them, eager to conform."

For the generation of runners of things which came to power in the Clinton years, at least a modest degree of participation in college-years protest was very nearly mandatory. The new elite does not protest. Young achievers vaguely know that they are supposed to feel guilty about not marching in the street for some cause. But they don't seem to feel guilty. When the controversial ethicist Peter Singer was hired by Princeton, there were protests over his views on euthanasia. But it was mostly outsiders who protested, not students. Two years ago the administration outlawed the



Nude Olympics, a raucous school tradition. Many of the students were upset, but not enough to protest. "It wasn't rational to buck authority once you found out what the penalties were," one student journalist told me. "The university said they would suspend you from school for a year." A prudential ethos indeed.

Part of this is just Princeton. It has always been the preppiest of the Ivy League schools. It has earned a reputation for sending more graduates into consulting and investment banking than into academia or the arts. But this is also what life is like at other competitive universities today. In the months since I spoke with the Princeton students, I've been at several other top schools. Students, faculty members, and administrators at those places describe a culture that is very similar to the one I found at Princeton. This culture does not absolutely reflect or inform the lives and values of young Americans as a whole, but it does reflect and inform the lives and values of an important subset of this generation: the meritocratic elite. It is this elite that I am primarily reporting on in this article, rather than the whole range of young people across the demographic or SAT spectrum. It should also be said, though, that the young elite are not entirely unlike the other young; they are the logical extreme of America's increasingly efficient and demanding sorting-out process, which uses a complex set of incentives and conditions to channel and shape and rank our children throughout their young lives.

It will surprise no one who has kids to discover that social-science statistics support that description. Not just Princetonians lead a frenetic, tightly packed existence. Kids of all stripes lead lives that are structured, supervised, and stuffed with enrichment. Time-analysis studies done at the University of Michigan's Institute for Social Research provide the best picture of the trend: From 1981 to 1997 the amount of time that children aged three to twelve spent playing indoors declined by 16 percent. The amount of time spent watching TV declined by 23 percent. Meanwhile, the amount of time spent studying increased by 20 percent and the amount of time spent doing organized sports increased by 27 percent. Drive around your neighborhood. Remember all those parks that used to have open fields? They have been carved up into neatly trimmed soccer and baseball fields crowded with parents in folding chairs who are watching their kids perform. In 1981 the association U.S. Youth Soccer had 811,000 registered players. By 1998 it had nearly three million.

Today's elite kids are likely to spend their afternoons and weekends shuttling from one skill-enhancing activity to

the next. By the time they reach college, they take this sort of pace for granted, sometimes at a cost. In 1985 only 18 percent of college freshmen told the annual University of California at Los Angeles freshman norms survey that they felt "overwhelmed." Now 28 percent of college freshmen say they feel that way.

But in general they are happy with their lot. Neil Howe and William Strauss surveyed young people for their book *Millennials Rising* (2000); they found America's young to be generally a hardworking, cheerful, earnest, and deferential group. Howe and Strauss listed their respondents' traits, which accord pretty well with what I found at Princeton: "They're optimists ... They're cooperative team players ... They accept authority ... They're rule followers." The authors paint a picture of incredibly wholesome youths who will correct the narcissism and nihilism of their Boomer parents.

Not only at Princeton but also in the rest of the country young people today are more likely to defer to and admire authority figures. Responding to a 1997 Gallup survey, 96 percent of teenagers said they got along with their parents, and 82 percent described their home life as "wonderful" or "good." Roughly three out of four said they shared their parents' general values. When asked by Roper Starch Worldwide in 1998 to rank

**They're so clean, inside and out.
Baby Boomers may be tempted to
utter a little prayer of gratitude:
Thank God our kids aren't the
royal pains in the ass that we were.**

the major problems facing America today, students aged twelve to nineteen most frequently named as their top five concerns selfishness, people who don't respect law and the authorities, wrongdoing by politicians, lack of parental discipline, and courts that care too much about criminals' rights. It is impossible to imagine teenagers a few decades ago calling for stricter parental discipline and more respect for authority. In 1974 a majority of teenagers reported that they could not "comfortably approach their parents with personal matters of concern." Forty percent believed they would be "better off not living with their parents."

Walk through any mall in America. Browse through the racks at Old Navy and Abercrombie & Fitch and the Gap. The colors are bright and chipper. The sales staff is peppy. The look is vaguely retro—upbeat 1962 pre-assassination innocence. The Gap's television ads don't show edgy individualists; they show perky conformists, a bunch of happy kids all wearing the same clothes and all swing-dancing the same moves.

In short, at the top of the meritocratic ladder we have in America a generation of students who are extraordinarily bright, morally earnest, and incredibly industrious. They like to study and socialize in groups. They create and join organizations with great enthusiasm. They are responsible,

safety-conscious, and mature. They feel no compelling need to rebel—not even a hint of one. They not only defer to authority; they admire it. “Alienation” is a word one almost never hears from them. They regard the universe as beneficent, orderly, and meaningful. At the schools and colleges where the next leadership class is being bred, one finds not angry revolutionaries, despondent slackers, or dark cynics but the Organization Kid.

THE ORIGINS OF THE ORGANIZATION KID

To understand any generation, or even the elite segment of any generation, we have to keep reminding ourselves when it was born and what it has experienced. Most of today’s college students were born from 1979 to 1982. That means they were under ten years old when the Berlin Wall fell, and so have no real firsthand knowledge of global conflict or Cold War anxieties about nuclear war. The only major American armed conflict they remember is Desert Storm, a high-tech cakewalk. Moreover, they have never known anything but incredible prosperity: low unemployment and low inflation are the normal condition; crime rates are always falling; the stock market rises. If your experience consisted entirely of being privileged, pampered, and recurrently rewarded in the greatest period of wealth creation in human history, you’d be upbeat too. You’d defer to authority. You’d think that the universe is benign and human nature is fundamentally wonderful.

But the outlook of these young people can’t be explained by economics and global events alone. It must also have something to do with the way they were raised. As the University of Michigan time-analysis data show, this is a group whose members have spent the bulk of their lives in structured, adult-organized activities. They are the most honed and supervised generation in human history. If they are group-oriented, deferential to authority, and achievement-obsessed, it is because we achievement-besotted adults have trained them to be. We have devoted our prodigious energies to imposing a sort of order and responsibility on our kids’ lives that we never experienced ourselves. The kids have looked upon this order and have decided that it’s good.

Childhood is indeed a journey, a series of stations on the way to adulthood. Snapshots of a few of the stations of contemporary childhood will show how the Organization Kid came to be.

Infancy. We used to think that children were shaped by God, or by dark oedipal impulses, but as the twenty-first century dawns, we know better. We know that children are shaped by the interaction of their DNA and their environment. In the books and magazines that cater to parents, children are described neither as mysterious creatures, driven by the sort of subterranean passions with which

Freud concerned himself, nor as divine innocents. Instead biology has displaced psychology and theology: there is a scientifically discernible structure to human life, and it is inscribed in our genetic code. If something goes wrong, it is because there was a genetic flaw, or because the synapses were not cultivated properly. In either case we may be able to supply a remedy.

“If you’re a new parent,” begins the introductory essay in a *Newsweek* special issue on children, “your baby had the good fortune to be born at a truly remarkable moment in human history, when science has given us extraordinary new tools for understanding what kids need to thrive physically, emotionally and intellectually.” The issue is a survey of recent literature and offers an encapsulation of the ethos of contemporary child-rearing. The essay continues,

At the dawn of the 21st century, we no longer have to guess about the best way to raise a child ... researchers studying cognitive development have used sophisticated imaging technology to track the constant interplay of genetics and environment. Though they still have much to learn, they have laid down the basic building blocks of a comprehensive understanding of how experiences shape growth. It turns out to be something like the way a sculptor chips away at a block of marble; you have to work with what you’ve got, but skill, patience and persistence make all the difference.

Your child is the most important extra-credit arts project you will ever undertake. The *Newsweek* special issue provides information about the creature parents will be sculpting. It describes the cerebellum, the basal ganglia, and the motor cortex; accompanying diagrams show the locations of different brain activities. There are intimidating warnings: for example, although each baby develops trillions of synapses, about half of them have died off by adulthood. Even before birth children need stimulation and feedback if they are to build a strong web of brain connections. The pressure is on.

If you walk through the parenting section of your local bookstore, you’ll find such titles as *Building Healthy Minds*, *Baby Minds: Brain-Building Games Your Baby Will Love*, and *Right From Birth: Building Your Child’s Foundation for Life*. If you go to an upscale toy store, in addition to innocent playthings you will find sophisticated development tools designed for fetus and infant cultivation. Even parents who didn’t buy *WombSong Serenades*, a musical collection designed to stimulate babies’ fetal brain activity, can probably still raise a perfect child if they fill the first weeks of his or her life with full doses of Mozart. My local Buy Buy Baby, the infant-oriented megastore, offers at least half a dozen selections, including *Mozart for Babies’ Minds* (featuring the Violin Concerto no. 3), *Mozart Playtime* (with the Minuet in F Major), the *Parents Magazine Classical Music for*

Baby Mozart collection (Serenade no. 13 in G Major), and *Mozart for Toddlers* (Symphony no. 35). Parents just have to choose which one will produce the best synaptic responses in their child's cerebral cortex.

They can continue their baby's mental development with other brain-enhancement products. For example, the Tiny Love Gymini 3-D Activity Gym (a 1996 *Parenting* magazine Toy of the Year) offers high-contrast graphics to stimulate sight and pattern recognition. Car Seat Gallery flash cards can be slipped into clear-plastic pockets to stimulate brain activity during those minivan rides. Babies can move on from there to the Playskool Kick Start Busy Crib Center, which utilizes natural kicking movements to activate music, other sounds, and blinking lights, and the Lamaze Infant Development System, which features a series of devices, including stacking rings, for various phases of infant development.

Slightly older kids can move up to Sesame Street's Elmo Picture Quiz, because it's never too early to work on test-taking skills, and the Fun & Learn Phonics Bus, with interactive animals to help with letter recognition. The Skidoo 'n' Learn Solar System might be next on the curriculum, followed by either Language Little dolls—bilingual dolls that speak English and Spanish, French, Italian, or Mandarin Chinese—or the Growing Smart “laptop computer,” which improves numeric, color, and spatial-recognition skills.

All of the literature is studded with reassurances for parents whose babies are not clearing developmental hurdles ahead of the other infants in the day-care center. Childhood is a journey, not a race, the experts say. That, say the parents of the coming elite, may be fine for future Piggly Wiggly clerks of America. Moms and dads who want the best and the most for their precious children know better. They know they must construct proper environments and experiences if they are going to get the most out of their child's genetic stock. The time for molding that little burbler is now. Accomplishment begins with the first breaths of life.

Elementary School. No one has done a meticulous scientific study of the subject, but my impression is that the big-backpack era began in the mid-1980s. Kids began carrying larger and larger backpacks to school every year; by the early 1990s I saw elementary school students lugging storage containers that were bigger than they were. I'd watch them trooping into the school yard and wonder what would happen to a kid who lost his balance and tipped backward onto his pack. He'd lie there like a stranded beetle, face skyward, arms and legs flailing in the air, unable to flip over again. Would he simply be stuck, pinned to the pavement by the weight of his mathematics texts, until someone came to the rescue?

Perhaps the most important event in ushering in the

big-backpack era was the release of the report *A Nation at Risk*, on April 26, 1983. Commissioned by Terrel Bell, Ronald Reagan's Secretary of Education, the report decried the “rising tide of mediocrity” plaguing American schools and it caused an immediate sensation. The problem, it said, was that schools had become too loose and free-flowing. Students faced a “cafeteria style curriculum” that gave them too many choices. They were graduating from high school having spent much of their time in elective gut classes. They didn't do enough homework. They weren't given enough “rigorous examinations” and standardized tests, nor were they forced to meet stringent college-admissions requirements.

The report represented a rejection of an era that celebrated “natural” education, student-centered diversity, and spontaneity, and that cultivated creativity over discipline and nonconformity over conformity. *A Nation at Risk* bid farewell to all that, and said it was time to reassert authority and re-establish order. Schools needed to get back to basics.

The message took, and the effect has been dramatic. During the 1960s and 1970s schools assigned less and less homework, so that by 1981 the average six-to-eight-year-old was doing only fifty-two minutes of homework a week. By 1997 the amount of homework assigned to the average child of the same age had doubled, to more than two hours a week. Meanwhile, the school day, which had shortened during the sixties and seventies, has steadily lengthened since, as has the school year. Requirements have stiffened. Before 1983 the average school district required one year of math and one year of science for high school graduation. Now the average high school calls for two years of each. The culture of schools has tightened. In the 1970s, rebelling against the rigid desks-in-a-row pedagogy of the 1950s, schools experimented with open campuses and classes without walls. Now the language of education reform has changed, and the emphasis is on testing, accountability, and order.

Especially order: increasingly, and in surprising numbers, kids whose behavior subverts efficient learning are medicated so that they and their classmates can keep pace. The United States produces and uses about 90 percent of the world's Ritalin and its generic equivalents. In 1980 it was estimated that somewhere between 270,000 and 541,000 elementary school students were taking Ritalin. By 1987 around 750,000 were. And the use of the drug didn't really take off until the 1990s. In 1997 around 30,000 pounds were produced—an increase of more than 700 percent over the 1990 production level.

Far from all of that Ritalin goes to elementary school kids, but the Ritalin that does is prescribed most frequently in upper-middle-class suburban districts—where, one suspects, the achievement ethos is strongest. Some physicians believe that 10 percent of all children have the sort of con-

duct disorder—attention-deficit disorder, oppositional defiant disorder—that could be eased with Ritalin or some other drug. It is stunning how quickly we have moved from the idea that children should be given freedom to chart their own learning to a belief that adults have a responsibility to reshape the minds of kids whose behavior deviates from the standard. As Ken Livingston wrote in *The Public Interest* in 1997, “In late twentieth-century America, when it is difficult or inconvenient to change the environment, we don’t think twice about changing the brain of the person who has to live in it.” And as Howe and Strauss wrote in *Millennials Rising*, “Ironically, where young Boomers once turned to drugs to prompt impulses and think outside the box, today they turn to drugs to suppress their kids’ impulses and keep their behavior inside the box ... Nowadays, Dennis the Menace would be on Ritalin, Charlie Brown on Prozac.”

The end result of these shifts in pedagogy and in pharmacology is that schools are much more efficient and productive places, geared more than ever toward projecting children into the stratosphere of success. Authority and accountability have replaced experimentation and flexibility.

Playtime. I suspect that before long, law schools will begin sponsoring courses in the new field of play-date law. A generation ago, of course, children did not have play dates; they just went out and played. But now upscale parents fill their kids’ datebooks with structured play sessions. And they want to make sure not only that the children will be occupied at somebody’s house but also that the activities undertaken will be developmentally appropriate, enriching, and safe. Parental negotiations over what is permissible during these sessions can take on a numbing complexity. Americans being Americans, surely it won’t be long before such negotiations end up in a court of law.

Many of the disputes in these talks revolve around what future lawyers will call VSIs (video-screen issues). Should there be a complete ban on using the computer during play dates, or should kids be restricted to didactic video games, such as the programs that enhance typing skills? What about Nintendo and PlayStation? Other disputes involve homework rituals, anxiety about pets, and

sibling-control measures. But the most-heated talks usually revolve around safety issues.

Will the nanny or parent transporting the children be using a cell phone while driving? Have all the child-safety seats recently been checked by a certified safety-seat professional? Are electrical outlets in the home protected by childproof covers? Do the oven controls have kid guards? Is there a foam bumper pad around the stone fireplace (such as the kind available through the Right Start catalogue)? What about the toilet—has it been lid-locked so that children don’t accidentally fall in and drown? And the yard—has it been aerated to make the ground softer in case of falls? Is there enough soft rubber under the outdoor play equipment?

No candy will be permitted, obviously. Sneaking chocolate into the diet in the form of a chocolate-chip granola bar is dubious. Mini-carrots are usually acceptable, though they can present a choking hazard. Sugar and refined wheat should be avoided for kids with food-related hyperactivity triggers. Most organic vegetables are acceptable.

Other cultures controlled behavior by citing divine commandments. We control behavior by enacting safety rules. And we’ve all noticed that these rules are growing stricter and stricter by the year. Not long ago young kids bounced around in the back seat of the family sedan; nowadays any parent who allowed that would be breaking the law and would be generally viewed as close to a child abuser. Not long ago kids rode bikes unencumbered. Now a mere scooter ride requires body armor, and in many families kids aren’t permitted to ride out of sight of the house.

A few years ago, while researching a magazine article, I visited the camp where I had spent summers as a camper and a counselor from 1969 to 1983. When I was a camper, roughhousing was part of life. Counselors would pound us on our chests and we’d feel privileged to have their attention. Dead arms and Indian belly rubs filled our ample free time. Now the state’s health authorities have tightened the definitions of physical abuse and sexual abuse, so noogies and wedgies and all that pounding are impermissible. Every year a psychotherapist visits the camp to brief the staff on child abuse. When I was a camper, only nonswimmers wore life preservers on the lake. Now everyone does. Then there



were no fences around the beaches. Now the state mandates barriers in front of the swimming areas (although the other two miles of lakefront are still open). Now camp authorities must fill out an accident report after each injury, in case of future litigation, and the director must attend risk-management seminars in the off-season. Staff life, too, is different. Two decades ago staff parties were held every Saturday night, usually with beer. Now those are outlawed: too risky.

Reading magazines published for camp directors, I found that my camp was still on the permissive side. A Florida law requires background checks on all camp counselors. The American Camping Association's magazine is full of safety advice: "For most drills, [tennis] balls should be fed across the net," writes Robert Gamble, the tennis director at a New Hampshire camp, in a typical piece of risk-reduction advice. "This protects the instructor should a camper lose control and overhit."

Presumably, parents in the past cared as much about their kids' safety as parents today do. But they took far fewer precautions than parents today, and exerted far fewer controls over kids' behavior. Perhaps they thought it was important that children learn to take risks in order to develop courage. Or perhaps they thought that getting into scrapes is part of childhood, and that parents have no right to let their own worries dominate their children's growth.

Adolescence. Adolescence is a complicated time, and maybe no single snapshot can sum it up. But reading through some of the best recent literature on the subject—Patricia Hersch's *A Tribe Apart*, Kay Hymowitz's *Ready or Not*, Thomas Hine's *The Rise and Fall of the American Teenager*—one is struck by how many people are grappling in different ways with a common quandary: too much space. At some point in the past sophisticated parents cottoned on to the idea that rebellion and experimentation are part of the natural order of growing up, and that parents of teenagers should therefore give their kids enough freedom and space to explore and define themselves. But these new books and a shelf's worth of foundation reports now assert that kids today do not seem to want as much freedom and space as they have been granted. So the task for parents is to define boundaries for their adolescents, to offer continual guidance and discipline. Two decades ago parents were advised to withdraw from their teens' lives as those teens flew off to adulthood. Now they are advised to serve as chaperones at all-night graduation parties.

The U-turn is dramatic. In 1967 the U.S. Supreme Court heralded the liberationist age with its decision in the Gault case. The Court held that students have the same due-process rights as adults. That decision restricted the ways in which schools could assert paternalistic authority, but it was also a sign of the times. Children and teens should be left free to be themselves. As the legal scholar Martha Mi-

now summarized it in an essay in *From Children to Citizens* (1987), the decision was part of a cultural and "legal march away from the conception of the child as a dependent person." Many high schools in the seventies and eighties adopted open-campus policies. Students had to show up for class, but beyond that they were free to come and go as they pleased; the high school was essentially turned into a college campus. The Emancipation of Minors Act, passed by the California legislature in 1982, enabled teenagers to sign contracts, own property, and keep their earnings. It transformed them into quasi adults.

The prevailing view today couldn't be more different. The 1997 National Longitudinal Study of Adolescent Health emphasized that the most powerful factor in determining the well-being of young people is the presence of parents and adults who are actively engaged in supervising and setting goals for teenagers' lives. A 1993 study, *Talented Teenagers*, found that teens need security and support if they are going to explore. Hersch's highly acclaimed *A Tribe Apart* is an angry rebuke to parents who have given their teens too much space. Hersch writes,

The lives of the kids in this book illustrate in subtle and not so subtle ways the need for adult presence to help them learn the new lessons of growing up. Kids need adults who bear witness to the details of their lives and count them as something. They require the watchful eyes and the community standards that provide greater stability ... The kids in the book who do best are those who have a strong interactive family and a web of relationships and activities that surround them consistently.

So when we survey American childhood today, we see that a quiet revolution has taken place. The Romantics—and the neo-Romantics of the 1960s and 1970s—thought that children were born with an innate wisdom and purity. They were natural beings, as yet uncontaminated by the soul-crushing conventions of adult society. Hence they should be left free to explore, to develop their own creative tendencies, to learn at their own pace. Now, in contrast, children are to be stimulated and honed. Parents shouldn't hesitate to impose their authority. On the contrary, it is now pretty widely believed that the killings at Columbine and similar tragedies teach us that parents have a duty to be highly involved in the lives of their kids.

Today's ramped-up parental authority rests on three pillars: science, safety, and achievement. What we ambitious parents know about the human brain tells us that children need to be placed in stimulating and productive environments if they are going to reach their full potential. What we know about the world tells us that it is a dangerous place: there are pesticides on our fruit, cigarettes in the school yards, rocks near the bike paths, kidnappers in the woods. Children need to be protected. And finally, what we know about life is that sorting by merit begins at birth and

never ends. Books about what to expect in the first year lay out achievement markers starting in the first month, and from then on childhood is one long progression of measurements, from nursery school admissions to SATs. Parents need to be coaching at their child's side.

Imagine being a product of this regimen—one of the kids who thrived in it, the sort who winds up at elite schools. All your life you have been pleasing your elders, performing and enjoying the hundreds of enrichment tasks that dominated your early years. You are a mentor magnet. You spent your formative years excelling in school, sports, and extracurricular activities. And you have been rewarded with a place at a wonderful university filled with smart, successful, and cheerful people like yourself. Wouldn't you be just like the students I found walking around Princeton?

THE MORAL LIFE OF THE ORGANIZATION KID

When students enter college today, they are on familiar ground. After throwing off curfews, dress codes, and dormitory supervision in the 1970s, most colleges are reimposing their authority and reasserting order, just as high schools and families are. Some universities are trying to restrict or eliminate drinking. Many are cracking down on fraternity hazing rites. Others have banned Dionysian rituals such as lascivious costume balls and Princeton's Nude Olympics. University regulations intrude far more into the personal lives of students, and the students seem to approve.

As part of an effort to cajole students into behaving responsibly, many colleges have tried to provide places where they can go to amuse themselves without alcohol or drugs. Princeton has just completed a new student facility in the Frist Campus Center, formerly Palmer Hall, an old science building. On a walk from the library to Frist one may pass Prospect House, formerly the president's residence and now the faculty club, with a sparkling, glass-walled restaurant overlooking beautifully maintained gardens. On the lawns nearby, if the weather is tolerable, a drama group might be rehearsing, and other students might be bent over heavy books or laptops. The students are casual, but they look every bit as clean-cut as students in the early 1960s did, as if the intervening forty years of collegiate scruffiness had never happened. Almost all the men shave every day. Their hair is trim and freshly shampooed. Very few students wear tattoos or have had their bodies pierced—so far as one can see—in unapproved places. Many of the women wear skirts, or sundresses when the weather is warm. "I lived an incredibly ragged life," Kathryn Taylor, class of 1974, now an administrator in alumni affairs, told me of her college days. "It never would have dawned on me to try to look nice. They seem to be much more conscious of apparel."

It was only relatively recently that Princeton went coed, but one wouldn't know it. The male students are modern,

enlightened men, sensitized since the first grade to apologize for their testosterone. The women are assertive and make a show of self-confidence, especially the athletes. Members of the women's soccer team have T-shirts that read YOUNG, WILD AND READY TO SCORE. Posters advertising a weekend's races say CROSS COUNTRY! IT'S EXCITING TO WATCH SEXY WOMEN RUN!—brashness that would be socially unacceptable if the boys tried it.

The Frist Campus Center is a Neo-Gothic structure, built in 1907, that once housed nuclear experiments. Coats of arms are etched in stone on the façade, from which an imposing statue of Benjamin Franklin looks down at visitors. But that is the old Princeton; the building's ground level has been turned into the up-to-date student center, where rows of computer stations allow students to check their e-mail and where modern banalities have been painted on the walls: "Only by deliberating together about moral questions will we find mutual respect and common ground.—Amy Cuttman." "The locusts sang and they were singing for me.—Bob Dylan." "Race matters.—Cornel West." "If I'm not out there training, someone else is.—Lynn Jennings."

Beyond are a billiards room, a set of low chairs where students can read while watching ESPN on a big-screen TV, a kiosk selling Princeton memorabilia, and a convenience store in which you can buy Nantucket Nectars, Arizona green tea with ginseng, raspberry Snapple, and the full array of Gatorade and Powerade, in flavors such as Fierce Melon and Arctic Shatter.

Bulletin boards throughout are festooned with recruiting posters from investment firms. One, from Goldman Sachs, shows a photo of a group of wholesome-looking young people relaxing after a game of lunchtime basketball. The text reads "Wanted: Strategists, Quick Thinkers, Team Players, Achievers." Another, from the business-consulting firm KPMG, shows a picture of a pair of incredibly hip-looking middle-aged people staring warmly into the camera. The text reads "Now that you've made your parents proud, join KPMG and give them something to smile about." It's hard to imagine a recruiting poster of a few decades ago appealing to students' desire to make their parents happy.

Downstairs is a cafeteria with a variety of food stations—pasta, a grill, salads, daily specials. Except that the drinks are not free, it reminded me of the dining hall at Microsoft, in Redmond, Washington. A wall of glass looks out over a lawn. Small groups of happy-looking people—Asian-American kids here, African-American kids there—sit at the tables. They are talking mostly about their workloads, and even their conversational style is polite and slightly formal. "Hello, ladies ..." one young woman calls out to a group of her friends. "How are you?" a young man asks a young woman in greeting. "I'm fine, thanks," she replies. "How are you?"

They're so clean, inside and out. They seem like exactly

the sort of young people we older folks want them to be. Baby Boomers may be tempted to utter a little prayer of gratitude: Thank God our kids aren't the royal pains in the ass that we were to our parents.

But the more I talked to them and observed them, the more I realized that the difference between this and preceding generations is not just a matter of dress and comportment. It's not just that these students work harder, are more neatly groomed, and defer to their teachers more readily. There are more-fundamental differences: they have different mental categories.

It takes a while to realize this, because unlike their predecessors, they don't shout out their differences or declare them in political or social movements. In fact, part of what makes them novel is that they don't think they are new. They don't see themselves as a lost generation or a radical generation or a beatnik generation or even a Reaganite generation. They have relatively little generational consciousness. That's because this generation is for the most part not fighting to emancipate itself from the past.

The most sophisticated people in preceding generations were formed by their struggle to break free from something. The most sophisticated people in this one aren't.

"On or about December 1910 human character changed," Virginia Woolf

famously declared. Gone, she wrote, were the old certainties, the old manners, the deference to nineteenth-century authority. Instead human beings—at least the ones in Woolf's circle—were starting to see the world as full of chaos and discontinuity. Einstein smashed the notion of absolute time and space. Artists from Seurat to Picasso deconstructed visual perceptions. James Joyce's *Ulysses* scrambled the narrative order of the traditional novel. Rebels upended Victorian sexual mores. And later in the century, when the modernists were exhausted, the post-modernists came along to tell us that life is even more disordered and contingent than even Virginia Woolf could have imagined. Words are detachable from their meanings. History has no grand narratives. Everything is just shifting modes of perception, a maelstrom of change and diversity.

For those growing into adulthood during most of the twentieth century, therefore, the backdrop to life was the loss of faith in coherent systems of thought and morality. Sophisticated people knew they were supposed to rebel against authority, reject old certainties, and liberate themselves from hidebound customs and prejudices. Artists rebelled against the stodgy mores of the bourgeoisie. Radicals rebelled against the commercial and capitalist order. Feminists rebelled against the patriarchal family. And in the

latter half of the twentieth century a youth culture emerged, which distilled these themes. Every rock anthem, every fashion statement, every protest gesture, every novel about rebellious youth—from *The Catcher in the Rye* to *On the Road*—carried the same cultural message: It's better to be a nonconformist than a conformist, a creative individualist than a member of a group, a rebel than a traditionalist, a daring adventurer than a safe and responsible striver. "We hope for nonconformists among you," the theologian Paul Tillich preached to college audiences in 1957, "for your sake, for the sake of the nation, and for the sake of humanity."

Today's elite college students don't live in that age of rebellion and alienation. They grew up in a world in which the counterculture and the mainstream culture have merged with, and co-opted, each other. For them, it's natural that one of the top administrators at Princeton has a poster of the Beatles album *Revolver* framed on her office wall. It's natural that hippies work at ad agencies and found organic-ice-cream companies, and that hi-tech entrepreneurs quote Dylan and wear black jeans to work.

For them, it's natural that parents should listen to Led Zeppelin, Jimi Hendrix, and the Doors—just like kids. They don't have the mental barriers that exist between, say, the establishment and rebels, between respectable society and the subversive underground.

For them, all those categories are mushed together. "They work for Save the Children and Merrill Lynch and they don't see a contradiction," says Jeffrey Herbst, the politics professor. Moreover, nothing in their environment suggests that the world is ill constructed or that life is made meaningful only by revolt. There have been no senseless bloodbaths like World War I and Vietnam, no crushing economic depressions, no cycles of assassination and rioting to foment disillusionment. They've mostly known parental protection, prosperity, and peace.

During most of the twentieth century the basic ways of living were called into question, but now those fundamental debates are over, at least among the young elite. Democracy and dictatorship are no longer engaged in an epic struggle; victorious democracy is the beneficent and seemingly natural order. No more fundamental arguments pit capitalism against socialism; capitalism is so triumphant that we barely even contemplate an alternative. Radicals no longer assault the American family and the American home; we accept diverse family patterns but celebrate family and community togetherness. The militant feminists of the 1960s are mostly of a grandmotherly age now. Even theological conflicts have settled down; it's fashionable to be religious so long as one is not aggressively so.

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Unlike their elders, in other words, these young people are not part of an insurrection against inherited order. They are not even part of the conservative reaction against the insurrection. The debates of the Reagan years are as distant as the trial of the Chicago Seven, which is as distant as the Sacco and Vanzetti case. It's not that they reject one side of that culture war, or embrace the other. They've just moved on. As people in northern California would say, they're living in a different place.

The world they live in seems fundamentally just. If you work hard, behave pleasantly, explore your interests, volunteer your time, obey the codes of political correctness, and take the right pills to balance your brain chemistry, you will be rewarded with a wonderful ascent in the social hierarchy. You will get into Princeton and have all sorts of genuinely interesting experiences open to you. You will make a lot of money—but more important, you will be able to improve yourself. You will be a good friend and parent. You will be caring and conscientious. You will learn to value the really important things in life. There is a fundamental order to the universe, and it works. If you play by its rules and defer to its requirements, you will lead a pretty fantastic life.

COMPELLED BY THE KNIGHTLY SPIRIT

One has to go quite far back to find another group of sophisticated students who took for granted the idea that the universe is a just and orderly place—back to a time before World War I, before modernism, before all the chaos and disruption that Virginia Woolf described. To find another age of such equanimity one has to go back to the Edwardian era and the years leading to World War I. Then, too, a generation of elite students accepted the established order and the life paths it laid out for them. Then, too, people had a sense that there was an underlying biological organization to life—though it had to do with Darwin rather than with DNA. Then, too, elite students idealistically committed themselves to community service, to moral and political reform, while feeling aloof from and generally disgusted by professional politics. Then, too, a pretty rigorous set of social mores regulated behavior—though it had to do with the code of the gentleman, rather than with health and safety concerns and political correctness.

Walking around Princeton, I saw the monuments to that earlier elite, and I couldn't help comparing it with the new one we are creating today. The school has buildings and developments named after some of the men who were students in that era—John Foster Dulles, James Forrestal. The old eating clubs are where the characters from F. Scott Fitzgerald's Princeton dined and drank. It is easy to imagine Professor Woodrow Wilson talking and teaching in the Neo-Gothic buildings.

Of course, in obvious ways the students in those days

were very different from the students now. Then they were all male, all white, almost all blue bloods. They were WASP aristocrats, not multicultural meritocrats. Today we congratulate ourselves that our code is so much more enlightened than theirs. We aren't nearly as snobbish as they were, or as anti-Semitic, or as racist, or as sexist. We aren't as closed-minded—or so we tell ourselves.

I've never met anybody who would trade our social order for theirs, who wants to go back to that old Princeton world. And yet ... and yet there are disturbing ghosts around the campus. The old order haunts this one, and whispers that maybe something was lost as well as gained when we sacrificed all for the sake of high achievement, safety, and equal opportunity. In some of the imposing old portraits, for example, I saw a moral gravity and a sense of duty that are missing from the faces of the recent presidents, who look like those friends of your parents who encouraged you to call them by their first names—friendly, unassuming guys in tweed jackets. Those old Princetonians were not professional administrators ministering to professional students. The code of the meritocrat was not their code, and maybe in some ways theirs was the more demanding code. For the most striking contrast between that elite and this one is that its members were relatively unconcerned with academic achievement but went to enormous lengths to instill character. We, on the other hand, place enormous emphasis on achievement but are tongue-tied and hesitant when it comes to what makes for a virtuous life.

The Princeton of that day aimed to take privileged men from their prominent families and toughen them up, teach them a sense of social obligation, based on the code of the gentleman and noblesse oblige. In short, it aimed to instill in them a sense of chivalry.

"You must either discover your duty or else create it and then swear allegiance to its high behests," John Hibben, the president of Princeton, told graduating students in 1915.

Who will prove that the spirit of peace may become the spirit of valor, and assure the solidarity and progress of our nation? Who but the choice men of our land,—the men of exceptional privilege, who by a process of natural selection have passed from one degree of excellence to another in the arduous discipline of mind and character through years of preparation for a life of service ... Centuries ago the knight errant rode forth on the adventure of service to champion the cause of the weak and the wronged wherever they might be found. For him there was no clear call to any definite undertaking, but compelled by the knightly spirit, he resolutely set himself to seek undiscovered duty somewhere beyond the far horizon.

Princeton did have some Bible classes as a means of teaching virtue and character, but one has the sense that

the school didn't really believe these things could be taught in the classroom. Documents from those days reveal a much denser social fabric at Princeton, and it was in the social sphere that the really important lessons were learned. There were more customs, dances, processions, and bonfires; they created a setting in which students competed for glory, for the laurels of being known as a big man on campus. (I asked today's Princeton students who the BMOCs were, and many didn't even know what the term meant. Those who did said that the concept didn't apply to their Princeton.)

Students in those days passed through harrowing extracurricular challenges and ordeals. There were clubs to compete for, hazing rituals to endure, brutal combats to win. Life at Princeton was a series of tests designed to cultivate manliness and determination. Each year, for example, the freshman and sophomore classes would stage a snowball fight. The library archives contain a picture of three Princeton freshmen after one such fight. Their eyes are swollen shut, their lips are broken open, they have contusions across their cheeks and signs of broken noses and broken jaws.

The primary virtue that Princeton tried to instill, in exhortation after exhortation, was courage. "Teaching men manhood" was one of the important tasks of Harvard, a professor wrote in that school's alumni magazine in 1902. John Hibben, who was a representative figure of his age, told a Princeton alumni group in 1913,

It would be pitiful indeed if we were constrained to confess in reference to our graduates, as Homer stated of the Trojan hero,—“He came forsooth to battle in golden attire like a girl.” Homer also adds that this unprepared warrior was met by Achilles, who slew him and robbed him of his wealth. We must fit men to work and to fight for our day, and to be ready when called to devote their fighting powers to that cause of righteousness which appeals to them as their particular vocation.

Of course, one form of ordeal reigned above all others: football. When John Hibben was president and F. Scott Fitzgerald was an undergraduate, one Princeton football star personified the ideals of the age—manly courage, duty,

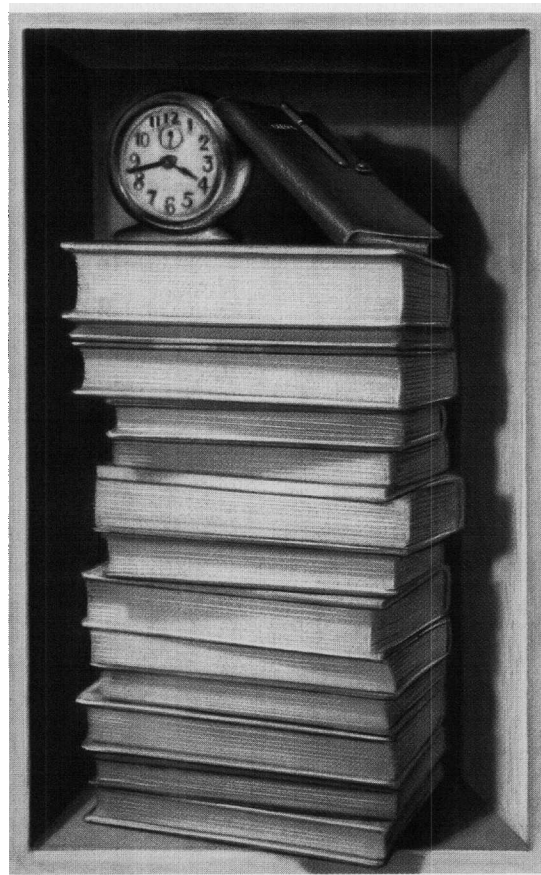
courtesy, honor, and service. He was Hobart Amory Hare Baker, a young man who wouldn't have a prayer of being admitted to Princeton today. Hobe Baker was born into a prominent but not particularly affluent Main Line Philadelphia family on January 15, 1892. After his parents divorced, he was sent off to St. Paul's School, where he became a legendary athlete. He arrived at Princeton in 1910, preceded by his reputation. He was only five feet nine inches and 160 pounds, but he was thickly muscled. He could walk downstairs on his hands, and he entertained his friends by jiggling his back muscles in time to a song. He once won a bet that he could walk from Princeton to New York City in ten hours. He was extraordinarily handsome, from a distance

looking a bit like the Duke of Windsor, though he was sturdier and more muscular, with symmetrical features and a crown of blond hair that seemed never to fall out of place. He was also a meticulous dresser.

Baker appears in Fitzgerald's novel *This Side of Paradise*, as the “slim and defiant” football captain, Allenby, who is the embodiment of manly grace, casually aware that “this year the hopes of the college rested on him.” Baker was the star of both the football team and the hockey team. In those days both games were different. Football was more defensive, slower but more savage. There was no passing. Teams would trade punts, hoping to get slight advantages in field position. The key play was the punt return. Baker would position himself a few yards behind where the punt was to land so that he could get a running start

and catch the ball at a full sprint. He didn't wear a helmet. It became a cliché to compare him to Sir Galahad, the solitary knight charging bravely into the breach.

There were no bureaucratized university sports programs or athletic scholarships or professional coaching in Baker's day. The games were more like medieval tournaments, ordeals in which the young men of the governing classes could build character and cultivate manly courage. Fatalities were relatively common in collegiate football until President Theodore Roosevelt—the epitome of the upper-class manly man—tried to instill some restraint. Speaking for the age, Charles William Eliot, the president of Harvard, declared that “effeminacy and luxury are even worse evils than brutality”; sports could transform “a stoop-



ing, weak, and sickly youth into [a] well-formed robust" one.

Hobey Baker was at least as famous for his sportsmanship as for his athletic prowess. Though opposing teams often tried to injure him, he never retaliated; he had two penalties called on him in his entire college hockey career, both hotly contested. He went to the opposing locker room after each game to thank his rivals for a good match. "Nothing was quite so characteristic as his acute modesty," his biographer, John Davies, wrote in *The Legend of Hobey Baker* (1966). "He was always polite and obliging, except when talk got around to his athletic exploits, and then he could be curt and even difficult."

Baker dominated the Princeton of his day. "The aura of Hobey Baker permeated the campus, and yet on personal contact ... he seemed somewhat withdrawn," one of his classmates told Davies. A national celebrity, Baker was, as the Fitzgerald scholar Arthur Mizener once put it, the "nearly faultless realization of the ideal of his age." He was recognized as a model for all young boys, and he was something of a campus god.

After college Baker went off to Wall Street, following the Princeton herd. But he was bored at J. P. Morgan, somewhat at a loss in the everyday world of commerce. World War I solved his problem. He enlisted at once as an aviator—Sir Galahad of the air—and flew aerial combat in France. American newspapers followed his exploits, exaggerating them and declaring him an ace before he had shot down a single enemy plane (he ended up shooting down three). In war Baker found perfect happiness—the camaraderie of the pilots and the thrill of combat. His athletic skills served him well, and he was promoted to squadron commander, with 206 men and twenty to twenty-four planes under him. He was awarded the Croix de Guerre and showed some disappointment when the Armistice was signed.

His death was like something out of a cheap novel. Six weeks after the war was over, on December 21, 1918, his tour of duty ended. He received orders to return home. He decided he would make "one last flight." His comrades argued vehemently with him, saying that making a last flight violated a sacred tradition in aviation; it was bad luck. He insisted, and took up not his own plane but a recently repaired machine that needed to be tested. The engine stalled. There was a way to survive such a predicament, but it involved wrecking the plane. Baker tried a trickier maneuver that might have enabled him to land the plane intact; he ran out of room and crashed nose-first into the ground. He bled to death in the ambulance.

Needless to say, that romantic end transformed Baker from an ideal to a legend. And everyone seems to have understood immediately that he was symbolic of a dying ethos. It wasn't just the modesty, and the grace, and the amateur spirit—it was the chivalric world view. The alumni directory for Hobey Baker's class of 1914 twenty-five years

after graduation reveals that a number of his classmates named their sons for him.

One more thing must be said about the chivalric code of that era, at least as it was articulated. It involved more than just shaking hands with one's opponents after a game and venturing acts of derring-do on the football field or the battlefield. The conflict that educators of the time talked about more than any other was internal conflict, between the good and the evil in each of us. John Hibben and others talked so much about courage and battle because they believed that a human being is half angel, half beast, and that the two sides wage lifelong warfare over the soul. People who made the high-minded addresses of that era were comfortable talking about evil and sin and the devil. Here's an excerpt from Hibben's address to the graduating students in 1913.

You, enlightened, self-sufficient, self-governed, endowed with gifts above your fellows, the world expects you to produce as well as to consume, to add to and not to subtract from its store of good, to build up and not tear down, to ennoble and not degrade. It commands you to take your place and to fight your fight in the name of honor and of chivalry, against the powers of organized evil and of commercialized vice, against the poverty, disease, and death which follow fast in the wake of sin and ignorance, against all the innumerable forces which are working to destroy the image of God in man, and unleash the passions of the beast. There comes to you from many quarters, from many voices, the call of your kind. It is the human cry of spirits in bondage, of souls in despair, of lives debased and doomed. It is the call of man to his brother ... such is your vocation; follow the voice that calls you in the name of God and of man. The time is short, the opportunity is great; therefore, crowd the hours with the best that is in you.

No doubt a lot of the students who were sitting in the audience that day were stuck-up country-house toffs, for whom this kind of talk merely delayed a trip in their roadsters to a New York nightclub. But many of the students raised on similar exhortations—including Teddy Roosevelt and John Reed at Harvard and Hobey Baker, Allen Dulles, Adlai Stevenson, and F. Scott Fitzgerald at Princeton—seem to have absorbed some sense that life is a noble mission and a perpetual war against sin, that the choices we make have consequences not just in getting a job or a law-school admission but in some grand battle between lightness and dark.

"LOVE AND SUCCESS AND BEING HAPPY"

This is what the comparison between the students of Hobey Baker's day and the students of today tells us: Then the leaders of Princeton were quite conscious of the fact that they were cultivating an elite. They thought it was only just and proper that these well-

born men be at the top of society. The task was to mold them into gentlemen. Now administrators at top-tier schools know they are educating an elite but they seem to feel guilty about the whole notion of elitism and elite status. Today's elite don't like to think of themselves as elite. So there is no self-conscious code of chivalry. Today's students do not inherit a concrete and articulated moral system—a set of ideals to instruct privileged men and women on how to live, how to see their duties, and how to call upon their highest efforts.

Although today's Princeton and today's parents impose all sorts of rules to reduce safety risks and encourage achievement, they do not go to great lengths to build character, the way adults and adult institutions did a century ago. They don't offer much help with the fundamental questions. "We've taken the decision that these are adults and this is not our job," Jeffrey Herbst says. "There's a pretty self-conscious attempt not to instill character." Herbst does add that students are expected to live up to the standards that apply to academic life—no plagiarism, no cheating. But in general the job of the university is to supply the knowledge that students will need to prosper, and, at most, to provide a forum in which they can cultivate character on their own. "This university doesn't orchestrate students' lives outside the classroom," says

Princeton's dean of undergraduate students, Kathleen Deignan. "We're very conservative about how we steer. They steer themselves." As the admissions officer Fred Hargadon puts it, "I don't know if we build character or remind them that they should be developing it."

In America today we don't tell our children they are half brutes. It's impossible to imagine a modern university president mentioning the devil or the beast in a commencement address. People don't even talk much about evil anymore, except as something that might happen far away, in Serbia or in Nazi Germany. Around us we see not evil but sickness that requires therapy. Today we speak the language of positive reinforcement.

In talking to Princeton students about character, I noticed two things. First, they're a little nervous about the subject. When I asked if Princeton builds character, they would inevitably mention the honor code against cheating, or policies to reduce drinking. When I asked about moral questions, they would often flee such talk and start discussing legislative questions. For example, at dinner one evening a young man proposed that if we could just purge the wrongs that people do to one another over the next few generations, the human race could live in perfect harmony ever after, without much need for government or laws or

prisons. I asked the other eight or nine students at the table to reflect on this, but they quickly veered off toward how long it would take to bring about this perfect world. I asked specifically if human beings were perfectible in this way. Some grunted in vague assent, and one young woman—a conservative Christian who had interned for Jesse Helms the previous summer—said that she agreed with what the young man had said. Apparently the doctrine of original sin had not left much of a mark on her.

Today's students are indeed interested in religion and good works. "In the past ten or twelve years students are no longer embarrassed about being interested in religion—or spirituality, as they call it," says Robert Wuthnow, the Princeton sociologist. "That's a huge change. People used to feel as if they had acne being raised in a religious home." I hadn't been on campus more than five minutes before I started hearing about all the students who do community service—tutoring at a charter school in Trenton, working at Habitat for Humanity—style building projects, serving food at soup kitchens. But religion tends to be more private

than public with them, and the character of their faith tends to be unrelievedly upbeat. "It's an optimistic view," Wuthnow says. "You just never hear about sin and evil and judgment. It's about love and success and being happy."

When it comes to character and virtue, these young people have been left on their own. Today's go-getter parents and today's educational institutions work frantically to cultivate neural synapses, to foster good study skills, to promote musical talents. We fly our children around the world so that they can experience different cultures. We spend huge amounts of money on safety equipment and sports coaching. We sermonize about the evils of drunk driving. We expend enormous energy guiding and regulating their lives. But when it comes to character and virtue, the most mysterious area of all, suddenly the laissez-faire ethic rules: You're on your own, Jack and Jill; go figure out what is true and just for yourselves.

We assume that each person has to solve these questions alone (though few other societies in history have made this assumption). We assume that if adults try to offer moral instruction, it will just backfire, because our children will reject our sermonizing (though they don't seem to reject any other part of our guidance and instruction). We assume that such questions have no correct answer that can be taught. Or maybe the simple truth is that adult institutions no longer try to talk about character and virtue because they simply wouldn't know what to say. John Hibben could fill books with moral instruction, but our connections to that tradition have been snapped.

Maybe adult institutions no longer try to talk about character and virtue because they simply don't know what to say. Our connections to that tradition have been snapped.

One sometimes has the sense that all the frantic efforts to regulate safety, to encourage academic achievement, and to keep busy are ways to compensate for missing conceptions of character and virtue. Not having a vocabulary to discuss what is good and true, people can at least behave well. It's hard to know what eternal life means, but if you don't smoke you can have long life. It's hard to imagine what it would be like to be a saint, but it's easy to see what it is to be a success.

The compensation works, to an extent. These young people are wonderful to be around. If they are indeed running the country in a few decades, we'll be in fine shape. It will be a good country, though maybe not a great one. The Princeton of today is infinitely more pleasant than the old Princeton, infinitely more just, and certainly more intellectual and curious. But still there is a sense that something is missing. Somehow, in the world of moral combat that John Hibben described, the stakes were higher, the consequences of one's decisions were more serious, the goals were nobler. In this world hardworking students achieve self-control; in that one virtuous students achieved self-mastery.

I had lunch one day with Robert George, a professor in Princeton's politics department. Like a lot of elite colleges, Princeton has one or two faculty members who are known as the campus conservatives. They may be liked personally, and admired for their teaching and research skills, but they are regarded as a bit odd, and dismissible. I don't, however, see anything specifically conservative in the message George offered that day (which I'm condensing from a thirty-minute portion of our conversation). "We would do our best if we could make sure our students had a dose of the Augustinian sense that there is a tragic dimension to life," he said. "That there is a sense in which we live in a vale of tears. We could make them aware of the reality of sin, by which I mean chosen evil, which cannot be cured by therapy or by science. We don't do enough to call into question the therapeutic model of evil: 'He has a problem ... He's sick.'

"I don't mean we should have a separate course on character. We don't need to give them specific answers. We could raise this awareness—through readings and discussions in history and philosophy and literature, by reading Plato's *Gorgias*, *Othello*, or a study of the Lincoln-Douglas debates—that the conquest of the self is part of what it means to lead a successful life. It's not enough to make a corporation succeed. It's not an external problem. It doesn't lend itself to a technical solution. Four hours spent studying in the library is not self-mastery."

George described a moment when he and a colleague were urging their students not to commit plagiarism. The honor code goes against it, George told them; the Internet makes it easier to plagiarize, but also much easier for faculty members to catch plagiarists. Besides, he concluded, God

will see you doing evil. Suddenly there was an awkward shifting of chairs and a demurral from his faculty colleague. The idea that it is possible to do wrong sitting alone in your room, even if you don't cause another person any harm, is hard, George said, for modern Americans to comprehend fully. The problem is that this idea is at the heart of understanding what it means to be virtuous.

George suggested that I talk to a student he had in a few of his classes, a sophomore, who came to campus with the tragic sense that George would like to impart. This young man took me to lunch in his college dining room, and when I asked him about character-building, he spoke more comfortably and thoughtfully than anybody else I had met. He wasn't easy on himself, the way supercharged achievers have a tendency to be. "Egotism is the biggest challenge here," he said. "It can make you proud if you do well. It can make you self-assured and self-sufficient. You don't need help from other people. You won't need help from your wife. You won't give yourself over to her when you are married." He went on, talking calmly but faster than I could write. He was talking in a language different from that of the meritocrat—about what one is, rather than what one does. He really did stand out from the other students, who were equally smart and equally accomplished but who hadn't been raised with a vocabulary of virtue and vice.

Somebody once wrote a book called *Harvard Hates America*, about the supposedly alien Ivy League snobs who look down on the rest of the country. I don't get that sense when I visit Harvard, and I certainly didn't get that sense at Princeton. Princeton doesn't hate America. It reflects America. And in most ways it reflects the best of America. After all, as people kept reminding me, these are some of the best and brightest young people our high schools have to offer. They have woven their way through the temptations of adolescence and have benefited from all the nurturing and instruction and opportunities with which the country has provided them. They are responsible. They are generous. They are bright. They are good-natured. But they live in a country that has lost, in its frenetic seeking after happiness and success, the language of sin and character-building through combat with sin. Evil is seen as something that can be cured with better education, or therapy, or Prozac. Instead of virtue we talk about accomplishment.

Maybe the lives of the meritocrats are so crammed because the stakes are so small. All this ambition and aspiration is looking for new tests to ace, new clubs to be president of, new services to perform, but finding that none of these challenges is the ultimate challenge, and none of the rewards is the ultimate reward. ■

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