

## **LIBRARIES, LEARNING AND DIRTY SANDALS**

by

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Many years ago, a sociologist who claimed to know such things told me that law libraries suffered the second highest theft rate. Seminaries were first.

Whether it was true or not I have never known, but his explanation seemed logical: when people who are lacking any interest or dedication in a library itself are forced to use one for their work, they abuse it. Popular culture might promote an image of lawyers as diligent scholars, but while the characters in "Law and Order" spout legal citations with reckless abandon, most real lawyers hate actually doing the research. His explanation also seemed logical because assigning undergraduate students term papers which require reviews of research literature often result in pages ripped from journals, books stolen from the library and other acts of miscellaneous vandalism. Like lawyers, they are forced to be in the library, but the odious task is something to be done as fast and as "painlessly" as possible.

Similarly, many college students sit in classes but would rather be elsewhere, to the detriment of higher education itself. Parents send children to college because they are told that it increases their future earning potentials, often without understanding just what it is about college that makes it valuable. So the students want to earn, not learn. As increasing percentages of our population attend college, and with President Clinton stating a desire that two years of college become as universal as high school graduation, the focus has been on credits earned and degrees awarded, not on education.

In Rebecca Goldstein's novel *Mazel*, a brief story within the story tells of a traveling peasant who encounters a windstorm. As the peasant walked along the path afterwards, he discovered that he now possessed a wonderful new understanding of all mysteries of life. When he later took off his sandals to rest and stretch, the knowledge left him, only to return when he put the sandals back on. The peasant realized that his footwear was the source of his wisdom, but he did not know that the windstorm had blown a leaf from the Tree of Knowledge out of the Garden of Eden and it had become stuck to the bottom of one sandal.

As such stories often go, the King's daughter was gravely ill and the peasant used his new wisdom to provide a cure which saved the princess' life. The King wanted to know how a lowly peasant came to possess such abilities and the peasant said, "It is my sandals." A strange statement like that might be hard to believe, but once persuaded, the King offered the peasant half the kingdom in exchange for those sandals. The peasant readily made the trade, but no King wants to wear dirty sandals. And when ordered to clean the sandals, the King's servants scraped off the leaf from the Tree of Knowledge with the rest of the dirt. As a result, wearing the sandals failed to make the King any wiser or more insightful than he was before.

The valuable leaf was buried in the dirt, but the King wanted the sandals, not realizing it was the dirt that carried the real value. Too many college students, like the King, only want the sandals. Even worse, they go to great lengths to avoid all dirt, never even taking a chance on acquiring the important leaf. All sorts of value can come from learning, but it can never be known just what or how or where. It is buried.

And yet, the students and their parents are not fully at fault, since so little is done to tell them the truth. To an extent, the universities have only themselves to blame. In the marketing of higher education, faculty and administrators often are selling only the clean sandals. Student's are told that they need to go to school for future earnings and they never understand that it is what they learn in the process or learning how to learn more that has the value. Admittedly, it is hard for schools to sell something as abstract as "learning," but that is the only real college benefit that students can carry into life.

After I made a presentation to some media executives in Seattle, a thirty-something radio station manager said "It must be so interesting to be a university professor, teaching classes with all those questing young minds."

Impressed, I asked if that was the way she approached her time in college, but she reluctantly admitted that she just wanted to enjoy herself, or so she recalled. "And I never used my degree," she said, "but I read many interesting books." Maybe she was more of a questing mind than she realized, and discussion revealed that her broad new abilities she acquired to think, write and analyze problems were a major part of her growing career success. Whether she knew it or not, her sandals got dirty. But then, whether she knew it or not, she went to college to learn, not to apprentice for a trade.

As our catalogs tell students of the valuable careers that come from a marketing major, as we focus on job training, the students just want the degree, but not the education. Teachers who control courses credits and grades are no longer seen by students as resources to tap or mentors who can provide guidance, but rather, as obstacles to overcome. When called upon to think through a problem, some might just reply, "I don't know. Tell me the answer." After all, tell them enough answers, which they then memorize, they will pass the exams, get the credit, and move on. To them, the learning is a distraction.

A lot has been said about the need for our students to be able to deliver a power point presentation, work in groups and know the proper "form" for a business letter. But sometimes even the faculty forget that it is even more important that they must also know how to compile and analyze information that would go into the presentations, group meetings and letters. As a result, it should surprise no one that few students are desiring to read a book and answer questions unless they are first told what they need to know and what is important to remember.

It wasn't that long ago that universities were primarily concerned with the organization and dissemination of knowledge, not the accumulation and bestowing of credit. In-class job training or a collection of marketing credits provide value for future employers only if it represents a developed ability to think. And learning to learn is what will serve both students and their employers for the rest of their lives.