

Class Meeting 6

Theme: What is Quality in Education?

READ: 6-1 ZAAMM Part III: Chapters 16-26 (pages 187-326)

Why do you think the narrator refuses to complete the trek up the mountain despite Chris's disappointment that they wouldn't be reaching the top?

Is the threat of a rockslide real? Is he afraid to "meet" Phaedrus? Is he making a statement about ego, relative to Zen philosophy?

Are there any hints at answers in what is concurrently happening in the Chautauqua part of the book?

Looking back on the parts you've already read, can you identify any other such correspondences between the contents of the Chautauqua, the description of the environment, and the characters' introspections and interactions?

PREPARATION:

READ: 6-2 Smith, P., (1990) *Killing the Spirit: Higher Education in America* (excerpts) Chapter 1: "Mapping the Desert" (pp. 1-21); and Chapter 14: "Teaching" (pp. 199-222)

WRITE: Reaction Paper #5

CLASS NOTES:

What is good and what is not good in education?

Particularly in its latter parts, "ZAAMM..." has rather a lot to say about this question. How is the question relevant to our inquiry into values? In respect to the MFA experience, our stress was largely upon the basic constancies and the great diversities of opinion among us regarding the aesthetic value of particular works of art. Last week, we considered some of the ways in which the distinction between "classical" and "romantic" plays itself out in the domain of scientific inquiry. This week, we shift our attention to a realm "closer to home" and inquire into the prospects for achieving consensual agreement. (Why might we be inclined to seek such a consensus?)

To begin with, compare and contrast Pirsig's comments on education with those of the noted historian Page Smith, who contends that there is a crisis in American universities connected with a trend toward research and away from teaching.

Recalling what was said earlier about the complementarity of differing perspectives, we presume at the outset that all of us (1) have our own unique educational experiences and (2) can thus lay claim to an equipotentially legitimate modicum of knowledge and skill in evaluating the quality (or lack thereof) of their own educational. This applies to the evaluation of your MIT learning experience as an MIT undergraduate student.

Do you recall Pirsig's discussion of "platform" problems? Taking the proverbial "step back", we will endeavor to get beneath the surface details (which are always uniquely specific and particular) and bring into focus some of the more general conceptual and material universals that characterize, epitomize, and exemplify the beliefs, values, and practices prevailing within the MIT academic community of which we are all presently a part.

This is not intended to be a "bitching session".

By hypothesis: human social systems (families, tribes, communities, churches, temples, academic, vocational or professional associations, schools and universities, cliques, claques, clubs, teams, leagues, gangs, cohorts, fraternities, sororities, local, regional or global membership organizations, corporations, nation-states, and all sorts of other groups) universally exhibit a particular self-maintaining and recurrently self-reinforcing homeostasis – a dynamic equilibrium blended of cognitive, affective, and behavioral (receptive/reactive) aspects that can be understood as comprising a "paradigm" (prototypical pattern of beliefs, values and practices).

Do our respective and collective experiences as members of the MIT community enable us to arrive at consensual agreement regarding the beliefs, values and practices that are most central to this community and its subsystems?

NOTE: This is a kind of "experiment." It poses as an empirical question whether or not it is possible for you – this particular subset of MIT undergraduates, belonging to 9.68/10 – to arrive in a scientifically credible, ethically appropriate and pedagogically sound way at a consensually valid working definition of "the MIT paradigm".

Can you meaningfully identify and effectively "unpack" at least a few of the key worldviews, valuesystems and lifestyles with which MIT is most readily associated and widely known? What do you know about locally prevailing institutional norms? What beliefs, values and practices tend to predominate MIT? Is that which is "professed" consistently practiced in actuality?

Are there any other worthwhile beliefs, values, and practices that tend to be subordinated in the process of "getting an MIT education"?

By hypothesis, the "MIT value system" and "MIT worldview" are associated with a variety of lifestyles (home lives, work lives). Which lifestyles do you most positively (or negatively) associate with the Institute's motto: "Mens et Manus"?

In class, we will make some time available for in-depth discussion of these and other aspects of the concept of "quality" as it relates to the presumably meaningful/powerful phrase: "an MIT education".

Is it possible for human individuals and groups to arrive however provisionally, at broad and fundamental agreement on a range of basic propositions relating to the world and its contents, including ourselves (e.g. to human/ecological relations)?

WRITE: Reaction Paper #5: "Quality and me and MIT"

"Home is where one starts from." MIT is a topic regarding which all of you can unquestionably lay claim to equipotentially credible first-hand "expert" opinions! Thus, in your remarks, begin, if you must, with the usual clichés. But also try to go beyond them as much as possible. Be as precise and specifically detailed as you can about your own first-hand experience. For example, you might choose to identify and describe some aspect(s) of student life and learning during the freshman year; or focus on an activity or activities that you participated in or observed and which you regard as having been of spectacularly "high" or abysmally "low" educational quality. Consider (if you wish) your "homelife" experience with peers in living groups; your "real life" (family, friends, sports, recreation, hobbies or other extracurricular activities), as well as your MIT "worklife". How mentally and behaviorally well prepared were you for your encounter with the first year science core curriculum? With this assignment, we're consciously touching upon a subject of broad current concern in the MIT community (the GIRs) and inviting you to

take it as a basis from which to begin making a serious effort to describe and to evaluate – in a scientifically informed and consensually credible way, insofar as you can in this context – what it means to speak of "quality" in relation to the MIT educational experience. Bring this reaction paper with you to class. Be prepared to use it as a basis for your participation in the discussion.

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9.68 Affect: Neurobiological, Psychological and Sociocultural Counterparts of "Feelings"
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