

Thoughts on Education...

Andy Parlin: A Student of the Farm

Andrew Parlin, son of our Dean of Faculty, graduated last year. Although accepted at Trinity College, Andy decided to delay his entrance for one year and instead, work on a Massachusetts dairy farm.

Last spring I made the decision not to go directly to college. I am now grateful to myself for choosing to work this year. Many of my thoughts about myself, about learning, about wealth, and even about dreams have changed.

First, some information about my job. I am working on a dairy farm in Easthampton, Massachusetts. I live in a one-room apartment two and a half miles from work. My means of transportation is a bicycle, except when it snows; then I walk. I work ten hours a day, six days a week, and get paid \$2.90 an hour (the minimum wage in Massachusetts). My daily chores include milking, scraping the barns clean with a uniloader (smaller than a bulldozer and having wheels, not tracks), feeding out hay, salt, and minerals to the cows, shoveling manure out of the calf-pens and bull-pen, and moving cows in and out of the barns for various reasons. Every day, however, presents new problems, so I am constantly learning more about dairy farming. This morning, for example, we tied a cow down, rolled her on her back, and had the herdsman jump up and down on her stomach to cure the cow of displaced abomasum (which means her fourth stomach was actually twisted out of place).

My job is both physically and mentally demanding. Since I am a relatively new worker on the farm, I usually get stuck with the most physically demanding jobs, such as shoveling manure. After a full day of work, I am exhausted. The job is mentally demanding, not in a problem-solving way, but in an "always keep alert" sort of way. The heavy equipment is powerful and potentially very destructive. Also, if you take your mind off what you're doing while milking the right cow at the right time, you're liable to get kicked. Getting kicked by a 1,400 pound Holstein is not a pleasant experience.

Do I like what I am doing? This

question is hard to answer. I certainly do not wake up at 3:30 A.M. thinking "Oh boy! I can't wait to milk those precious cows!" Nor do I dread going to work. I like what I am doing in the sense that my mind has expanded and my life has deepened more than at any other time in my life.

During my first week at work, I kept thinking to myself how unfair it is that there need not be any relationship between how hard a person works and how much money he earns. Jerry, the farm's herdsman, works about an eighty-hour week and has tremendous responsibilities. Anyone who enjoys dairy products would agree that Jerry's job is an important contribution to society. I have never met a harder, more capable worker. When he told me he was eligible for food stamps, I was shocked. Here is a man who is pulling twice his weight in the world and getting a salary small enough to make him eligible for food stamps, while some people work a leisurely forty-hour week, at the most, and are abundantly wealthy. This seems to me an incredible injustice.

I had never realized before this year how much a person's socio-economic background affects his life. For example, all but one of the people I work with got married at the age of eighteen. Among the lower social bracket, this fact is perfectly acceptable. You finish high school, find a husband or wife, and get a job. Can you imagine the reaction that my family and friends would have if my life followed a similar pattern?

Most important to me has been my change in attitude towards school. My attitude towards academics last year was not to be admired. I was not an enthusiastic student and took too many of my courses only half-seriously. I suppose this reaction was natural. I had always had infinite opportunities to learn as much as I wanted in practically any area that I wanted. This year has been an awakening with respect to school. School is a privilege. This does not mean that I do not find fault with our educational system. It has its problems, no doubt. But in general, it's a gift. And if a student, especially a Newark Academy student, finds himself bored with school, or feels that he is being pulled through a ruthless system, it would do that person

good to get away. My perspective has changed. Believe it or not, one of my favorite pastimes during milking is to recall specific classes that I enjoyed last year (especially Music History and Chorus). The range and depth of new ideas and the number of people that a student is exposed to during the course of a single day is incredible.

I mentioned earlier that some of my thoughts about dreams have changed. I am by no means a pessimist (quite the opposite), but I do want to share with my reader a misconception that I had regarding peace of mind.

Last spring, especially as finals loomed closer, I became disgusted with all the pressure and anxiety that I was feeling (perhaps self-inflicted, but nevertheless for me they existed). I would daydream of days ahead on the farm, where I would find "peace of mind." I had expectations of calmly philosophizing all day under the sun between rows of corn. I guess reality can be deceptive. True, exam pressures have ended. But new headaches have replaced old ones. Instead of worrying about a math exam, I now worry about forgetting to shut the barnyard gate (I forgot once already and about eighty cows trampled all over my boss' lawn—not a good scene) or breaking a stall with the uniloader, or getting kicked by a cow, or getting the bull too riled up, or mixing dry cows in with the regular herd, etc., etc. I suppose pressures exist no matter where you are or what you're doing. It's probably all in the mind.

I look forward to next year at Trinity College. I miss people my own age very much. I miss singing in a chorus. I miss reading and discussing interesting books. But I will continue to enjoy working on the farm. Who knows? Maybe someday I'll be a farmer.

—Andrew Parlin
Class of 1979