

**A Little Night Music  
Observations on Being an Evening Student**

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The fall semester just ended and I'm waiting to receive my grades which are to be posted within the next week or so. I think I did OK; that was my goal. As a part-time evening student at Hofstra University Law School I don't have much time for study or for worrying. Balancing work, family and school, I'm lucky to be able to keep up as I commute an hour to class at the end of my work day. Sound familiar? We've each heard this refrain from hundreds of the adult students enrolled in our respective continuing education programs and have come to think of it as a familiar refrain that is emblematic of our profession. Adult students, returning to school to earn credentials that will help them advance in the world of work. It's serious business. Yes, there are plenty of liberal arts enrichment programs, but most of us deal with the meat and potatoes of continuing higher education- certificates and academic credentials attesting to increased competency and new skills acquisition, offered in the evenings, online, or in some other compressed format convergent with the needs of working students.

My first semester of law school carried me back to the almost forgotten world of night school I last experienced at NYU when I studied for my doctorate in higher education. This was in the early 1970's. Instead of driving to campus I took the subway. And while I was one of the youngest students at NYU, I now have the honor of being the most senior among the entering 2010 class of 1L's. So far I've also been older than any of my instructors, one of whom is a dead-ringer for my own daughter. It gets pretty confusing at times. On several occasions AV technicians, mistaking me for the professor, have asked me how I want things set up. And most strange of all, in class I revert to the undergraduate behavior I last displayed forty years ago at Brooklyn College. This, I've found, is one of the most pleasurable parts of being a student.

Having been a dean of continuing education for twenty years it is a treat to re-enter the unique ambience of night school. Unlike at work where I am locked in what often feels like a primitive struggle with other deans and administrators for influence and resources, the student world I've re-entered is one of sharing and mutual support. There is just so much we have to do it is an acknowledged truth that no one can do it alone. We all want to pass and by banding together some of the workload is distributed, easing individual burdens. For the final exam period I took some vacation leave and practically lived in the

law library so that I could study and discuss cases with my classmates. This pooling of subjectivity reminds me of some of the adult education strategies I've come across in prior years and even used in my courses.

Law school is about reading and arguing. One of my friends, an assistant dean at another law school, advised me to prepare myself by reading five hours a day for six days a week. Fortunately it's not quite that extreme, even though it may feel like it at times. And if you love to argue, law school is the place. I find it to be a great outlet since opportunities to do this at work are limited, hemmed in as we are by hierarchy and many political-social constraints. You never have to give up although there does come a time when pausing is judiciously advised.

Most of my fellow students are hoping to embark on a second career. My own goals are much more diffuse, similar to how I have approached other phases of my life. I'm open to what school has to offer. Where this will lead, I don't yet know. I've learned to take one step at a time, enjoying the process, grappling with the unknown, and absorbing new knowledge along the way, and this last item is law school's best surprise so far. It is fun. Yes, I must be nuts. Talk to most any lawyer and they will tell you how their own school years were replete with stress, competition and worry. Maybe it is because I am at the point where I've had a challenging career and am looking toward what might be next. And being a student again is returning to a world I loved and where I found a unique happiness and yes, I will admit it, escape.

Cyril Houle's landmark contribution to our adult learning literature, *The Inquiring Mind* (1961) provides insights into what motivates us as adult learners. His ground breaking typology identified three distinct motivational styles: 1) Those who are goal-oriented and pursue defined educational objectives, 2) Activity-oriented participants who see adult education as a way of connecting and interacting with like-minded peers, and 3) Persons who value learning for its own sake with voracious appetites for new knowledge. This last category is where I place myself and my continuing education colleagues. Why else would we choose to in an environment that is truly suited to our most intimate personal inclinations? Let's face it; in our field the light is always green when it comes to ongoing enquiry, experimentation, and study. Some might even refer to this as an adult education lifestyle and the more that I think of it, I find this term to be exceedingly appropriate. With a lengthening life span, there is even more time to set new goals, reinventing ourselves along the way.

Three and sometimes four nights a week I meld with the frenzied Long Island commuter traffic, hunt (not always with success) for a convenient parking spot, grab a container of coffee, and rush to my first class. The books weigh a ton so almost everybody uses a wheeled suitcase. Waiting for the elevator we all look like we're about to embark on a business trip. Instead, it's three or four hours clicking away on laptops, taking down whatever seems important which at this stage is everything. In the morning I try to find the time to review my hurried notes in order to be ready for that night's classes.

It's a relief not to have to do the lecturing. I can truly empathize with the night school faculty and can vividly recall my own evenings in front of tired, hungry, cranky and anxious students. Plus, I don't have to grade, surely one of the most problematic experiences for anyone teaching. An A, A-, or B+...it has always been difficult for me to make the necessary very fine distinctions, knowing how important grades are to students. Among my new friends there are several who want A's in every class in order to qualify for the top jobs following graduation. I keep telling myself, "just do OK" but it is hard to dampen my own competitive nature. Oh, the strange world of being a student again. Even knowing that for me grades are irrelevant, the night of my first final I was sick to my stomach. It was that bad. Conversely, I was physically and mentally numb by the time of my third and last test.

For the past few days I've been logging onto the law school web site curious to see how well I did. I know this is a mistake, but how do you beat down a lifetime of engrained behavior? I've also been eager to obtain the new term's reading lists so that I can start preparing myself, but so far only one instructor has provided this information. Concurrently at Stony Brook we are also in the midst of organizing ourselves for the spring semester, making sure instructors and students have their classes and all the hundred and one other things that must be checked before everyone returns to campus.

Being both a dean and student provides contrasting and complementary perspectives. Clearly these are just two facets of adult education, refracting what it means to be engaged with the larger issues of living and learning. As I continue down this path I'm hoping that each twist and turn will hold new surprises and adventures. And I have no doubt that this questing will provide me with a greater insight and ability to fulfill my professional obligations as a continuing educator.

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