

Amanda's lament

The Cranky Professor

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Amanda Wenek, who will graduate from Saint Mary's this year with a Bachelor of Arts degree, wonders what the point of her university career is and worries that her studies and her degree will prove irrelevant to her future. Amanda, the editor of *The Journal* and a fourth-year honours philosophy student, expressed her frustration and fears in an editorial in the November 21st edition of this paper. Amanda advises other students about to graduate simply to push on through and complete their degrees despite the stress and the boredom, and even should they feel their hard work is pointless.

So what is the point of being an Arts student?

Earning a degree, preparing for a career, even learning something or acquiring certain skills—none of these is the central point of studying at a university. The central point lies entirely within whatever one is doing during one's activities as a student. The central point of attending a university is meeting the standards of excellence that give meaning to the various activities in which one's life as a student consists.

Let's take one of those activities—writing an essay. A good essay is one in which something significant is said well. A student meets standards of excellence for essay writing when she says something significant on the topic at hand and says it well. Now saying something significant and saying it well requires thought, hard thought about the topic and hard thought about how to organize one's thoughts about the topic. That requires writing and rewriting, thinking and thinking again. Meeting standards of excellence for essay writing is not easy. Yet during the process of writing, one experiences little and large moments of satisfaction, a moment of satisfaction on each occasion one manages well with a difficult idea. When one is finished, one has in one's hands a good essay. That is why one is studying at a university: to produce good work and to enjoy the process and result of producing good work.

Participating in class, participating in an intellectual discussion outside of class, working hard to understand a reading, viewing a newspaper or magazine article through ideas and skills you've recently acquired, listening attentively and critically to a lecture—these are just a few more activities that make up one's life as a university student. Each can be done well or poorly. The point of being an Arts student is in the joy of doing each of these things well, or at least in the joy of trying to do them well.

Think of playing hockey. One attempts in playing hockey to meet standards of excellence for the various things in which hockey consists—stick handling, finding the open man and passing to

him, taking the opponent off the puck, hitting cleanly and effectively. These are not easy things to do and they can be done poorly. The point of playing hockey is to do these things well, to participate in a well-executed play, to contribute importantly to a well-played game. In meeting the standards of excellence in the game of hockey one contributes to a well-played game and takes satisfaction and joy from doing so. Studying at a university is really no different.

Being a hockey player is not easy. You have to get up early, you have to lug your equipment around, perhaps you have to endure the antics of some idiot teammate. And all that's before you even hit the ice. On the ice you have to practice and drill, you have to listen patiently to the coach as she bawls you out, you have to wait your turn. And all that's before you even scrimmage, let alone play a game. During the game you have again to wait your turn, you have to skate hard right until the end of your shift, you have to go into the corners and pay the price. None of that is fun at all. And yet contributing to a well-played game is a joy as great as any. All the drudgery, fatigue, and pain is worth it just because it's all necessary if one is to contribute to a well-played game. Studying at a university is really no different.

Now of course getting a degree, acquiring credentials useful in beginning a career, making friends, establishing contacts, acquiring knowledge and skills, and all the rest, is terrific and fine. But none of that is any more central to being a student than developing one's skills, getting a good workout, signing a pro contract, winning a game, or even winning the cup is to being a hockey player. Perfectly fine though each of these reasons for being a student is, no set of them amounts to a sufficiently good reason for being a student. The only sufficiently good reason is that you love what you are doing.

I worry that too few students know this. I worry that too many students think that university is just preparation for something else. If you are not capable of finding satisfaction and joy in writing a good essay or in participating well in class, then you ought not be at university; or, at any rate, you are not here for the right reason. I hazard that most students are quite capable of finding joy in meeting standards of excellence in their studies; they rarely do find this joy, though, because they don't know that that's what they are here to do. Without that joy the drudgery is just drudgery and the pain is just pain.

To Amanda and to anyone else experiencing the fourth-year blues (or the third-year blues, or the second-year blues), then, I say sit down, pay the future only a little mind right now, and reconnect with the present. Become intent on doing well those things that define your life as a student. Listen attentively and critically in your literature class, sit with friends to discuss the elections in Russia in light of what you've been doing in history, work hard on your philosophy essay. Get back in the game. That's where the fun is and that's what will make all the rest worthwhile.