

Applying One's Self

by Andrew Oberg

“Just what do you think will come of this?” Davis asked, setting the essay down on his desk and moving his coffee mug to one side. He would have liked to move the student opposite him to one side too, but his office was too small and too cramped with books for that.

“What do mean, Mr. Davis?”

“I mean, do you really think North Woods State will take this seriously?” He stared at the man — the boy — unsure whether he should try to hide his irritation or not. It could be a useful motivator, but what was the point? How many more students did he have to see this afternoon... December was always his busiest, and worst, month.

“I’m still not sure what you’re getting at, Mr. Davis. Why wouldn’t they? This essay is what they wanted, or at least the kind of thing that they asked for. And I also completed all the required forms and included my transcript. I think my application is pretty solid.”

“Derek, this essay is titled ‘Singularity: Black Hole Existence’ and seems to be a kind of quasi-mystical study in ontology. The application package calls for you to write on why you want to attend the university, what you can contribute to its academic community, and what you hope to get out of it.” He leaned back in his chair, raising his glasses slightly and rubbing the bridge of his nose as he did so. If the boy hadn’t noticed his frustration before then he certainly should have now.

“But my essay discusses all of those points. Maybe not in the most straightforward manner or in a way that is conventionally comprehensible, but it speaks to those issues nonetheless. And it does so through the use of words and nonwords, I might add. Did you try reading it sideways? I worked quite hard on its structural balance, you know.”

“I don’t doubt that you did, Burroughs put a lot into *Naked Lunch* too. Your essay really is very good, at times even brilliant. But it’s just so...” Davis sighed. “How can I put this? It’s just so off topic.”

“Do you mean because it isn’t a standard three paragraphs directly addressing each of the university’s three questions?”

Davis thought he heard a tone of defiance in that question but chose to ignore it. “Yes, that’s it exactly. These people get hundreds, maybe thousands, of applications

every year. They don't want to have to wade through the random thoughts of students who, no matter how good their grades have been so far, haven't demonstrated a real desire to actually attend the university that they're applying to. Just tell them how much you're looking forward to studying the courses in whatever program catches your eye at the moment, how you'll participate in sports or other extracurricular groups, how you'll make new friends and have the time of the your life."

"The time of my life? I certainly hope not. No offense Mr. Davis, but I'm already bored just thinking about writing an essay like that, I can't imagine being an admissions officer and having to read such tripe — not that your ideas themselves are tripe, of course. Please don't put thoughts into my words."

Davis found himself slightly confused by that reply but it also somehow shed a little light on the essay. He needed to get through to the boy though, not least to save himself trouble later, and so he chose his words — which did have thoughts in them — very carefully. "North Woods State is our local university, Derek. With your grades and graduation exam scores as long as you can demonstrate an ability to pay you'll get in. By sending them an essay that, in all honesty, is weird and disturbing, you'll actually be hurting your own chances."

"Weird and disturbing? Aren't those just your opinions?"

"Derek, I'm your school counselor. I've been through this process myself with university and graduate school, and right here in town at NWS too. I have a good idea of what the people in charge of admissions want to see." Five more students after this; that was it, Davis remembered. Five more and then the reports for each that the principal wanted to see. What a hassle this had become. Three years ago there was almost nothing to be filed at all with anyone. His job had been so easy, he only needed to be available whenever students felt that they had something to discuss and to generally assist in choosing a university or area to try and find work in. Now everything had to be done in triple, brought round to the various internal offices, and — worst of all — followed up on with result notifications. And the gods forbid that a student actually fail to get in somewhere as that brought another dimension entirely to the paperwork plus a fresh round of counseling sessions with the poor blunderer. It was lucky that Derek wasn't any more ambitious than he was; the kid had a tremendous mind and could probably compete for a spot at one of the top universities, but they cost money, money which he doubted Derek's family had, and if he did end up failing to get in then he'd be right back here in the office sitting there perched on the edge of his chair and staring down at his own two feet again. As long as he could be convinced to send in a reasonably normal admissions package, Derek should be a shoo-in and then safely out

of Davis' hair with the minimum of paperwork required.

Looking over at him now, Davis could see that for the moment his approach wasn't working and decided to shift tactics a bit. "But we can come back to your essay. While we're on the topic of generally giving the university what they want to see, I did notice a couple of odd points on your background form. Under references you have Baruch Spinoza and Aldous Huxley listed. Unless I'm mistaken, both those men are dead."

"Well, yes. Dead in the sense of no longer being composed of the bodies that housed their consciousnesses. But in every sense except the biological they are very much alive."

Davis glanced back up at the boy and tried to make eye contact. "For you to list them as people who can vouch for your character and study habits they need to be alive in every sense."

"Do you really think that the university will contact anyone's references? You said yourself that they probably get thousands of applications every year."

This session was starting to grate on Davis' nerves. "Look," he began curtly, caught himself, adjusted his glasses and rubbed his nose again, and then took a deep breath before continuing. "You're right; references aren't likely to be contacted unless everything else is almost up to snuff but not quite there. But you still can't get away with listing long dead writers."

"Spinoza actually worked as a lens grinder."

Davis glared at him. "You know that's irrelevant."

"To the form, maybe. But I wonder: how much did that affect his writing? The illness he died from may have been made worse by all the glass dust in his lungs. If he were always out of breath and not getting enough oxygen to his brain, his mind may have worked in different ways, and maybe not necessarily less able ways. He could have seen the world through eyes that were shifted into an entirely different plane, rather like Huxley achieved but without the psychedelics. And with the similarity of their thought, both men stressing the essential unity of all reality — well, it's striking, isn't it?"

"I think you're reaching a bit there," Davis said, making no attempt now to hide his irritation.

"It's too bad they were born so far apart in both time and place. Do you think Huxley would have worn glasses ground by Spinoza?"

"Derek, I have a few more appointments today, I'd like to get through this." Didn't this kid have any friends to share his rambling nonsense with? What time was it

anyway?

“Okay, I understand. I’m sorry, Mr. Davis. I’ll put my parents down instead. But as far as influences go, Spinoza and Huxley take the cake.”

“I’m sure they do, I can certainly see them in your essay. Why is your date of birth listed as being in the year 1666?”

“Have you ever seen *The Ninth Gate*, Mr. Davis?”

“No.”

“Well, the basic idea of the movie is that...”

“Derek?”

“Yes?”

“Just write the real year you were born.” Davis needed a cup of coffee. Or some of Huxley’s LSD. Maybe both. This was now beyond tiresome. “One more thing on your background form, you’ve reversed the first and last letters of our school’s name.”

“Yeah, I know. The end is the beginning.”

Davis bit his lip and fought the urge to crumple the application papers into tightly packed balls that would be the perfect size for chucking across his desk at the little snot.

“I’ll fix that too.”

“Thank you,” Davis said flatly. “With that done, you’ll only need to work on your essay. And let me say again that I think it needs to be entirely rewritten to fit the topic. I’ll read you a bit, and then you tell me, in light of what I’ve said, whether you still think it doesn’t need changing. Your opening paragraph goes like this:

‘Physics has now demonstrated what our sages have long taught, that every bit of matter is in constant flux, atoms and subatomic particles shuttling between different positions, blurring the distinction between this and that, here and there, you and I. There is not a single cell in our bodies that was present at our births, and yet we cling to a notion of being distinct and separate, unique and special and alone in all the universe. It’s clichéd but it’s true, the only thing that’s permanent is that everything changes.’

Do you really believe that’s a good way to introduce yourself to admissions? How about instead emphasizing that you grew up here and have always wanted to attend your hometown university?” When he finished reading and glanced back up at the boy, Davis was surprised to find him now meeting his gaze, a hint of excitement in his eyes.

“Absolutely! That the admissions officer and I, and everyone else of course, can be considered to essentially be part of the same mass organism, the same block of pure life, establishes just how important the connection between us already is, even before I set foot on campus.”

“On that note,” Davis began, starting to develop an interest in the conversation despite himself, “let me read you a bit from your second page:

‘The constant interflow of the basic building blocks of matter is not by any means the whole of our singularity, however. Consider the example of light. What we know, what we think we know, is that light travels as both waves and as particles. This is not to say that light is sometimes a wave and sometimes a particle, but that it is always both, perfectly skating the line between pure energy and pure matter, perfectly demonstrating that pure energy is not pure, and that pure matter isn’t either. Both are always both, neither just energy nor just matter, and the same goes for us as well. And my keyboard as I type this. And everything else that composes and fails to compose this grand home of ours, hurtling through a space that we can hardly understand and the vast bulk of which appears to be composed of a material and an energy that are so mysterious we can neither measure nor explain them, but think that they must be there to account for the universe’s total mass.’

Now, I will admit that this is quite interesting, but certainly this material should be saved for a future assignment and not included here. Wouldn’t you agree?”

“Not at all, Mr. Davis. If I am to say who I am to the admissions officer then I must give a full account of myself, of him, and of the ties that bind us. I am he as you are he as you are me and we are all together. Or her, of course.”

“I am the walrus,” Davis said.

“Pardon?”

“You’re quoting from ‘I am the Walrus’, right? The Beatles’ song.”

“Who?”

“Never mind. I can see that this is important to you, but I must say that I really think, that I’d like to suggest in the strongest terms, that you change at least parts of this to indicate some kind of normal interest in your future and to show that your attendance at the university will help you attain your goals.” Davis hadn’t thought it possible, but he was slowly being won over to the boy’s point of view on his essay. It was the kind of

work that, no matter how far out there it might be, was likely to make an impression. Whether that would be for good or ill though, he really couldn't say.

“Don't you think I discuss that, Mr. Davis? If I remember correctly, my conclusion spells that out in fairly clear terms.”

Davis smiled, “Let's read that, shall we?”

‘Just as the lines we think to be borders are really only porous midway points, that our flesh and blood demonstrates little difference on the subatomic level with the layers that form the rocks beneath our feet, and just as the exchange between our senses and what we take to be the outside world flows in rivulets of energy-mass, so too the mind-body distinction must be seen to be likewise illusory. If our bodies give rise to our minds — as we think they must — and our bodies are matter, and all matter is one, and that matter is energy, which is also one, then we are flying through black holes and screaming out of the other side. Annihilation and rebirth are every moment; everything now is dependent on what formed it before, and what it will go on to form. There is nothing and no one that stands independent, not even nothingness. To embrace the void is to embrace truth itself.’

Those are heady words Derek, but where's your future in them?”

“Nowhere. And now.”

Davis noticed that the broad smile greeting him from across the desk was reflected on his own face. “Okay young man. I've got my next appointment in five minutes. Let's reschedule this for another day, and in the meantime, do at least think about what I've said. If you do any rewriting then please bring that with you. I've got the afternoons of the 14th and 15th open; which do you want, the odd or the even?”

“Mr. Davis, I can't see any difference between.”