

States of the Union

ON HUSBANDING ONE'S RESOURCES

BY RICHARD J. MARGOLIS

Everybody knows about the ordeal of the dissertation. The candidate is married, has children, and little or no money. The wife (or husband) supports the menage and the other's ambition—what a setting for thought and inquiry!

—JACQUES BARZUN,

The American University

Let every sheep keep his own skin, say I

—THOREAU

DEAR DIANE, Barzun calls the PhD dissertation “an incubus that probably spoils more talent, and sours more good nature, and breaks up more homes than any other purely abstract invention.” His solution—a reverse-English gloss of Thoreau’s—is to “give every native-born American a PhD at birth and start from there.”

One trouble with this generous plan is that some college students, not comprehending the true value of their birthright, may sell it for a mess of pot. Another is that the Barzun scheme short-circuits the delightful process of earning a PhD. You may object to my use of the word “de-

lightful”—*distasteful*, I can hear you saying, would be more like it. Well, as a successful but exhausted PhD candidate, you can be pardoned for viewing the matter somewhat narrowly and through a glass darkly. I, as the successful husband of a successful candidate, am still able to maintain a broad and cheerful outlook. In any case, now that it is finally over—now that another scholar has been initiated and another sheep has been skinned—permit me to make you this modest commencement offering: a minithesis on being the husband of a PhD-seeker.

As Barzun delicately hints, it is not just a piece of cake. I found the role exacting—and I have something more in mind than the extra household chores that fell to me while you labored at a scholar's desk. (Anyway, as you know, I let most of those chores slide by, having sold my birthright for a messy cottage.) The first thing I noticed about being the husband of a PhD-seeker was that people paid me more compliments, but in ways that were puzzling and worrisome.

“I think you're being an awfully good sport about this,” a friend said

to me one evening, several years ago, over a beer.

“About what?” I asked.

“Oh, you know. Your wife's PhD and all that.”

My friend's mysterious sympathy, as I recall, was the initial hint that in some circles I was thought to be *suffering through* your PhD. You, on the other hand, were probably considered by these same circles to be having a good time. I did nothing, at the outset, to dispel either notion.

At a dinner party a few months later, I found myself seated next to an attractive woman who feigned a profound interest in your dissertation. I obliged with a thumbnail summary, but her attention soon wandered. “I wanted to go to graduate school, too,” she interrupted. “Joe couldn't see it.”

“Maybe he's the short-suffering type,” I mused.

“No, he's a very nice guy,” she answered. “What I think the trouble was, was his male pride. He just didn't want to take a backseat to any woman, not even his wife. *Especial-l*ly not his wife. You can't really blame him.”

She sipped her wine meditatively.

Then she touched my sleeve "Of course, you seem well, different Most men have strong male egos"

Maybe you can remember that we went home early that night I had a headache

The picture I got of myself at the time, as I gazed into other people's eyes, was that of an emasculated husband who did not have enough sense or ego to keep his wife in the backseat Not everyone held that opinion, of course, but it came up often enough to start me wondering

What I wondered about, mostly, was marital backseats Were they necessary? Was marriage simply a series of races, of competitions, with a winner and a loser for each race? What did friends and relatives mean when they inquired, oh so casually, whether I had ever considered going back to school, maybe getting a doctorate in something or other? They weren't wishing you ill, but I suspect they feared you were getting ahead in the education race, and they were telling me I still had a chance to beat you in the home-stretch In a funny way they were urging me on, because, in this man-made world, your sprinting had made them uneasy

Among other things, marriage is an imaginative form of symbiosis, yet our culture promotes a double symbiotic standard It holds that if a man rises in the world, his woman will rise with him, but if a woman rises, her man will fall Our literature is replete with this see-saw mythology In *Sister Carrie*, to mention one classic example, poor Hurstwood's decline makes a perfectly symmetrical countercurve to Carrie's ascent One gets the unmistakable feeling—though without any solid basis in the narrative—that the two careers are tragically bound together, and that Carrie's decision to "make it" on her own, without recourse to any man's money or protection, has somehow doomed Hurstwood

So Hurstwood dies a pauper—muttering "What's the use?"—lying

on a Bowery cot that cost him his last 15 cents And Carrie, a famous actress, sits in a rocker in her opulent apartment and contemplates her life "She could look about on her gowns and carnage, her furniture and bank account Friends there were Applause there was Beauty also and yet she was lonely." Then Dreiser drives home the lesson "Oh, Carrie, Carrie! In your rocking-chair, by your window, shall you dream such happiness as you may never feel"

Thus we learn from Dreiser that (a) a woman's success can be won only at the expense of a man's, and in any case (b) it leads to loneliness and unhappiness Do you wonder why so few women have sought doctorates?

TO SUM UP, Diane, the husband of a PhD-seeker has to keep his wits about him His love—both self- and uxorious—must be proof against all the sexist humbug of the Western world, all the see-saw speculations and macho mumblings of our great novelists and poets No mean challenge, *n'est-ce pas?*

Despite all this, or perhaps because of it, I have had a fine time watching you at work ("With what fortitude we watch another bear his burdens," observed Kipling) Reading over your shoulder, I have skimmed some of the cream off that murky deliquescence you call sociology, so that I am now able to distinguish my friends' church of St Marks from your friends' church of St Marx I can also parse Parsons (sort of), reason with Riesman and tell right from Wrong In short, you have helped to make me a sampling semisociologist, doubtless the worst kind Probably in any decent marriage, and maybe in some of the not so decent ones as well, each person tends to become a quirky and unpredictable version of his or her spouse Marriage is not a see-saw, it is a two-way funhouse mirror

Did I tell you how I spent the

time while you were before The Committee defending your dissertation? After we parted I went uptown and wandered around the West Side, finally venturing into the Museum of Modern Art There I bought a book containing some of Edward S Curtis' incomparable photographs of North American Indians, and was reminded in the preface that Curtis' 40-year documentation of Native American life, which resulted in a collection of 40,000 negatives, had been financed by John Pierpont Morgan

Artists and social scientists have always relied upon the rich for sustenance, which may be why it is the poor who are forever being photographed and scrutinized The system seems to suit the rich, who have organized tax-deductible foundations that reward sociologists for concentrating on the poor and never daring to investigate the wealthy I am glad that in your choice of a dissertation subject you spurned this baneful tradition, focusing on the new affluence of corporation managers, and it pleases me that I, the only foundation to heed your call, was able to "subsidize" the study

I left the museum and walked to a sidewalk florist on 54th Street It was almost time to meet you The man in the stall was wearing a light blue smock and an ill-fitting toupee

"How much is a carnation?" I asked

"I don't sell single carnations," he said "Why don't you buy a mini-basket?"

"What's that?"

"It's a small basket of carnations," he explained carefully "Is it such a small occasion?"

"My wife's getting her PhD," I said

The florist gave me a look that I interpreted to be admiring "No kidding?" he said "Well, you're taking it pretty well"

I bought the carnations from him anyway

Love,
Dick