

# States of the Union

## A GRADUATION LETTER

BY RICHARD J. MARGOLIS

*pocket calculator  
bicycle  
typewriter  
sax, trumpet, clarinet  
stereo*

**D**EAR PHIL,  
Thanks for submitting the list of possible graduation presents, as per your mother's and my request. On the whole it seems a worthy inventory of your tastes, talents and tendencies. We shall have a hard time deciding.

The typewriter is a sensible notion, but that's what we gave your brother three years ago for *his* graduation. Shouldn't we vary the routine? Besides, yours would be the fourth typewriter in this clacking household. One pictures ribbons and ribbons of words unwinding from our front door all the way to the Massachusetts border. O what a tangled web we'd weave!

If we decide to give you a musical instrument, I hope you will sometimes play it through the night. On our recent trip to France we found birds in the Loire Valley who sang both day and night, trans-

mitting a sense of clock-around jubilation. May the music you would make be as glad and winning.

What you have to sing about right now is your emancipation from the town's school system after 13 years of servitude. The reason you have spent nearly four-fifths of your life in this one place is because your mother and I feared the ill effects of transiency, not wanting to contend with all those psychological aches and pains that allegedly derive from moving about too much. So we didn't budge. Instead, we congratulated each other for having achieved *stability*, whereas you and your brother, trapped inside the local repetitive classroom scenario, may have felt at times that what your parents had achieved was *paralysis*.

Anyway, aside from the stereo, a suggestion fated for the limbo of benign neglect, all your recommendations remain in the "active" file. Also, I am pleased to observe, they remain in the *active voice*, in the sense that each requires you to put something in—be it breath or thought—before anything useful or

beautiful can come out. Your list is far from listless; among other things, the items on it discourage lollygagging, malingering and unseasonal languor.

"Art thou weary; art thou languid?" That, you will recall, is the hymn Simon Stimson asks the choir to sing near the end of Act I in *Our Town*. I thought your portrayal of the besotted choirmaster in last fall's high-school production was remarkably convincing; your Simon Stimson was not only weary and languid, he was bitter in the extreme. In fact—I confess it—you alarmed me, for how could you understand and capture his deep pessimism without yourself sharing some of it?

The choirmaster's final speech, uttered from the grave—the speech you delivered with such quiet ferocity—has always struck me as one of the eeriest laments in modern drama. Wilder notes that it's to be spoken "with mounting violence; bitingly":

"Yes, now you know. Now you know! That's what it was to be alive. To move about in a cloud

of ignorance; to go up and down trampling on the feelings of those . . . of those about you. To spend and waste time as if you had a million years. To be always at the mercy of one self-centered passion, or another. . . . Now you know them as they are: in ignorance and blindness."

But it is Mrs. Gibbs, fretting in a nearby grave, who has the last word. "Simon Stimson," she says indignantly, "that ain't the whole truth and you know it."

Of course you know it, too. The reason I sometimes worry, though, is that your generation seems particularly vulnerable to Stimsonitis. It's a sign of the times. A few years ago, kids your age could express their aspirations by marching and burning draft cards. Some of those protests may have seemed unduly strident to the rest of us, but at least they were fundamentally hopeful. Protest, after all, is basically an optimistic pastime; like politics, its more respectable sibling, it presumes that life can eventually get better.

I am not sure your generation believes that any longer. Protest, it appears, has shaded into irony, a condition that frequently disguises despair. Irony is "an insult conveyed in the form of a compliment," or a moan conveyed as a laugh. Its characteristic gesture is a shrug; one shrugs off the burden of knowledge too painful to bear. One ceases to hope.

It is easy to identify a generation of pessimists: They have no children. They remind one of Braz Cubas, the ghostly, cynical narrator of Machado De Assis' novel, *Epitaph of a Small Winner*. Like Simon Stimson, Braz speaks from the grave. He surveys the plusses and minuses of his life and concludes that they total an ultimate zero—except for a single saving grace-note: "I had no progeny, I transmitted to no one the legacy of our misery." He is thus "a small winner."

It is a terrible thing, don't you think, to count barrenness a victory. Yet many of your contemporaries feel they can strike a blow for the future simply by neglecting to populate it. That's because their heads are stuffed with vague notions of "pop-zero" ecology and women's lib, and their best biological impulses are withering atop the dunes of modish rhetoric.

Did you see Nancy and Chip McGrath's apologia a few Sundays ago in the *New York Times Magazine*, where they actually explained why they had mustered all their courage and—you guessed it—had a baby? Apparently, people who have been



educated at eastern colleges no longer have children. Rather, they become aunts and uncles to children whose parents have attended schools in Middle America. I am pleased you will be going to Oberlin.

**P**RETTY SOON, one hopes, all this self-imposed aridity will be behind us. The McGraths may be among the early songbirds of a new dawn. (Maybe they have been to the Loire Valley!) As a case in point, I got a letter yesterday from a young friend announcing that "my bride is in a family way. . . . I am attempting to adjust to this rather remarkable change

in our life style. Perhaps you have some wisdom on the art of child rearing." He also said that he and his wife Peggy were "off tomorrow to Davenport, to enable my relatives to look at Peggy's stomach for a few days. It will be . . . the moment they've all been waiting for in Davenport, Iowa."

When I read this letter to your mother, she said, "It's nice to see the world continue." I agree—but what shall I tell the poor fellow about "the art of child rearing?" It is less an art than it is a series of opportunities, most of them missed. The single piece of advice that comes to mind is one you will instantly recognize: *If your child steps on a hornets' nest, get him out of there fast.*

How old were you then? Nine or ten, I should judge. I remember you screaming bloody murder in a way I had never heard you scream before. I ran outside and saw you crouching under the willow tree, your arms stiff at your sides. At first I couldn't understand you—you weren't exactly making yourself clear. But then I got close enough to hear the hornets angrily buzzing around your head.

"Run!" I shouted. "Run into the house!" But you didn't move. It was as if the stings had paralyzed you.

I took a deep breath, lowered my head and ploughed into that stinging swarm. You grabbed my hand and we dashed toward the house, the hornets buzzing and biting as we went. When you stripped and jumped into the tub, there were still hornets, the color of dried blood, on your back and legs. Your face had puffed up like a muffin.

Does it surprise you to learn that the memory of all that pleases me? Children nearly always hurt in ways that parents do not understand. It is unusual for a parent to share his child's stings. I am glad I shared yours that day.

Love,  
Dad