Franklin’s “Scientific Amusements”

His exploding “thunder house” gives electrifying proof of the value of pure knowledge.
BLUE COLLAR, CRIMSON BLAZER

Recollections of class on campus.

by M. ELAINE MAR

I remember the exact moment I became intimidated by Harvard College. It happened in September 1984, on the steps of Thayer Hall, the week before freshmen were due to arrive in Cambridge. I had come early, along with other members of the incoming class (all financial-aid recipients) who needed the extra money we could earn by cleaning the freshman dorms. Difficult as the work was, I felt comforted by our shared experience. The brochures were not lying, I thought in relief—I was not the only one who was short of cash and having trouble financing a Harvard education. And my future classmates were not so scary; SAT scores shrink in importance when you’re scrubbing out toilets and mopping floors. Roaming Harvard Square with them in the packs so characteristic of students, I was lulled into a false sense of community.

One day, having finished our work, we settled on Thayer’s steps and started complaining about federal policies on student aid. These were the Reagan years, and we were concerned about recent cutbacks, which could affect us quite directly.

“What’s the new income cut-off?” someone wondered.

“Something low,” I speculated cautiously, testing the group to see just how similar our backgrounds were. “Maybe $30,000?” I suggested, naming a figure that was nearly twice my family’s total annual income.

The response was a disdainful scoff: “No way! Then my family would be way out of it.”

By the time the rest of the freshmen arrived, I had the good sense to feel out of place. If these were the financial-aid recipients, I reasoned, the other students must be even wealthier. Watching prep-school alumni find each other, and seeing Harvard fathers rediscover old roommates, I quickly realized that it was more than money that I lacked.

When I was accepted into the class of 1988, my parents did not know what Harvard College was. Immigrants with little education, they were immune to the Ivy League mythology; they knew only that they wanted me to attend college. Since I could not rely on them for guidance, I had applied to Harvard on the advice of my high-school English teacher, who insisted on writing me a recommendation for Radcliffe. So, saying my mute goodbyes at the Denver airport, I came East to fulfill a dream that was partly my teacher’s, partly my parents’, and only partly my own. I carried with me a vague hope that at last I would be among peers who did not look at me strangely for wanting to discuss the nature of being. (As it turned out, occasionally they still would.) But I had not counted

In a cover article about Harvard in 1941, Life magazine ran this photograph with the following caption: “Harvard’s ‘commuters,’ graduates of local high schools, travel to Harvard Square every day. The lowest undergraduate social stratum, once derided as ‘untouchables’ and long neglected by the administration, they now have their own center, Dudley Hall (above), and are organizing to have a voice in undergraduate affairs.”

Reprinted from Harvard Magazine. For more information, contact Harvard Magazine, Inc. at 617-495-6746.
Charles W. Eliot, a succession of Harvard presidents has fought that image, stressing high academic standards instead of high social ones. Speaking at his inauguration in 1869, Eliot insisted that most students were "neither poor nor rich," emphasizing that "the poor student with quality will get through." Several decades later, President James Bryant Conant wrote in his report for the academic year 1932-33, "To accomplish its mission Harvard must be a truly national university...we should be able to say that any man with remarkable talents may obtain his education at Harvard whether he be rich or penniless." Meeting such egalitarian goals became easier immediately after World War II, when the GI Bill made federal funds available to returning veterans desiring a college education. During these years Harvard began making admissions decisions without regard to the applicant's ability to pay—an early version of the "need-blind" policy that remains in effect today. To facilitate this policy, in 1952 Conant appointed the first dean of ad-

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missions and scholarships, noting the "importance of close integration of scholarship policy and admissions policy."

By the time I entered the applicant pool, that position had been renamed "dean of admissions and financial aid," and Dean L. Fred Jewett '57 was expressing concern about the low number of incoming students like me—those from families with no college background. For my class of '88, that low number was 180—only 11 percent of the total. In his report for the academic year 1983-84, Jewett wrote, "[the] long-term downward trend...has concerned us for some time." The previous year, he had made the same observation, adding that "the number of applicants from blue-collar or other low income family backgrounds continued to decline."

Apparently there had been little remediation of a situation that had existed at least since 1974, when Jewett commented, "Clearly the image of Harvard as an expensive university—out of normal reach for the average or poor family—is having an effect on our applicant pool . . . . Unless we can take corrective actions the increasing economic stratification of our applicant pool will inevitably affect over-all class quality as well as the goals of diversity."

1 Arnold Coran '59: "My family didn't do a lot of intellectualizing. I felt like a 'townie,' not a 'gownie.'"

Coran is chief of pediatric surgery at the University of Michigan.

on this feeling of inadequacy based on class—what Noam Chomsky has called "the unmentionable five-letter word."

By the end of Freshman Week, I was mimicking certain patterns of speech, saying "Exe" for "Exeter student," and explaining to a parent, "Oh, you're from the class of '58 as well!?" To which the alumnus said delightedly, "Yes! Is your father?!
And I had to explain that all I meant was, as well as all the other members of the class of '58 whom I had already met that day.

The most publicly embarrassing encounter was another conversation with an alumnus. A kindly man from a long line of Harvard graduates, he shared with me all the advice he had already given his son. He seemed genuinely curious about my interests and hobbies and anxious to help me make the most of my college experience. Then, remarking on how proud my parents must be, he asked, "Where did they go to college?"

"They didn't go to college," I replied.

He was so confused by this answer that after a few awkward "oh's" and some frantic chewing of the ice from his glass, he excused himself to get another drink. Sometime later I discovered his son's middle name adorning one of the buildings in the Yard.

The man had not meant to hurt me; he simply did not understand a world where some people didn't go to college. Indeed, I was to find that many of my fellow students would have the same reaction. As diversified and egalitarian as I believed late-twentieth-century America to be, it was in fact a society stratified by social class. At Harvard, such interactions taught me just how strong the class differences were.

Perhaps it is the American presumption of equality that makes its contrast with reality cut so deeply. Professor of sociology emeritus Lee Rainwater comments, "In everyday life we go around thinking we're all pretty much the same. There are implicit differences, but we don't talk about them, because we usually don't bump into disjunctions. For instance, at work there are class differences, but these are expected, due to positions such as 'boss' and 'secretary.' We ignore these differences because of the implicit power structure. Only in a place like a university will the disjunctions occur, when people of different classes are expected to be peers. Then it's like the saying, 'Some are more equal than others.' Harvard is just the most extreme case of that experience."

If I realized as an undergraduate that there were others in my situation, I didn't dare seek them out. I was too scared that drawing attention to my social ineptitude would force Harvard to acknowledge that I had been an admissions error. Sometime after my fifth class reunion, this fear began to fade; I became interested in the experiences of other students from working-class backgrounds. I have since spoken to a number of alumni from the past 60-odd years and found that many of us shared feelings of invisibility and isolation.

As early as 1643, Lady Anne (Radcliffe) Mowllon gave £100 sterling to help finance the education of poor scholars. By 1840 Harvard had introduced a loan system, gradually shifting to it as the primary form of student aid. Nevertheless, the College's scholarship fund continued to grow, receiving a major boost in 1852 when the Alumni Association exerted each class to raise resources for scholarships. By 1878 Harvard had the best-funded scholarship program in the nation.

Despite these efforts, the relatively high cost of a Harvard education in the early part of the nineteenth century earned Harvard a reputation as a "rich man's college." Beginning with Harvard Magazine. For more information, contact Harvard Magazine, Inc. at 617-495-5746
Today, approximately two-thirds of the student body receive some type of financial aid. The present dean of admissions and financial aid, Bill Fitzsimmons '67, was himself a working-class student. He reiterates Harvard's commitment to remaining accessible to students from across the economic spectrum, saying, "I remember believing that Harvard was for rich people. It's important for people to know that's not true."

Commendable as the University's work has been, however, the issue is not merely one of recruitment or financial aid. Once admitted and enrolled, working-class students face tremendous social pressures, precisely because there are so few of us present. Rainwater says of his time teaching at Harvard, "For many years I taught a course on 'the urban working class.' I never asked, but I had a feeling that about half the people who took it were from that background. It seemed clear to me that Harvard was not a place where it was easy to be a working-class student. Although Harvard has moved toward admissions that are not based on ability to pay, its culture has not moved to that point. Harvard has not taken its own culture into account."

For my part, I was horrified to discover that the Harvard culture included Caribbean trips, dance lessons, and tennis camp. Not only was my family unable to afford these symbols of leisure, they did not understand their value. I did not differentiate between middle-class students, whose parents had simply gone to college, and the truly wealthy, who might fly to Italy for the weekend on a whim. With my background, I thought that having even one of these things meant having it all.

Arriving at Harvard with hopes that intelligence would no longer mean social ostracism, few of my peers anticipated a new standard by which we would be found lacking. Kevin Jennings '85 grew up in rural North Carolina, one of five children his mother supported by cleaning houses and working at McDonald's. He first felt out of place when he saw a group of Andover alumni gathering on the steps of Widener. "It looked like there were 50 of them," he says. "I thought, 'I do not belong here at all.'"

Arnold Coran '59 had a similar reaction. "I remember my Humanities 2 section. All those prep-school kids and their button-down shirts. They had read those books already, and talked about them with their parents. There I was in my 'High School Harry' clothes, feeling uncomfortable. My family didn't do a lot of intellectualizing. I felt like a 'townie,' not a 'gownie.' It was like going through puberty late."

For Jennings, the culture shock was even more startling. "There's a really strong class system at Harvard that's not acknowledged," he says. "I feel like the people from prep schools are on a different track. The same with kids from public schools in Grosse Point, Lake Forest, Greenwich, or Newton. They all read those cultural frames of reference. So that's why there's no career counseling—we're privileged, we don't need to talk about careers, because everything will be okay.

"But I grew up in a trailer, and being afraid is my dominant memory," Jennings continues. "I was always afraid I wouldn't have another meal. I had no medical care. I saw a dentist maybe two times my whole life. I was so scared that I wouldn't succeed at Harvard, and I would lose my scholarship. I thought I would end up working at Au Bon Pain."

Fear and embarrassment motivate some students to conceal their working-class origins. I quickly learned to evade, or even lie, in order to avoid the agonies suffered Freshman Week. I spent the next four years creating excuses for my parents' failure to visit me, and pretending that I really would rather stay in the dorms over the Thanksgiving and spring breaks to get work done.

One member of the class of '58, who requested anonymity, empathizes: "In the days that I was there, Harvard was not particularly accommodating to those of us who were impoverished—but I didn't expect them to know what my life was like, because there were so few of us there. I had no help. I was left alone. I never knew what to expect. My ideas of success were undefined, and I had nobody to ask. My parents couldn't provide guidance on what classes to take. In a week, I knew more about college than my parents did."

He remembers being invited to dinner at a friend's house in Brookline. At the end of the evening, he walked back to Cambridge, not wanting to reveal that he could not afford subway fare. He occupied his student days "trying not to spend money"; some days his major meal would be a 25-cent bowl of soup from the Hayes-Bickford Cafeteria. Today, he chuckles at the memory: "Crackers came with that, but they used to give me an English muffin instead. I think it was because I looked

Kevin Jennings '85: "There's a really strong class system at Harvard that's not acknowledged." Jennings is executive director of Gay, Lesbian, and Straight Teachers Network in New York City.
so forlorn." On other occasions he might eat for free at a Chinese restaurant where he had befriended the owner. Despite hard times, he describes his Harvard years as "interesting and liberating," adding, "The experience left me feeling that I could try anything, and the worst that could happen is that I would end up poor. I already knew what that was."

The struggle of working-class students to fit in at Harvard often strains relationships with their less-educated parents. By his sophomore year, Coran "felt tuned in," and Harvard became "one of life's great experiences." At the same time, his relationship with his family suffered. Coran felt embarrassed by his parents, because of the difference in their intellectual backgrounds. He says that it took a long time for him to develop a "more mature view" of his father, realizing that "the difference was in level of education, not intelligence."

Like Coran, I had never discussed literature or philosophy with my parents. We talked about our health, the weather, that night's dinner—all in Cantonese, since they do not speak English. While at Harvard, I ran out of words to communicate with my parents. I literally did not have the Cantonese vocabulary to explain the classes I was taking or my field of concentration.

Susan Cronin Ruderman '84 says that her parents did not support her college education either financially or emotionally. Her mother had dropped out of high school, and her father had gone to a trade school; neither parent expected Ruderman to do anything other than get a job after finishing high school. When Susan applied to Harvard "on a lark," her parents thought it was just another act of adolescent rebellion. When she got in and worked out the financing on her own, her mother reacted in fear. "I was going to do something that my mom didn't do—it made her feel inadequate," she says.

In contrast, Mary Muchmore '88 received plenty of parental encouragement. She was uncomfortable only when trying to reconcile her family life with her college life. While her dorm mates talked about debutante balls, finishing school, and their parents' professions, Muchmore thought, "What am I going to do, invite them to Lynn so my mother can serve them Cheez Whiz?"

In some ways, Harvard is only a microcosm of the surrounding social structure, reflecting prevailing attitudes about race and gender as well as class. Jennings was able to have some good times. "It was like a life raft out of North Carolina," he recalls. "I didn't get beat up for being smart anymore."

Emile Godfrey '72 found that the political climate of the late 1960s eased his adjustment. First marshal of his class, Godfrey grew up in New Orleans and attended an all-black, all-male Catholic high school. His father was a truck driver whose education had ended at the eighth grade, and his mother cleaned houses to supplement the family income. "It was fashionable to be me during that period," he says. "Being black and poor was okay then, when it was much more interesting to be all those minorities. I try not to worry about it, just keep on going forward. Maybe in some small way all those people changed because of me."

Living in a more rigidly structured society, poor students in the 1930s were unable to find this kind of solace. Then, undergraduates from modest backgrounds typically economized by attending college as "day students"—living at home and commuting to Harvard and its classes. Of course, this meant that they missed out on much of the undergraduate experience, insofar as that depended on residing on-campus. Little-noticed because of their small numbers and their exclusion from Harvard social life, marked by their commuter status, they were once referred to as "the untouchables," according to a 1941 issue of Life magazine.

Harry Katseff '35 was a Depression commuter. A chemistry concentrator, he lived in the old West End of Boston and would commute in to Harvard each morning at nine. He stayed until his chemistry lab ended at five or six in the afternoon and then took off to Charlestown, where he worked in a cigar shop until midnight, then returned home to study until he fell asleep, only to start all over again the next day. "A drab existence," he sighs, apologizing for knowing so little of Harvard. "You asked me about my college life. What college life? That was my college life."

Katseff met his one Harvard friend due to the alphabetical seating arrangement in his chemistry class. The friend convinced him to go to his 25th class reunion, the only one he's attended. That week Katseff lived on campus for the first time. "In Lowell House I looked around," he recalls, "and I couldn't believe it was the same university I went to."

A member of the class of 1933, who requested anonymity, earned spending money by tutoring wealthier students, but never became friendly with them. Thinking back to that time, he says: "I took notes for people, I even wrote term papers for all the rich kids who couldn't be bothered to go to classes because they were too busy skiing. They were always polite to my face, they always paid me fairly, but nobody ever invited me back to their rooms. I only heard stories about the rooms and the skiing."

He remembers that commuter students were "second-class citizens" who ate lunch every day in the basement of Phillips Brooks House. "We would descend into the Black Hole of Calcutta," where we had a place to hang our coats and hats. For five cents we could get a cup of milk or cocoa. But we talked to nobody and knew nobody." Asked if he has any good memories of college, the alumnus looks away. "I got through," he says, "and that's what counts."

Since class distinctions are forged outside the University's

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Emile Godfrey '72: "It was fashionable to be me during that period." Godfrey is now vice president of corporate affairs at Guidant Corporation in Indianapolis.
walls, casing the resulting conflicts within them is a daunting task. Many working-class alumni recommend a more receptive advising system. In my own case, youthful fear, social pressure, and academic competition were powerful inhibitors to my asking for help.

Kevin Jennings, a former high-school teacher, remains skeptical about recommending Harvard to potential applicants. Co-founder and now executive director of the New York-based national organization Gay, Lesbian, and Straight Teachers Network (GLSTN), he says, "There's no advising [at Harvard]. It's all 'sink or swim.' My adviser had nothing to say to a gay, white-trash boy from the South. I guess I didn't look like I needed help, because I was white and I was getting good grades."

Ruderman agrees. "There is no advising to speak of. Advisers seem to think they're there to give intellectual advice only," she says. "But it's connected. I might have taken more academic risks if I didn't have to worry about money. Sometimes I took classes based on how many books were required [for purchase] and whether I could read them at the library." When she attempted to talk about her situation with one administrator, Ruderman was told, "Work through it." She shakes her head at the memory: "Like it's something to work through and overcome. Maybe the University Health Services can give us some inoculations."

University-sanctioned attempts to resolve the problem have been short-lived. Greg Johnson '72, executive director of Phillips Brooks House, facilitated a support group for working-class students in the mid-1980s. The group of approximately 50 students met two or three times before dissolving.

"After the initial catharsis, we had nowhere to go," Johnson explains. "We couldn't just keep on talking about how we felt, and we couldn't figure out what course of action to take."

Robert Read, Ed.D. '87, a psychologist at the Bureau of Study Counsel, a center that offers educational and emotional support to Harvard students, tried a therapeutic approach during the 1989-90 academic year. He convened weekly sessions, including both graduate and undergraduate students, to discuss issues of common concern. Students found the meetings valuable, he says; the undergraduates particularly appreciated the advice of the older students. Unfortunately, due to time constraints, the bureau has not been able to offer the group since.

Both of these strategies assume the student's willingness to admit to a working-class background. But many of us have struggled with our identities. When I asked Mary Muchmore to describe her experience, she responded reluctantly, "I feel like I'm 'coming out.' I would never have gone to a support group. [Not having money] was hard enough. I wouldn't have wanted to be more stigmatized by going to a group for it."

As an undergraduate, I was equally insecure. I am unwilling to say that I was ashamed of my family, yet I was not honest about my circumstances during those years. Through these conversations with fellow alumni who shared their stories, I have discovered the value of my past.

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