

*Apathy, Passion, and  
Alexander Supertramp*  
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One of the tragedies of youth is that it is cool not to care. It is cool not to give a damn about things that make you uncomfortable. We teachers see it in the classroom and every generation of old people complains about the apathy of the young. As the framework for my complaining, I will use the book *Into the Wild* by Jon Krakauer, which we asked all of you to read. The central theme of this book is the question of whether we should laugh at, or admire, Chris McCandless – who liked to call himself Alexander Supertramp. I believe that the author’s aim was to use this true story to make us see our own apathy, and to make us realize how difficult it is for us to respect a person who was as intellectually passionate as Alex Supertramp.

When I first picked up this book, I demonstrated the apathy of the young people I am here to whine about. I asked: “Why do I have to read this book?” But after reading it I saw that this collective assignment was an excellent way for the College to show you, even before arriving on campus, that our purpose as a liberal arts college is to foster intellectual passion. Our purpose is to make you

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*Convocation Address, August 28, 2000, by the winner of the Beachley Award for Distinguished Performance by a faculty member with less than six years of service*

read things you wouldn't otherwise read, and to make you think about things you wouldn't otherwise think about. In this spirit, our intention was to send the signal that you are entering an intellectual community and not a vocational institute.

Most of you come here directly from high school. You are familiar with apathy, either in your former classmates, or perhaps you embodied this apathy when you mocked those "brown-nosing" students who sat in the front of class and always had their hand raised. This book is a direct attack against apathy. It is a glorification of passion. But it is disturbing that so many people take this story as an affirmation of their apathy.

After reading the book, I read several letters and editorials about it. In a bizarre way, many people have perverted Alex's life story into a justification for their smug anti-intellectualism. After all, these critics argue, how can we admire someone like Alex, who completely rejected the comfortable, secure material life that we all know is the highest aim of every human? Ironically, Alex Supertramp is the kind of person who makes it easy for us to embrace the culture of apathy. He allows us to laugh at intellectual intensity as the drug for those idealistic lost souls who have lost touch with the practical, real world.

It is very hard to convince you to resist the comfortable life of apathy. First, because this apathy is a powerful defensive impulse in almost all young people, and second, because the culture of apathy has spread into so much of our society. Today, you don't need to restrict your apathy to quiet snickering in the back of a classroom, or to primitive ranting in a dorm room. Much of society now reinforces and even rewards apathy.

This is very clear in the changing attitudes regarding education. Many of you are here primarily to receive practical training for a decent entry level job upon graduation in four years. On the fringes of this practical training you will tolerate some intellectual fluff, but only because we won't give you a diploma without it. This is the anti-intellectual, apathetic view of education that runs directly against the ideals of a liberal arts education. With this view you will fight every effort by us to awaken in you some intellectual passion. Your weapons in this fight will be a few simple questions: "What is the relevance of this stuff to my future career?" and "Do we need to know this stuff for the test?"

In a letter to Ron Franz, Alex wrote:

I'd like to repeat the advice I gave you before, in that I think you really should make a radical change in your lifestyle and begin to boldly do things which you may previously never have thought of doing, or been too hesitant to attempt. So many people live within unhappy circumstances and yet will not take the initiative to change their situation because they are conditioned to a life of security, conformity, and conservatism, all of which may appear to give one peace of mind, but in reality nothing is more damaging to the adventurous spirit within a man than a secure future. The very basic core of a man's living spirit is his passion for adventure. The joy of life comes from our encounters with new experiences, and hence there is no greater joy than to have an endlessly changing horizon, for each day to have a new and different sun. If you want to get more out of life, Ron, you must lose your inclination for monotonous security and adopt a helter-skelter style of life that will at first appear to you to be crazy. But once you become accustomed to such a life you will see its full meaning and its incredible beauty.<sup>1</sup>

When I first read this passage, it fired me up. I wanted to adopt a “helter-skelter style of life” and leave behind my life of material security and conservatism. But then I remembered that I had a wife, two kids, and a house and if I hit the road I would lose my job, and I wouldn't be able to speak to you about apathy and passion. In the face of life's realities, passion often fizzles. Unlike Alex, I don't mock anyone for being concerned about future financial stability. Likewise, I will not criticize any of you for seeking solid practical job training. The problem, however, is when you view this training as the focus, as opposed to one part of your four years at Juniata. But the crucial question in all of this is: Why is this narrow focus a “problem”?

I could talk for hours about the value of broadly educated citizens for a free society. C.S. Lewis wrote: “If education is beaten by training, civilization dies.”<sup>2</sup> But I know that such abstract ideals mean little to an 18 year old who thinks in terms of narrow, practical, personal interests. Thus, why should you give a damn about

becoming an intellectual? Because, you have the opportunity over the next four years to become a flexible and sophisticated critical thinker, who can speak and write well. These are the most powerful job skills you can acquire. The only thing holding you back from this is your own cynical apathy. Do you want to train yourself for your first job? Or do you want also to acquire the skills that will make you excel throughout life? A nice way to capture this is to question whether you are going to limit your challenges, or allow yourselves to challenge your limits?

What is the relevance of lifting weights to playing volleyball? The narrow, practical approach to coaching the volleyball team would be to make sure all the players know the rules of volleyball. You would then need only a few practices to discuss strategy. There is no point in working out, because the bench press is not part of the game. In this sense, weight lifting is to sports as the liberal arts are to job training. This means Coach Smith is the humanities department of the athletic program. All of the coaches rely on Coach Smith to torture their players and to turn them into athletes. In the gym, I see students who would never question the relevance of all the strange things that Coach Smith makes them do. I am jealous of the way they passionately carry out every drill he thinks up. But many of these same students refuse to accept the relevance of a literature course to their training as a future lawyer or banker.

Our job is to train you by teaching you to think. Our ideal is to create in you a passion to teach yourself. I have found that all of the top students I have met at Juniata were “A” students not because they have disciplined study habits. They are 4.0 students because they have a genuine passion for learning. Their academic discipline is a product of their intellectual passion, not of their greed for big future paychecks, although their passion will certainly bring the money, if that’s what they want.

I am now going to make some specific suggestions for simple steps you can take to bring some intellectual passion into your time here at Juniata. I have come up with a list of eleven things:

- 1) Don’t go home until Thanksgiving, no matter how much your parents cry.
- 2) If you have a car on campus, sell it, and buy some good books and CDs.

- 3) If you have a boyfriend or girlfriend back home, dump him or her. You have entered a new circle of friends and intimate relationships. Besides, long distance relationships don't work, and they just become a serious distraction to what you need to accomplish here.
- 4) Become good friends with some international students. Likewise, to the international students: become good friends with the American students.
- 5) Study a foreign language. This is the most rewarding job training you can undertake, and you will most likely never have another chance to throw yourself into a foreign language.
- 6) Build study abroad into your POE. Every student who studies abroad says that it was the best part of their college experience. And don't let anyone tell you can't go abroad. Everyone can fit it into their POE and everyone can find a program that is right for them.
- 7) Take the minimum number of courses needed in your POE. I was recently tailgating at a Washington Redskins football game when I met a man who is a brain surgeon at a D.C. hospital. When I told him what I do, he ordered me to tell all my students not to waste their precious few years of college taking courses only in their major. He told me, "As an obsessive pre-med major, I got excellent training, but I didn't get an education."
- 8) Following the theme of point seven, take as many literature and history courses as possible. The Bible says: "With all your knowledge, get understanding." It is impossible to be apathetic when you read good novels (which was Alex's obsession). If you wish to be a deeper person, take these courses. But then, it is very cool to be shallow.
- 9) Ask your professors for more reading, but get smelling salts from the athletic trainer first.
- 10) Tell your professors they are wrong, and then provide some support for your argument.
- 11) Join a club. The Model UN and Rugby clubs are the dual homes of passion at JC.

Finally, if Alexander Supertramp had known that potato seeds were poisonous, he wouldn't have died so pathetically in an old bus

in the Alaskan wilderness. Eventually, he would have returned to suburban Washington, D.C. I believe he would have channeled his intensity into a traditional career track, perhaps as an author, and he would have become far more famous than he is now as the dead hero of an inspiring book. I am in awe of him, because of how unique he was. What set him apart from all of us was that his passion gave him control of his destiny. This book made me think of a passage from Immanuel Kant: “Enlightenment is man’s leaving his self-caused immaturity. Immaturity is the incapacity to use one’s intelligence without the guidance of another. Through laziness and cowardice a large part of humanity, even after nature has freed them from external guidance, gladly remain immature.”<sup>3</sup> Alex was the antithesis of this self-caused immaturity.

In a practical appeal to each of you, don’t waste these four years smugly rejecting things that make you use your brain. Even if you fall into a comfortable apathetic view of education, your Juniata diploma will probably get you a good job. But why would you voluntarily be so short-sighted as to cling to a narrow view of education? If you do, some day you will be working for the brown-nosing, intellectually passionate geek who sits in the front row of all your classes.

#### NOTES



<sup>1</sup>Jon Krakauer, *Into the Wild* (New York: Random House, 1996), 56-57.

<sup>2</sup>Cited in: Vigen Guroian, “Why Should Businessmen Read Great Literature?” *Religion and Liberty* (Volume 12, No. 4), 2002.

<sup>3</sup>Immanuel Kant, “What is Enlightenment? (1784),” In *The Philosophy of Kant* (New York: Modern Library, 1949), 132.