Technical vs. Liberal Education

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Abstract

Tom: (throwing book he has been studying across the room) God, I’m sick of this T. and A.M.!
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An Eccentric Philosopher Debates with an Eccentric Engineer

Scene: A college dormitory room. Tom and Howard are studying.

Tom: (throwing book he has been studying across the room) God, I'm sick of this T. and A.M.! In fact, when I think about it, I'm sick of the whole damn school. If I had the sense of a . . . a . . . philosophy major (no reflection, fella), I'd be laying bricks.

Howard: (still holding his book, eager to get back to it) Take it easy, will you? You don't mean that anyway . . .

Tom: That's what you think. But say, will I be set once I get that little old sheepskin in my breast pocket . . . they're screaming for engineers.

Howard: You sound as if your education is just an obstacle to be overcome.

Tom: That's just about how it is. But when it's over, I'll write my own ticket, and boy, am I gonna make up for all the time I've spent rotting away behind these books. Say, Howie, what does a (clears throat loudly) philosophy major do to make up for lost time?

Howard: Lost time? I'll never have lost time as long as there is a great book to read, a great idea to think about, a new truth to find . . .
Tom: (cutting him off) Yeah, yeah, I know, but what do you do, Howie? What happens when the party is over?
Howard: Oh, I don't know . . . there's plenty of time . . .
Tom: Sure, but what happens when they shove you out in the cold cruel world and you get dragged down out of your fluffy white clouds by the great truth that you're hungry? Just exactly what are you gonna do after you graduate?
Howard: Oh, go back to school, I guess—I'll probably go on for my Ph. D. in something.
Tom: That's what I like about you, Howie—a nice clear set of plans for your future!
Howard: My only plans for now are to learn all I possibly can in the time I have—and that's pitifully little . . . I could spend every minute for the next thousand years studying, and not begin to appreciate all there is to know . . .
Tom: You're right; you could—so why waste your time trying? Man, get back in this world and try learning what it takes to make a living.
Howard: Make a living? That doesn't seem too important to me at the moment.
Tom: Oh, it doesn't, huh? Look, Howie, times have changed since what's-his-name—that Greek that finished himself off with poison back in the dark ages. This is the U.S.A., 1954, and PROGRESS . . .
Howard: (breaking in) Progress! What's progress but a bunch of automatic little people automatically writing down verbatim what someone tells them is right . . .
Tom: Okay, okay . . .
Howard: . . . . and automatically writing the same thing from memory to pass the test and "get their sheepskins" and make a lot of money to spend on all the automatic things they've been learning to make? Tom, if you'd just try thinking . . .
Tom: Oh, no, not me. Not if I can help it. Waste of time.
Howard: You've never tried it.
Tom: Man, I had to take a Soc. course once, and everything we read just said what a mess the world is in, as far as I could tell. And then in class we thought . . . just sat and thought.
Howard: It's about time someone does.
Tom: Oh, don't think we got the world out of its mess . . .
we just thought about it. God! I couldn't stand it.
Howard: Somebody has to be brave enough to think about it.
Tom: Not me! Give me something that's down in black and white, with the questions on one page and the answers on the next.
Howard: Isn't that the pattern of the book you just threw across the room?
Tom: Sure, I get up to here with memorizing all those facts, but at least it's something you can get hold of.
Howard: Tom, it's no wonder you don't like school. Do you know what you are? You're just a little object being put through the same machine with a lot of other little objects and coming out a mass-produced engineer.
Tom: And, you know, it doesn't even hurt.
Howard: It should. Because you have no more chance to be an individual, to develop your own interests . . .
Tom: Engineering is my interest.
Howard: . . . than the machines you're learning to build.
Now, if you could at least choose some of your courses . . .
Tom: One of your "great ideas," huh, and running true to form — sounds good, but just doesn't work.
Howard: And why not?
Tom: Because how the hell do I know what it takes to be a good engineer? You never appreciate bad medicine till the stomach aches gone, but it's worth it.
Howard: Then if you think you have no interest in the Humanities, they should be required, because you have no idea what you're lacking.
Tom: Oh, sure, that's just what I need — some "required Humanities" when I can't get in all my engineering courses in four years without breaking my back. And all so I can find out what I'm lacking!
Howard: Is a year too much in gaining ideas and understandings which may change you from a technological robot to a living, understanding individual?
Tom: You said it — a year's too long, when I'm already spending four years in this hole, and four more in the Navy.
Howard: So? You have the rest of your life . . .
Tom: Oh, no, not me. Just figure out how old I'll be now before I can get married and start living my life, and see why I'm not interested in another year of school. Not mentioning the fact that I couldn't afford it anyway.
Howard: Did it ever occur to you that you might be a better engineer if you understood some things outside your particular field? Might even get a better job?
Tom: I doubt that. If an employer wants someone to think, he'll hire a guy to do it. And if he wants someone to make engines, he'll hire the guy who can make the best engines — period!
Howard: I don't believe it.
Tom: Kinda tough for you and your idealism to swallow, maybe, but that's how it is.
Howard: I can't help thinking that the world is in the "mess" you were talking about because a lot of people with skill beyond their understanding don't know what to do with the "scientific miracles" they've produced.
Tom: And you're gonna find the answer in that philosophy book, huh?
Howard: I don't know. Maybe no class will solve the problems of the world in one quarter, but if enough people start thinking intelligently, sooner or later someone will.
Tom: Right now, I don't give a damn about solving the problems of the whole world. I'm having enough trouble with this one small life of mine.
Howard: Small is the word for it.
Tom: Come off that, will you? Don't you think we need professional men with know-how?
Howard: Not narrow-minded ones!
Tom: I can't learn everything, and I'm not about to waste my life trying.
Howard: (muttering to self, exasperated) What's the use . . . narrow-minded, materialistic . . .
Tom: (picking up book and also muttering) Poor stupid dreamer . . .
Howard: You'll never even know . . .
Tom: Stupid, useless argument — I coulda been doing something!

—Ruth Frantz, H. Ec. Sr.