###### Opinion

# Education’s Hungry Hearts By MARK EDMUNDSON Published: March 31, 2012

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“EVERYBODY’S got a hungry heart,” Bruce Springsteen sings. Really? Is that so? At the risk of offending the Boss, I want to register some doubts.

Granted my human sample is not large — but it’s not so small either. I’ve been teaching now for 35 years and in that time have had about 4,000 students pass my desk. I’m willing to testify: Not all students have hungry hearts. Some do, some don’t, and having a hungry heart (or not) is what makes all the difference for a young person seeking an education.

There’s been a lot of talk lately about who should go to college and who should not. And the terms that have guided this talk have mainly been economic. Is college a good investment? Does it pay for a guy who is probably going to become a car mechanic to spend $20,000 to $30,000 going to a junior college for a couple of years? (I’m including the cost of room and board here.) He’s probably going to leave with a pile of debt that will take him years to work off. What’s more, the current thinking goes, he didn’t need that associate degree to end up with his job in the garage. Something similar is true for the young person who is going to become a flight attendant, a home health care aide, a limo driver or a personal security guard. It’s not a good investment, we’re told. It’s not the right way to spend your dough.

The implication here is that paying for college is like putting money into a set of stocks or a mutual fund. It’s an *investment*. If the money spent on college doesn’t result in an actual cash advantage, then you’ve made a mistake. If you end up not needing a college degree to pursue your professional life at all, then school was more than a strategic mistake: it was a complete waste. They saw you coming. You got yourself taken.

All of this may be true, but it’s true only for those students who showed up at college without the attribute Bruce Springsteen sings about (and in his way celebrates): a hungry heart. For kids who aren’t curious, alive and hungry to learn, going to college and then moving on to a job they could have had anyway is no doubt ill advised. But that’s not everyone. There are plenty of young people out there who will end up in jobs that don’t *demand* college degrees: yet college is still right for them.

Thirty-five years of teaching has taught me this: The best students and the ones who get the most out of their educations are the ones who come to school with the most energy to learn. And — here’s an important corollary — those students are not always the most intellectually gifted. They’re not always the best prepared or the most cultured. Sometimes they think slowly. Sometimes they don’t write terribly well, at least at the start. What distinguishes them is that they take their lives seriously and they want to figure out how to live them better. These are the kids for whom one is bought and sold. These are the ones who make you smile when they walk into your office.

How do they get this way? Why is it that some young people, often young people who have not had remarkable advantages, are so alive? They’re an amazing pleasure to teach even if their subject-verb agreement isn’t always what it might be and they don’t know what iambic pentameter is. I can teach them those things. What’s way harder to teach — maybe it’s impossible — is the love for learning and the openness to experience that these students bring to the seminar table.

TOO many current students conform to the description that Lionel Trilling offered in a famous passage from an essay called “On the Teaching of Modern Literature.” Trilling had been teaching his students Kafka and Blake, Nietzsche and Freud. “I asked them to look into the Abyss,” Trilling writes, “and, both dutifully and gladly, they have looked into the Abyss, and the Abyss has greeted them with the grave courtesy of all objects of serious study, saying: ‘Interesting, am I not? And *exciting*, if you consider how deep I am and what dread beasts lie at my bottom. Have it well in mind that a knowledge of me contributes to your being whole, or well-rounded men.’ ”

And the hungry ones, what about them? Why are there some people who don’t see the Abyss of modern literature as a mere cultural acquisition or the equivalent of a theme park ride? Freud says that vital curiosity in adult life often comes from a very active curiosity about sexual matters during childhood. But this seems too much of a reduction, even for Freud. I sometimes think that what the truly hungry students have in common is pretty simple: Their parents loved them a lot and didn’t saddle them with gross expectations, spoken or unspoken. These students aren’t adventurous because they’re insecure and uncertain. It’s very much the opposite. Students willing to risk their beliefs and values in school do so because they have confident beliefs and values to risk.

I had a childhood friend named Paul Rizzo. Paul had a hungry heart. He wanted to see everything, know everything, read everything, go everywhere. He had what you might call an associative mind, and he surely didn’t cold-cock his SATs. But he did want to learn. He went to some colleges; he took some courses. But I don’t think he ever got the quality of education he deserved. That kind of schooling was too often reserved for kids who aced their boards and charmed their teachers and were elected presidents of the Climbers Club by unanimous acclaim.

Paul is still out there, driving a cab, writing fiction, reading what he can and trying to figure it all out. He sees himself as an Everyman type, but not without aspirations of an intellectual and even spiritual sort. Not long ago he used the phrase “Hamlet with a coffee to go” in a note to me and that describes Paul pretty well. The Boss would probably like him, maybe even enough to slip him into a song. Hungry hearts — smart or slow, rich or poor — still deserve a place in the class.

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