

When I was in college, I had a friend named A.C. AC and I would spend hours passionately discussing issues and trying to get the other to understand what we were talking about. He and I would listen to lectures and talk ideas; we would scavenge old bookstores and discuss each find over cheap food. My favorite memory is how we loved words. We would discuss and argue about words for hours. For some reason, we had decided that the Oxford English Dictionary was the one authority we would both agree on. One day, I found a used two-volume OED and it was as if I had acquired treasures of gold and diamonds. We were poor lovers of wisdom.

Getting a degree can sometimes take the love out of learning. I remember telling someone on the day I gave my PhD defense that I would trade it all for a good nap. For years, I didn't even want to look at my dissertation, and still consider the final year of graduate school one of the bleakest in my intellectual life.

I found my way out of my funk. Research suggests that one of the best ways to stay intellectually young is to study new things outside of one's field. For the past decade, I have worked through nearly 90 teaching company courses, and for the past three years have been taking classes at the university where I teach. For the past three, I have also had a book club that I mostly run just hoping to meet other people and talk about books. I have friends in all sorts of fields and get to share their lives. I get a constant exposure to new ideas, new ways of thinking about the world outside of one scholarly discipline. After years of feeling overwhelmed, I am finally starting to see new connections.

Just as important, I have also been active outside of the ivory tower. I have pursued interests that have brought me into contact with a range of people and I have had the pleasure to see many different ways to live a life. I've been in quasi-legal poker games with a motorcycle gang where the only people I knew were my bowling buddies and I was the only person who didn't have a weapon; I've been to operas where I have been moved to tears and others where boredom took me to the same place; I've studied the history of jazz, classical, and rock and heard music that has moved my soul and some that has rolled my eyes; I've spent weekends with friends in muddy lakes solving the world's problems over beers and cigars; I've discovered hiking, camping, and the beauty of nature that can't be seen from a car or captured on film and can only be shared with the one you're with; I've found a group of people who also think it's a good idea to run around in the woods looking for cheap beer while singing dirty songs. I've learned these and more that aren't taught in any formal setting. It's a big world, and there's so much good and good people in it to discover.

I don't know where the future will take me, but for the first time in years, I feel like I am back in a dorm room where the only things that matter are talking about issues, making personal connections, and that love of learning that makes one excited to find a cheap secondhand copy of the small print OED. Come, walk with me in the mud.

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