

# Hamilton College

Clinton, New York

## Class and Charter Day Address 2002

May 10, 2002

### "Aspiration and Terror – Gifts from my Mentors"

by Sean K. Fitzpatrick '63



Sean Fitzpatrick '63

I have been asked to give you an eyewitness account of Hamilton College back in the old days of 1959 to 1963. And I agreed to do this despite an increasing number of senior moments, serious enough to cause me to glance down every now and then and make sure my fly is zipped or that I have remembered to put on pants at all. Luckily, these gowns cover a multitude of senior moments. I should give you one further caveat, gleaned from my many years of experience: Do not trust eyewitness accounts. I have often found them to be larded with biases and misrepresentations. . . .

One thing I am sure of and you can trust is that my memories of this incredibly beautiful campus are not altogether different from yours. It is always going to be a very, very cold winter filled with very interesting characters. But cold was not my first impression of Hamilton.

The class of '63 was in for a treat. The hot September of 1959 was marked by the grand opening of Dunham dorm. Whatever your impressions are, our experience was much worse, I guarantee you. The only things left of the road at that moment in time and at that location were ELS and the beginning of Root Glen and the forest that surrounded the stables. Directly behind Dunham was more forest.

The dolomite building blocks were, I believe, an orangish red, to match the slashes of earth still visible around the building. It looked like the earth had

vomited up a huge stone prison. The land was soft. The rumor was that Dunham was sinking back into the earth.

We heard rumors that ace geology Professor (David) Hawley had miscalculated and that the whole thing would disappear with a huge slurp one night, taking with it the entire freshman class, which, by the way, was composed of 240 freshmen from 16 states and 6 foreign countries. The total enrollment in September of 1959 was 709, up 27 from the previous year. By 1962, enrollment swelled to 830. No women around, with the exception of some faculty daughters (hands off) and the occasional scullery maid smoking outside of Commons.

What kind of boys were we? I am 60 years old, born in September of 1941. My peers have been described by demographers as the schizoid generation. To be born between 1941 and 1945 put your feet firmly in the depression and the boom, figuratively speaking.

The Class of '63 came to Hamilton dragging the nagging fears of depression values along with the optimism of the boom surging in their veins. In our later days, we were to know both fear and exhilaration, from the Vietnam debacle to the incredible boom time of the '90s. For four years, however, we would have time to prepare for both.

We were preppies and high school Harries. Jocks and nerds. Students and playboys. Sincere and wiseacres. We were all male, mostly white, primarily Protestant, largely from New York and surrounding states with a strong contingent of Roman Catholics and Jews to help our diversity scorecard, if there were one then, which there was not. There were very few African-Americans. The few that were here excelled in college and later life.

Our college boards put us into the top tier of entering freshmen in the USA, not high enough for Harvard, perhaps, but enough to make us quite certain we were capable of handling anything. We had yet to discover "**yes**" themes. I have searched the yearbooks and my cache of memories to find the single most vivid impression from that time. It was freedom. Despite the fact that we had condemned ourselves to existence on a windswept, forlorn hillside in the great nowhere, there was an incredible amount of freedom. We were free from prep school study halls and free from the watchful parental eye. We were free from our birthright responsibilities and we were free to eat and sleep and drink whenever and wherever we wanted, within the limitations of no cars, no televisions, no computers, no cell phones, no women. But we felt free.

As I sat down to capture memories of Hamilton, I became aware of my limitations. No matter how non-diverse we were, in today's terms, there were

experiences and moments diverse enough that I am insufficient to capture even a representative sample. So, I decided to try to see into the past through the eyes of my first roommates in Dunham dorm.

In our little suite, there were four citizens lodged on day one, looking at each other with great curiosity. I am going to mention five freshmen because one of the original four realized the other three were morons and moved out. The fellow who moved in was the nicest person and one of the best athletes I have ever seen. So, come with me now back into yesteryear. The sound track features a mélange of *Wake Up, Little Susie*; the Four Lads singing about *Moments to Remember*; Johnny Mathis crooning *Chances Are*, and Richard Berry's subversive mega-hit, *Louie, Louie*.

It is day one. Bright, sunny, overly warm September. Cars are depositing incoming freshmen at all Dunham orifices. Trunks, bags, boxes and stereos are hauled in like picnic droppings on ants. A huge Cadillac limousine lurches up, pulling a large boat. It circles Dunham and stops behind the dorm. That is rumored to be Douglas Benedict, the son of a wealthy financier. His sister was kidnapped the previous year by her chauffeur and held for ransom. Douglas is major news. Page 6, *New York Post* or *Enquirer* news. He does not stay long, however.

Another fellow pulls up. Takes out his bags. Walks up to the front door and enters. He finds his room. He eyeballs his new roommates. He turns around and walks back to the car. He drives away, never to be seen again. We, of course, elect him class president.

I have been at school a week already for early football practice. So has Ed Kenney, my new roommate. He is from New Jersey and plans to be an advertising man. Ed is very precise. He arranges his Keuffel & Esser logo slide rule and T-square perfectly on his desk and puts his gear away neatly. Ed looks like a cross between Clark Kent and an ancient Greek sculpture.

Tag Adams is perhaps six-four. He is a graduate of a real live, high quality, prep school, Hotchkiss, and a resident of New Canaan, Conn. His father brings him to our room and makes friends. He is even taller than Tag. We offer him a martini. He drinks all our gin and then says good-bye. Tag settles in, glad to be away from the strictures of Hotchkiss.

Ed and Tag will become ends. They are tall and finely muscled. I am big. I am a tackle, not a very good one, but big. Into this arena arrives a modest-sized fellow wearing geeky glasses. His name is Bruce Temple. He is wearing a Sherlock

Holmes hat and smoking a curved pipe. He is from Bloomington, Ind., and sounds an awful lot like Jimmy Stewart in *Mr. Smith Goes to Washington*. "Greetings," Bruce says. We look at each other.

We say, "Greetings."

The work stuns us. Trying to be football players and students at the same time appears to be an impossibility. As papers and hour exams come due, we are crazed. Bruce, on the other hand, does not play football. But he is also crazed. Instead of football, he spends his time running perfumed letters from his high school sweetheart under his nose. When he is not trying to snort these letters, he is figuring out ways to corrupt young maidens from Wells or Skidmore, or Cortland State or Cazenovia.

We have met Alexander Hamilton and he has kicked our butts.

After awhile, Bruce kicks our butts too. He is nice about it. He just moves out. We all feel very badly because we have not treated Bruce well.

Luckily, John Soffey moves in. John is a running back and the best natural athlete any of us has ever seen in person. He saves us from the sophomores when they try to make us wear beanies and not walk on the grass. John lifts one harassing fellow over his head and twirls him. The rest of them get the message. The class of '63 does not wear beanies. We also walk on the grass. John takes care of our studies, too. He explains that he is not a genius like us. Therefore, he needs to study. Therefore, we should be quiet and study too. John does not wear a funny hat or smoke a pipe. He has big muscles and a big grin. We listen to him and turn off the record player with the Johnny Mathis love songs. We shut up and study. Thank God.

All freshmen eat in Commons. Saga has the food contract. The food is awful. For the past four years, you, by contrast, have been eating gourmet food. One day we have fish. The next day we have steak dinners. The fish was packed over the steaks. The steaks taste like fish. The freshmen riot. Steaks are flying around Commons like swallows at Capistrano. Into the room comes the dean of students, Sidney Wertimer. Mr. Wertimer is a little shorter than Bruce is. This makes no difference. Mr. Wertimer is not amused. The freshmen will pay.

Interestingly, Saga's food serving habits improve after the food riot. Have we learned something about collective bargaining?

My grades are not good going into finals. I am in big trouble in geology. Dr. Hawley's Saturday morning lab is two hours of projecting slides. When he turns

on the sleep machine, I sleep. I have a 60 average. Everything depends on the final exam. If I fail geology, I lose my scholarship and my loan, and I am out on my ear.

The night before the geology exam, I go into the library, which is now the Christian Johnson building. I study like crazy. I realize that it is too late. I am doomed. I put the geology text down. I look around for amusement and find a book on dinosaurs. It is actually interesting. I read the whole book. I am ready to accept the inevitable.

The next morning, I go into the geology exam with dread. I open the exam sheet. I am dead. Wait a minute! The last question is: Make up a question and answer it. Five points for the question. Twenty points for the answer.

I remember paleontology and dinosaurs from the previous night's madness. I receive a full twenty-five of twenty-five points. My total score for the exam is 60. Dr. Hawley gives me a D. I don't deserve it. But I pass every subject. I keep my scholarship.

All of a sudden, it is second semester and what have we learned? We walked into Dunham with different backgrounds and different goals. We shared a Spartan and noisy dormitory. We shared miserable meals in Commons. We shared the isolation and loneliness that accompanied attending an all-male liberal arts institution in the boondocks with no televisions, no cars, no women and damn few telephones to call one. We shared overwhelming terror in realizing that we would have to stretch to just pass our courses. We shared all the weaknesses and malevolencies that humankind is heir to: the pettiness, the exclusiveness, the jealousies and the snobbery. And we shared a community, imperfect but real.

We learned we were not alone on that hilltop. Professors were there not only to instruct us but also to mentor us and guide us. They became friends and associates. The steelyeyed Mr. Wertimer became our protector as much as he was our enforcer. We were a Hamilton community. We were the Hamilton Continentals, every bit as sturdy as the lone Continental sentry that stands in the snow day and night, protecting our campus from ignorance and insensitivity.

Second semester introduced us to our first real intellectual challenges. We may have taken different classes leading to different majors but we all took English comp and public speaking. These two challenges unified our class and linked us with past Hamilton classes more than anything else. Public speaking provided an opportunity to make a fool of ourselves in public without benefit of party favors. English comp provided true terror in the form of the "**yes**" theme.

The **yes** theme was simple. You had to write five in-class **yes** themes and two out-of class **yes** themes. A **yes** theme has zero mistakes. No spelling mistakes. No grammatical mistakes. No logic mistakes. It is perfect. It is a **yes**. Anything else is a **no**.

**Yes** themes became the most political event on this campus through the years. They were eventually done away with sometime in the Seventies. Some called it curriculum reform. Some called it a cop-out because a wealthy alumnus's son left school after not being able to accomplish a sufficient number of **yes** themes. This may have cost the school some donations. Either way, you have been deprived of a wonderful experience: The sheer terror of knowing that this one has to be perfect; it has to be a **yes**.

Throughout the years, I have faced high-pressure deadlines in the news business, the movie business and the advertising business. I have never worried about them. I have faced the monster and I have conquered the **yes** theme. I am sorry you have never confronted one. If I were king for a day, I would reintroduce the **yes** theme requirement. In my mind, it was the defining experience at Hamilton College. My **yes** theme came to me in the person of Dr. John Crossett. He may have been the ugliest man I had ever seen. I know that his fellow faculty did not like him. Even today, when his name is mentioned, professors who knew him look left and then right before answering a question.

When I met him, he was a tall skinny man in a cheap blue suit with huge snagged green teeth, bad breath and outrageous ego. He looked down upon our class with a gleam in his eyes, which were shielded by thick lenses. He announced that Socrates was the smartest man who ever lived. He then said that he, John Crossett, was the closest thing to Socrates we would ever meet.

When we came face to face with John Crossett and the **yes** themes, I learned to respect pure terror and what it could motivate in me. I not only got my **yes** themes, but Dr. Crossett worked with me on a poem I had written. He made me write it repeatedly until it was perfect. Then he published it on his own press. I still have a copy to this day that I keep in a special place. Perhaps no one else will ever treasure this poem, but I will, because I know what produced it. Some years later, Dr. Crossett successfully committed suicide. But then again, so did Socrates.

The next big thing was fraternity rush. Looking back, live-in fraternities seem like a stupid idea. But we had no cars, no computers, no personal television and very few phones. There were no members of the opposite sex. The only possible social life seemed to be in a fraternity. I came to Hamilton believing the only possible life was to be a DKE. Ed, Tag and I went DKE. Ed and I were English lit

majors. Tag was a economics major. While the DKEs were known as hell-raisers and athletes, they were also leaders in honor societies, the literary magazine and a variety of campus activities. Throughout my three years of fraternity life, the DKEs were either on, going on or coming off social probation. Perhaps a study can be funded to understand why so many DKEs end up as CEOs of major corporations and even presidents of the United States. Our trustee board is even infested with the annoying varmints.

Soffey went Psi U but remained a close friend. Once Bruce was out of the room, he pursued other friends and other interests. One by one, each of us became closer to Bruce and therefore closer to diverse persons on campus. Bruce chose to be a member of Gryphon society, a now defunct local fraternity. This did not seem to hurt him very much because he became a member of the student senate and we voted him senior class president. To this day, my friendship with Bruce Temple is one of my most cherished memories.

That was the year of the great Hamilton social experiment. The administration decided that every student should be allowed to join a fraternity. Therefore, after rush, all those students not chosen were assigned to a fraternity. Naturally, this group was known as the turkey pool. The DKEs received two from *the turkey pool*.

It was a horrifying experience for the two young men. The DKEs were not abusive to them. They just did not fit in. They left of their own accord and became independents. I had been oblivious to their feelings until it was too late. They were gone, and I was caught up in academic and fraternity life. It was not until later that the sick feeling grew in the pit of my stomach.

This was twice now that I had been a participant in something that was very much not pro-community. I was not mature enough or socially conscious enough to realize that I was part of a despicable system that rewarded the strong and despised the weak.

As a senior, I wrote in my *Spectator* column, "The Horse's Mouth," a harsh criticism of the spectacle of sorting through humankind, rejecting the "unfit." It was too late by then to make any meaningful changes. I suspect that many of my fellow trustees who voted on the residential life changes at Hamilton gained similar insights along the way. While they were not ready to denounce their own past or abolish fraternities, they were determined that no more turkey pools or human sorting should ever bring grief to a Hamilton student, at least not in an official capacity.

The years rolled on. We had mandatory chapel appearances on Tuesdays and Sundays. Although there were no real religious harangues, we mostly acquiesced by keeping quiet for the hour. It was in chapel that I encountered another defining Hamilton experience. The first time I heard it, I thought the room had filled with locusts. It was finger snapping. WE did not applaud at Hamilton. We finger snapped. You try it. Please. Do it for an old man.

Fabulous personalities danced across our field of vision. George Nesbitt, Tom Johnston, Dwight Lindley and the amazing Ed Barrett tormented and delighted English majors. Austin Briggs, who was closer to our own generation, dazzled us with his beautiful wife, much-too-intelligent son and American lit lectures. In fact, (one of) Austin Briggs's kids taught me I should not go to graduate school in English. I used to baby-sit for him and read him stories. He knew more about literature than I did.

Digger Graves wowed us in history classes. I remember my first class. There in front of us was a little old man who looked very much like Alfred Hitchcock. He was arranging three-by-five cards on a desk in preparation for his lecture. When class started, he walked in front of the desk and delivered oratory worthy of Churchill. He never looked back to refer to the notes.

History became my minor. I was fascinated by it and scared to death of it. I often found myself underlining every word in the text. To this day I have nightmares that I have a history exam and have awakened to realize I never bought the textbook, never went to class and don't know where the exam is taking place. Talk about anxiety.

Now, I poke around in Colonial and Confederate ruins around Virginia where I live. I underline nothing. But I take in the history along with the sultry air and the scent of pines. Somehow, Digger and a series of great history professors prepared me for this enjoyment.

The four-year public speaking requirement was another defining experience of my Hamilton years. In fact, it was four years of hell conducted by nicknamed legends like Swampy Marsh and Mumbles Carson.

And then there was Lafe Todd. Lafe Todd was a startling experience on the Hamilton campus in those days. He was from the real world of public relations. He did not wear threadbare, baggy clothes. He wore spiffy sports jackets and gray flannel SLACKS. He was Madison Avenue incarnate. And he taught me how to stand in front of two or two thousand people to make a statement and not wet my pants.

Sidney Wertimer was and is one of the greatest human beings to ever walk the earth. Many of us believe we owe our adulthood to Sidney Wertimer. In speaking with him several years ago, I asked him if he ever truly lost patience with us. He said the only thing he blames us for was not becoming economics majors.

In my junior year, I ran out of money. My scholarship, my loan and my jobs were not going to cover the cost. A sweet and wonderful woman by the name of Silvia Saunders saved me. She lived in her home just up the hill behind Dunham. She grew famous peonies and loved poetry. Her father was the legendary professor Percy Saunders. I imagine you still hear his name on a day like this.

Silvia offered to let me live in her house in return for reading poetry to her women's gatherings. It was a tiny room, but it was a wonderful room. Also living in the house, John von Bergen was the resident sculptor. Von Bergen was and is very talented. You will find him lurking around here from time to time. I think some of his foundry work is stashed here, too. Von Bergen was a jovial folk singer who made up scurrilous lyrics that frequently featured me in various embarrassing situations. To this day, I would not mind if he fell into his ovens while he is mass-producing his ferrous art.

Somewhere along the way, Nikita Khrushchev, who was putting atomic warhead missiles into Cuba, interrupted our idyllic life. President Kennedy went on television to proclaim a crisis. The DKE house took the message in soberly. A number of us went down to Utica to find the Marine Corps recruiting depot. We were ready to defend our country. The Gunny told us that he would accept us only if our mothers came down with us. He said this was because, "She'll be here on Monday trying to get your butt out."

The country survived and we rolled along into graduation. I had learned I wanted to be a writer. In fact, my every thought and dream was focused on the aspiration to be a writer. One day, Bruce Temple wandered into my room with his dad, Bruce Temple, Sr. He said he had been reading "The Horse's Mouth" in the *Spectator* and that if I ever wanted a job as a writer, I should come out to Bloomington, Indiana.

I won the Wallace Johnson Playwright Prize that year at Class and Charter Day. It came with a check for \$200. I bought a suit and a ticket to Bloomington, Ind. I was on my way.

Tag Adams became a lawyer and joined the Justice Department. He returned to private practice and some years ago was appointed a judge. God, would I hate to be brought up in front of old stone-faced Judge Adams.

Bruce recently retired from being the editor, publisher, owner of the *Brown County Democrat*. Bruce was a helluva fine reporter and editor for the *Louisville Courier-Journal* and learned the only man with the freedom of the press is the man who owns the press. For years, he had the freedom and now he is looking for something else to do.

John Soffey became one of the best running backs ever at Hamilton and then went on to work for the State of New York. He married his high school sweetheart and became an NCAA referee. Today, he is a supervisor of referees for the NCAA. I miss seeing him referee the Notre Dame games on Saturday.

Ed Kenney, who came to Hamilton thinking he would be an advertising man, was mightily changed on this hill. He became an English lit professor, and I understand he was a great one. In our senior year, Ed and I were elected to the ultimate honor society: *Nous Onze*. Ed died some years ago. He was a talented and kind man. I miss him a great deal.

At my stage of life, I read books and listen to tapes trying to figure out what my life has been about and what my soul is trying to tell me to do before I pass from this mortal plank. Throughout my advertising career, I learned to rely on Maslow's *Hierarchy of Needs and Information* to construct my communications to consumers.

Perhaps you are familiar with them. We proceed upward in the pyramid from biological and physiological needs to security needs. From security needs we progress to social needs. And from social needs we spring upward to ego needs. And when we transcend ego needs, we reach self-actualization and fulfillment. These human drivers seemed to work when trying to puzzle out human motivations. And when you were trying to get somebody to part with his money for cheese crackers.

Then, one day, I listened to Bill Moyers interview the late Joseph Campbell, former college professor and guru of comparative religions. In speaking about human mythmaking, Campbell said his good friend Maslow had done an excellent job of staking out human drivers, but that if that were all you were living for, you were not living at all.

If you are not willing to die for what you are living for, he said, your life doesn't mean much at all. He said the greatest drivers of all are "terror" and "aspiration."

In a flash, I understood the motivations of suicide bombers and saints. I understood why, after a lifetime earning my living writing, I now write late into the

night, trying to explain some element of the human condition. When others are swinging golf clubs in my neighborhood, I am enjoying the terror of a blank sheet of paper. And I understand what my mentors and friends and professors at Hamster Tech were trying to gift me with: my own, private aspirations and terrors.

I hope that the Hamilton community of 2002 is still capable of encouraging your aspirations and terrors. And, I hope that you will receive the rewards that come from them. Good luck and Godspeed to you. And remember, the Hamilton community is still here when you need it. It is another gift from our mentors.

**Copyright © 2002 The Trustees of Hamilton College. All rights reserved.**