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Breaking Away



Preliminary Findings of a Study of First Generation College Students

Howard B. London

Several years ago the film *Breaking Away* was a box office success across America. On the surface it was the story of "town-gown" frictions between the "cutters" of Bloomington, Indiana -- so called because they were the children of the men who mined the local limestone quarries -- and the ostensibly more sophisticated but condescending students of the University of Indiana. The competition became centered on the annual campus bicycle race, the "cutters" for the first time entering a team of their own. The hero of the story, a "cutter,"

trains excruciatingly hard and at movie's end he "breaks away" from the pack of racers, and the locals triumph.

It is not, however, simply the tale of how some snobbish university students were put in their place. Rather, the story within the story tells how the adolescent hero struggles to find his place: whether and to what extent he should "break away" or separate from family and friends whom he loves but whose world he finds narrow and constricting. Propelled by a vague but powerful feeling of wanting more out of life, he at the same time fears losing

what he already has. Growth, in other words, implies loss, as poignantly depicted in a scene where the hero and his father are seated in front of the university's limestone library; it is night, and behind them through the windows students can be seen walking the stacks:

Father: I was one fine stone cutter. Thing of it was, I loved it! I was young and slim and strong. I was damn proud of my work. And the buildings went up. When they were finished, the

damndest thing happened. It was like the buildings was too good for us. Nobody told us that, it just felt uncomfortable, that's all. Even now I like to be able to stroll through the campus and look at the limestone, but I just feel out of place. You guys still go swimming in the quarry?

Son: Sure.

Father: So the only thing you've got to show for my twenty years of work is the holes we left behind.

Son: I don't mind.

Father: I do! Cyril's dad says he took the college exam.

Son: We both took it.

Father: How did "both of us" do?

Son: Well, I don't know... One of us did OK, but neither of us... Hell! I don't want to go to college, Dad! The hell with them, I'm proud of being a cutter.

Father: You're not a cutter. I'm a cutter. What are you, afraid?

Son: Ya, a little bit. Then there's the rest of the guys.

Father: Well, you took the exam. Did all right, didn't ya?

Son: Yes.

Father: Well, that's ... that's good. Well, your mom ... your mom will be expecting us home.

While the son feels like a "cutter," both he and his father want him to have and to be more. When asked by his sensitive father if something about going to college is frightening, he cites his friends -- his fears, really, of being disloyal to "the guys" should he aim for a different fate.

During the past several years I have tape recorded the life histories of fifteen students who, like the hero of the movie, are the first in their families, and often among their friends, ever to go to college. There is much talk in these interviews, some of it rhapsodic of the joys of a college education, of scales wondrously falling from the eyes, and of the excitement of new vistas and possibilities. But as *Breaking Away* suggests in both title and theme, there are great difficulties as well. As I listened and relistened to the tape

recorded interviews I began to understand that the conflict, confusion, and even anguish that some students felt was part of the breaking away process. Furthermore, it became apparent that this process was exacerbated by their being upwardly mobile. These students, after all, were not just leaving, but leaving for the middle class, a place no one in their families had ever before been. To put their experiences into context, let us briefly discuss in general terms the breaking away or separation process, as it is called in the social sciences.

Late adolescence and early adulthood in our culture are times of increased disengagement from parents. The young adult typically strives to become more individuated and differentiated, that is, to acquire more independence and autonomy on various emotional, cognitive, and moral levels. Usually this is an erratic process, consisting of discontinuous episodes, reversals, and periods of stalemate. Though it begins in early childhood, separation becomes more intense, speeding up, as it were, during this stage of the life cycle. (Separation can, of course, be "out of phase," occurring prematurely, later in life, or perhaps never at all.) It is also fundamentally important to note that separation is a two way street, parents having to "hold on" or "let go" as they move through their own life cycles. Some parents, as we all know, do more of one than the other.

As I stated earlier, individuation and separation were at the heart of the drama of first generation students. Making use of the ideas of the psychoanalyst Helm Stierlin, I began to see these students in light of how the family as a system negotiates their separation. For example, Stierlin describes how some parents are unable to tolerate much separation at all, and try to psychologically bind one or more of their children to them. When this happens to first generation students, the parents try to undermine, sabotage or directly prohibit their college attendance. For example, one student, who I will call Jane, described herself as a parentified child, which in her family meant that she was more the confidant, comforter and helper to her father than

was her mother. When Jane wanted to go far away to college her father reared in anxious defense, and for the first time in Jane's memory their relationship soured. Her father became silent, sullen, brooding and angry, and refused to let her go. For Jane, of course, this was agonizing, until her mother stepped in. Until now the mother had been sitting quietly on the sidelines, her usual family role, but the struggle between her husband and daughter provided her with a chance to be heard, rescue Jane and get Jane out of the house, all at the same time. The father relented somewhat, and even gave Jane a credit card as a going away gift, to be used especially, he said, if she wanted to fly home.

Once she left, however, the conflict was not over. Through the mail and over the telephone wires, Jane endured an onslaught of paternal entreaties to return home in order to help out financially. For her part, Jane felt the "bad daughter," victimized by a "break-away guilt" that, in her darkest hours, made her feel that leaving was criminal. Yet she planned neither to atone by ruefully returning home nor to sever ties with her father. Instead, she sought ways (helping out over the summer and on vacations, for example), that did not require what would amount to a forfeiture of self. She was, of course, under enormous pressures which she feared had already interfered with her making the most of her college years.

Several students described parents who encouraged their separation because they recognized, accepted and even embraced its maturational value. The parents still wanted things for and from their children and were able to tell them so with clarity and concern, but did not try to impose some plan of their own regarding their children's lives. This is what distinguishes parental aspiration for children from parental delegations (as Stierlin calls them) to children. A delegation requires that the adolescent become autonomous enough to go out into the world, but with the purpose of fulfilling an important psychological "mission" for one or both parents. A delegate demonstrates responsibility, then, not by staying, but by leaving, yet always remains emotionally tethered to



the family by "a long leash of loyalty." For example, one student, I shall call him Don, describes how his working class father desperately wanted him to go to college and to achieve a middle class, white collar position after graduation. Don's father, it turned out, had been asked to do the same thing by his father, and even repeated to Don the grandfather's stern injunction, "I don't want you to labor like I did." Don's father, however, did not do as asked, but instead found himself trapped and embittered in a low paying, dead-end job. Said Don,

All my life I heard that story of how things if they had gone differently and if he hadn't of made bad moves (decisions) that life would have been more different, better. So study, go to a good college so I can feel like I did something. (Emphasis added).

His father's wishes, then, seemed not for Don alone, but appeared to be mixed with a mission to resolve some doubt about the self. To say it differently, Don was enlisted in an effort to ease his father's burden. The voice of the now dead grandfather reverberated through the generations, and in the interview his name still invoked as one who would have been proud. When Don's father explained, "Go to a good college so I can feel like I did something," perhaps what he really meant was that in addition to feeling proud of his son, he could also at last feel proud of himself in the memory he holds of his father.

For Don, however, this delegation is doubled-edged. On one side his recruitment into the effort to emotionally assist his father has provided a powerful underlying motive for him to succeed, and, indeed, Don has become an academically superior student. On the other side is the possibility that Don has become weighed down by his father's needs and demands at the ex-

pense of his own separation and growth. He has, in a sense, taken it upon himself (or been drafted, depending upon how one looks at the issues of determinism and choice) to "repair" something in his father, but at the cost of his own sense of well being. Several times in our interview, for example, Don wondered out loud whether he had done things for his father or for himself. Indeed, he questioned whether listening to a stronger voice had made it difficult to find his own, and whether this was connected to his vague feelings of unhappiness and indecision at college.

Finally, Stierlin describes children who suffer a premature and overly intense separation because they are expelled from home by rejecting or neglectful parents. Needing shelter, intimacy, and guidance, these children are instead pushed into a world for which they are simply unprepared. Usually the tensions fester for years until finally a child is either thrown out or runs away. In the case of a third student, here called Betty, the expulsion was so subtle that I prefer to call it an exclusion: she was in the family, but not of it, cast down but not out.

Betty's parents separated and her father disappeared before her mother even knew she was pregnant. As a result, Betty never met or heard from her father, and felt abandoned by him. In the interviews she referred to herself as "the going-away present, so I was not exactly welcomed as the flowers in spring, tra-la, tra-la." Her mother later remarried, and changed her other children's last names from her first husband's to her second husband's -- but not Betty's. She also poignantly described her exclusion from sibling games and adventures, having her bed set apart from her sisters' (though they slept in the same room), and being shunned for having the lightest skin in

a family and community which valued blackness.

Further excluding Betty were her intelligence, vocabulary and encyclopedic knowledge. During the interview she described a lifetime of being teased and set apart for all three. "A blessing and a curse," she said of them, implying that the very traits which distinguished her further denied her the inclusion she so desperately wanted. (This is not at all to imply that these traits are devalued among blacks in general.) However, from an early age Betty learned to transform her ostracism and loneliness into the thoughtful solitude of reading. While other children were playing *Chutes and Ladders*, she reported, she was reading everything from Greek myths to Black history. Beginning in elementary school she was a prodigious reader and a precocious and outstanding student, and finally graduated near the top of the class from the most selective and academically competitive high school in her city.

Betty, then, seems to have negotiated a potentially damaging separation through the ingenious strategy of embracing education. Academic achievement became in essence a salve, and finally a badge of specialness and honor, and school a house into which she could repair to build the strength to face her family, the world, herself.

It would be too one-dimensional and hence distorting to conclude that such dynamics alone are what motivates first generation college students (or anyone else, for that matter). Indeed, in the interviews students gave any number of reasons for their matriculation -- vocational aspirations, intellectual fulfillment, and so on -- part of what is probably an ever shifting hierarchy of motives. To omit family forces from consideration, however, is to miss something of importance. Of course, the sons and daughters of college educated families can be in the emotional and social employ of their parents. But what distinguishes the odyssey of these working class, first generation students is that their journey takes them into what can be experienced as a strange and alien land, namely, the middle class. To say it

differently, for middle class students with a college legacy in the family, higher education is mostly further socialization, additional steps along a familiar path; for first generation students, however, it is a resocialization and a departure, and a sometimes jarring one at that. Mobility, after all, requires learning the ways of a different social class: its styles of language (accent and vocabulary, for example), dress, aesthetic tastes, conversational topics, preferences in media, the arts, and so on. (Indeed, the classical sociologist Max Weber claimed that the differences between social classes were most conspicuous in the conduct of everyday life.)

There were many examples of this in the interviews. One student, for example, told of returning home for Thanksgiving vacation wearing a tweed sports jacket with patches on the elbows, only to be teased mercilessly by his family. Another reported how she expressed her new, more liberal stands on sex roles and race relations during the family breakfast conversation, provoking angry outbursts that seemed directed more at her than at her positions. Of course, tweed jackets and liberalism are by no means monopolized by the middle class, but in both cases (and in others like them) they were seized upon as symbols of a student's becoming different, of becoming more "middle class." These symbols, then, provided family members with an opportunity to express their concerns about the consequences of change, more specifically, about the possibility of loss. It was as if someone said, "Look, we've all noticed that you appear different in some respects. We may be proud of you, but we still want to know what this means to us as individuals and as a family. Will we still recognize your voice, or are we left only with a fading echo?" The students, of course, had similar concerns, and sometimes purposefully behaved "differently" in order to test the family waters. In either case, I believe what families were really expressing, in an indirect, disguised and sometimes counterproductive fashion, was a sense of "endangered love," and a concern about whether family members might be able to find new ways of loving each

other.

It is difficult to say just how representative these fifteen students are of others who are the first in their families to go to college. They certainly were not selected by a "scientific" sampling process. Most in fact were volunteers responding to ads placed in student newspapers, and a few were found through word of mouth. Perhaps only the ones with the most pressing concerns decided to participate; then again, maybe the ones with the most pressing concerns were too anxious to participate. The important point, however, is not whether or not the interviewed students are somehow "representative," but that they inform or remind us that social achievement is not always entirely pleasant. It is, as we all know, a culturally valued and usually unquestioned goal; but when we focus on the negative side of upward movement we see that the same modernity that creates the possibility of "opportunity" also creates the potential for biographical and social dislocation. It is, I believe, something we ought to investigate about our society, ourselves (if we have experienced it), and our students.

A Star's Biography

When life has narrowed down,
One finds oneself become
Only what one's public will remember:
A man, a woman, caught by the persona
Of certain fame.

"This is not what I am..."

Behind the image,
The presentation, the facade;
Behind the million words, the gestures
Learned to perfection, the studied calm
Of the hidden self,
Lies the horror.

"This is not what I am..."

Watching one's self float off
Like a child's balloon
When one day the child lets go.
Smaller and smaller, against the sun,
Black as the whitest bird
In the brightest sky.

W. F. Bolton



David Wilson

Howard London teaches in the Department of Sociology and Anthropology of Bridgewater State College. His research and publications concern higher education, particularly the areas of student, faculty, and administrative cultures. Professor London has served as a consultant to the National Institute of Education's Program on Educational Policy and Organization, as well as to the National Commission on Excellence in Education.