

*From the
Pages of the
Golden Book*



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From the Pages of the Golden Book

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First Edition, June 2018

(Formerly published as *The Man with the Golden Book*)

Fourth Edition, June 2021

ISBN-13: 9798523118104

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Chapter I: Educational Evaluation

“True terror is to wake up one morning and discover that your high school class is running the country.” – Kurt Vonnegut

My girlfriend is studying education in college. One of her classmates, a man about age 35, said his 16-year-old son called him old because he “knew things.” Apparently many members of our current generation of young people believe that they don't have to know things because today they can just look them up by using the Internet.

The Good, the Bad, and the Ugly

As far as the students went, there were always a lot of “bad kids” in the Hagerstown schools. Periodically, teachers took them to other classrooms full of older children to show them how much better the other students behaved there. One day, our exasperated fourth grade teacher finally asked the class if we knew what “obnoxious” meant.

Peer pressure to be like the “in crowd” undoubtedly caused some students to act up in just the same way. Conformity had a big effect on almost everyone there. Even early on in elementary school, each grade had already developed a variety of cliques, which probably included a total from one-half to two-thirds of the kids. Whether popular or not, nerds or jocks, townies or farmers, class clowns or jerks, most students usually developed some sort of discernible character.

It was difficult for me to understand the mindset of the remaining students, those who were “unaffiliated,” because they never stood out in any way. They dressed plainly and conservatively, while their personalities were totally vanilla

and uninteresting. Not surprisingly, their behavior was extremely low-key. Although they were present at school almost every day, they seemed almost invisible – they rarely said anything in class and seldom excelled academically. Not only were those kids completely bound by conformity, but they were extraordinarily *average*. They wouldn't have known how to get out of line even if they were aware that one existed.

Chapter III: 1985

“I'm not going to buy my kids an encyclopedia. Let them walk to school like I did.” – Yogi Berra

My second stint at IU-Bloomington began in January 1985. There, I lived on the first floor of Foster Quad's Magee building, located near the north end of the university. It was a cold 15-minute walk in the winter (or more, on snowy mornings) to the central part of campus.



Figure 8. Snow surrounds the Student Building at Indiana University in Bloomington (photo by “Nyttend”).

“Foster” – Hoosier for “beer”

Magee-1 had already earned a checkered reputation by the time that I arrived there. I cannot put into print all the stories about my classmates who lived there, but suffice it to say that a

lot was usually happening on our dorm floor.

Students from Chicago would often drink Old Style beer (which they called “Cold Style”), a widely-available and inexpensive brew. Guys who wanted to impress other people often chose to buy pricier beers imported from Canada such as Moosehead and Molson. Those brands were stronger than U.S. brews but frequently had a skunky smell.

You could spot the usual group of suspects who had gotten drunk on a school night (again) because they always overslept and therefore were wandering the dorm hallways wearing towels at 10 a.m. the next morning. Bleary-eyed and edgy with pounding headaches, those fellows would be running late and so they were always in a big hurry to get ready for class. Then they would stand around outside the shower stalls complaining that everyone inside was taking too long and making them wait.

Long before the concept of gender neutral restrooms became a political issue, residence hall members had to deal with this problem. Young men who lived on a particular floor would check inside its restrooms for other fellows before letting female guests enter, then they would stand watch at the door. If a “kegger” (a party with a keg of beer on tap, usually dispensed into red Solo cups made of disposable plastic) was taking place, one of the hall's two bathrooms would be designated as the ladies' room for the evening, using a hand-lettered paper sign taped on its door.

One evening, the top (third) floor lounge in the adjacent building caught fire. From our rooms in Magee, we could see orange flames flickering in the large upstairs windows next door. A few minutes later, two wiseguys living down the hall (somewhere near the middle) opened up their window, set their stereo speakers up on the ledge, and blasted out *Burning Down the House* (a popular 1980s song performed by the Talking Heads) into the courtyard below.

Chapter V: All in a Day's Work

“The brain is a wonderful organ; it starts working the moment you get up in the morning and does not stop until you get into the office.” – Robert Frost

Friendly Cheeses and the Cheerful Chef

Today, the modern “thought police” (consisting largely of hyper-sensitive millennials) uses social media outlets to single out those citizens who have offended them in some usually-trivial manner. However, not too many years ago, the medium of choice for the thin-skinned was the “Letters to the Editor” page of the daily newspaper.

On one occasion, the headline of a Sunday feature in the food section of the Richmond *Palladium-Item* contained a play on words from a famous Christian hymn. The banner across the top of the page read “What a Friend We Have in Cheeses.” The result of this clever pun was a massive outcry from indignant church people with nothing better to do but complain. However, Jesus himself did not write a letter of protest (not that I know of, anyway).

One person whose writing did appear in the newspaper was a local auctioneer who had a flair for cooking. He wrote a column called “Skinny Cooks Can't Be Trusted,” and for a number of years, his work could be read in the *Palladium-Item*. Later, he even authored a book by the same title. I had never met him in the newsroom, so I only knew him from his photo, but apparently we both had the same physician. One afternoon while I was waiting in the doctor's office for my appointment, he was present there too.

Not surprisingly, the culinary columnist was unusually large. He rode an electric cart of the type that excessively

overweight people often require to get around. As he motored on past me to enter the examination area, he was chuckling over something he had discussed with the desk nurse. The literary chef seemed to be a good-natured fellow – but I didn't see what happened later when he got the bill.

Chapter X: Working Hard or Hardly Working?

“Most people work just hard enough not to get fired and get paid just enough money not to quit.” – George Carlin

So I've described some bad bosses. What about odd coworkers? I have known a few of them too, while working at a few places over the years both in Indiana and here in Arizona. Not surprisingly, you'll find many types of quirky individuals working everywhere.

Customer Service Announcements

While working at eTelecare in Phoenix, it was important to know the capabilities and limitations of the satellite television products that we supported. One thing that our bosses kept reminding everyone was that, even with a DVR, “You cannot fast-forward live TV.”

In the call center environment, you would encounter many unusual people – both on and off the phones. One afternoon, I listened to an agent try to make himself sound more reputable by telling a customer that he wasn't a “used car salesman.” Unfortunately, his caller *was* a used car salesman.

I was a member of one sales team that featured one of the more memorable characters who worked for the company: a petite blonde woman with a really dirty mouth who also apparently lived a somewhat Bohemian lifestyle. She was impatient and would quickly grow angry at callers. Then she would press the mute button on the phone and start yelling obscenities at them (which they could not hear at that point). Next, she would loudly announce how stupid that person was and scream more profanities at them, before rejoining the call.

Of course, phone customers who were speaking to other agents seated near this woman could overhear her loudly swearing in the background. This did *not* help the rest of us make sales. Although I don't know if she ever actually failed to hit the mute button, eventually her employment was terminated and suddenly she was no longer there.

Chapter XIV: Spaghetti Western

“Thinking is the hardest work there is, which is probably the reason why so few engage in it.” – Henry Ford

Undead Souls

Zombies became a part of science fiction decades ago. Many readers have probably seen George Romero's 1968 film *Night of the Living Dead*. While zombie pics have not been especially common, the undead have periodically reemerged in films such as *I Am Legend* and *28 Days Later*. Yet in recent years, zombies have made a big comeback, becoming a staple of popular culture through various movies and hit TV series such as *The Walking Dead*. The central premise of these stories is usually the arrival of a “zombie apocalypse,” in which a plague or some other cataclysmic event turns ordinary people into mindless, homicidal creatures (or reanimates the dead), which then threaten the survival of all humanity.

(Just as an aside, a real zombie apocalypse wouldn't last very long. Everyone would just go upstairs, barricade their doors, and wait until the military wiped out all the zombies. It would be like a fun training exercise for those guys. Also, since zombies are mindless, they would *not* be able to get you if you stayed away from them. How many large animals get into your house now? Finally, if the zombies' circulatory systems did not work, their flesh would quickly die without oxygen, rot, and fall apart. The first cold winter night or hot summer afternoon would cause the undead to drop like flies.)

After a van passed by us while headed the wrong direction through a mall parking lot, my girlfriend told me that she believes the zombie apocalypse is already here, and added that she thinks about it every morning while driving to work. At

that very moment, an oblivious pedestrian suddenly stepped out blindly into the lane and crossed directly in front of us. As the unconcerned walker moved mindlessly through traffic, I replied, “At least they don't have to *think* too much.”

According to Dictionary.com, a zombie can be defined as “A person whose behavior or responses are wooden, listless, or seemingly rote; automaton.” Or, “An eccentric or peculiar person.” That pretty much sums things up.



Figure 29. Some cell phone users obliviously cross streets, seemingly unaware of the danger in their surroundings (photo by Martin Alonso).

Like undead souls, distracted individuals absentmindedly amble around businesses and schools while tightly holding their cell phones, staring intently at the glowing screens yet seldom glancing up, seemingly unaware of all the activity and other people surrounding them. In my opinion, if a person cannot stop talking on their phone long enough to pay attention while crossing the street, then he or she is probably an idiot – and we have plenty of them here in Arizona.

Not only that, but drop in on any fast food spot or coffee

house with free Internet and often you will see lazy millennials sprawled out sluggishly in the booths nearest the electrical outlets where they can recharge their cell phones and laptops. Sometimes they can even be spotted sleeping while their devices power up.

(A recent television commercial featured a new refrigerator with a large touchscreen located on its front. If you press the screen, a picture appears so that you can see what is inside the fridge without having to actually open the door. This energy-saving feature also should be a great selling point for those same lazy millennials.)

This oblivious behavior is a common (and hazardous) problem here in the Valley. And it's not just the ones on foot that act like zombies, drivers and walkers alike often just “go,” entering busy streets without even glancing in either direction to look for oncoming cars. Therefore, it should come as no surprise that “a pedestrian was hit by a vehicle today” is a commonly-recurring story in our local news.

I wrote about the influence of cell phones on drivers in *Passport Renewed* but they aren't entirely to blame for this phenomenon. Not only do they have fewer good manners, in general people just seem to be getting dumber than ever before. That's bad news for our society as a whole. A phenomenon known as the Dunning-Kruger Effect suggests that unintelligent persons think they are smarter than they really are, because they aren't smart enough to comprehend how much they don't know about most subjects.

Similarly, a document available from The National Institute of Health examined several studies on self-evaluation of a person's own skill level. The report, entitled *Why the Unskilled Are Unaware: Further Explorations of (Absent) Self-Insight Among the Incompetent*, found that individuals tend to vastly overrate their own capabilities. Most importantly, this research also determined that stupid people overestimate their own

abilities the most. Why? Because their incompetence prevents them from having the awareness and understanding necessary to recognize their own shortcomings.

In other words, most idiots are too stupid to realize how dumb they really are.

Chapter XVI: Top Gear

“If you do not change direction, you may end up where you are heading.” – Lao Tzu, Chinese philosopher

Even in Arizona, it rains whenever you wash your car.

Land of the Lost

In the years immediately following my 2003 divorce, I regularly went with two of my cousins (Tim and Sue) to eat at various area restaurants. Occasionally, these get-togethers also presented us with an odd spectacle or two.

The three of us usually met up late on Friday evenings for a pizza at a nationally-known chain restaurant. One night, a former girlfriend from my community college days and her current beau also showed up there. She even knew one of my cousins. I guess our town was even smaller than I realized.

After sitting down at the next table, my ex-girlfriend tried questioning me about whether I remembered this or that thing that had happened 20 years earlier, as apparently some of those moments had been especially memorable to her – but I wasn't going there as the entire situation was just too awkward for me (and for her current boyfriend as well, I'm sure). As she pressed on for answers, I finally just said that I couldn't remember, and added that after drinking a lot in college, those old days were “a lot of brain cells ago.” After quickly eating a few slices of pizza, I headed out of there.

Sunday dinners were another opportunity for us to get together. On many occasions, we would gather at a diner that featured Cincinnati-style chili. The small restaurant was hidden away on a recently-built side road that led from the main highway past the entrance to “Sam's large blue store” (I

think you know the place to which I'm referring).

Because of its out-of-the-way location, the diner had to work hard to attract customers – so the boss hired a girl to wear an oversized hot dog costume, stand on the corner of East Main Street, and hold up a board with a giant arrow on it that directed people to the restaurant. While traffic zipped by, she would smile and hoist her sign in the air. As passing motorists repeatedly honked their horns at her, she would laugh good-naturedly and wave at them.

Once on Easter Sunday, we dined at a busy all-you-can eat buffet. Soon after, a large family came in with five children ranging from about ages two to eight (more or less, I'm just guessing). Their parents wore matching gold wire-rimmed glasses. Each and every one of their kids also sported an identical pair. Coordination or just enforced conformity?

I think the biggest surprise came one afternoon as the three of us were eating in a burger joint just east of downtown, when we encountered a young traveling couple from Indianapolis who asked us if we knew where Terre Haute was located.

Apparently without any idea how to get to their destination, the couple had just set out on I-70 and headed east. Unfortunately for them, Terre Haute is west of Indianapolis, far away near the Illinois state line. At the Ohio border, they must have finally become aware that something was terribly wrong. After exiting the highway, somehow they had traveled several miles through town before stopping for lunch and a chance to assess their situation.

We told them to go back to the interstate, reverse direction and head west, then completely cross Indiana – and go all the way to its opposite edge. Hopefully they arrived safely after a couple of hours. Better late than never.