

THERE'S A SPECIAL PLEASURE in discovering the exact thing that vexes you most. At the current crux in my life—high school still present but beginning to nod out, college peeking over the horizon, “teenagerness” showing no signs of decreasing—the most galling thorn I’m forced to contend with is my extreme, perhaps unusual conflict with high school.

We don’t get along.

I’m talking about the system in general, but I’ve been at the same high school from enrollment through (in a bit) graduation, so except as an academic interest—pun intended—it doesn’t much matter whether the trouble is Berkeley High or just high school in general. The point is, though I have nothing against either the ideal or the practice of education, the actual application of modern pedagogy in America at the high school level simply grates me wrong.

It’s the sort of thing that’s easy to ignore—for a while. But I’ve had three years of high school, and many more in K-8 to inculcate an experienced mindset of uselessness, and at a certain point, it’s very difficult not to realize exactly how much of one’s time is being wasted. For me, the first and best such epiphany came during a quiet foreign language class, in my second year of high school Spanish; while I listened to the teacher drone, the little light of Naughty Truths clicked on in my head, and a rebellious voice observed, “You could have taught yourself all of the material you’ve learned in here this year in about two weeks—and you’d not only have retained it, you’d have enjoyed it, too.”

It wouldn’t be quite so unnerving if I didn’t know it to be true. For most of my life, I have never hesitated in the pursuit of my intellectual interests to seek out the material and the methods that I needed, and, in casual, relaxed, perhaps fumbling, but perfectly effective autodidactic method, take big chunks of it and swallow every bite. I’ve worked side-by-side with industry professionals in defining tomorrow’s technical web standards, I’ve given instruction in the physical, emotional, and legal aspects of self defense for teenagers, and I could render CPR and defibrillation to a choking infant—and not one scintilla of it was learned in school. I have no philosophical stance on the “proper nature of education,” and certainly no political saw to pitch, but when it comes to what works for me, it’s hard to deny the obvious: school works, but not well.

And that’s the point, of course. I stress that the issue is one of compatibility: if I felt that it was worth the cost to me, in terms of actual resources expended (my time and my brain) as well as the cognitive disconnect involved in doing something I knew was inefficient, then I could have tightened my belt and bulled through it all anyway—just as I know that there are people who sluced through four years of high school without a complaint, learned what there was to learn, and for whom the “system” was no problem at all. But for me, I was always left with a basic question: Did I want to wholly devote a major period of my life toward preparation for a future goal (college admission)? Or did I want to live and learn how I felt best, draw from school what value I saw in it, but ignore the calls for mindless automation... and as for the future, let come what may?

I chose the latter, but now we’ll see.