

This American Life

Henry M. Halff

CUUC Speech Club

May 2, 2004

Mr. Toastmaster, ladies and gentlemen, I stand before you today charged with the task of talking about me. It occurred to me that I don't know all that much about myself. This puts me in the awkward position of not knowing what I am talking about. This situation is all too familiar to me, but tonight I am going to break out. I do recall my past pretty well, so I am to talk about that, while I can still remember it. So, *This American Life*, my life, in three acts.

Act I: Clueless. I grew up in a time warp. Sometimes it put me a half hour behind the rest of the world, sometimes only a few minutes, sometimes a year or more. I spent my younger years trying to catch up.

All of my peers seemed to magically know the rules to playground games, lunchroom rituals, and classroom behavior. The only way that I could inform myself on these crucial matters was to ask another kid, with the inevitable result that my cluelessness was broadcast all over school.

It was not until high school that the consequences of my cluelessness became serious. You see, I spent my grammar school days in a school with no academic standards whatsoever, truly a school for the clueless. My high school was the exact opposite. You almost had to have a high school degree just to get in. Nonetheless, I learned a lot in high school. Mostly I learned how to get Cs and Ds.

And, it was at high school that I learned that there is a difference between dim and clueless. Dim is a low score on the SATs. Clueless is not knowing what is going on around you. When I took the SATs, I found out that, although clueless, I was rather bright. The college admissions counselor put it to me this way, "Halff, high SAT scores, low grades. We have a word for people like you. You're an *underachiever*." Being clueless, I had no idea what he was talking about.

Nonetheless, the high SAT scores did stand me in good stead because I got into a rather well-known West Coast university (Stanford, if you must know) which brings me to ...

Act II: Wasted. There is a tradition at most institutes of higher education called "orientation. A week in which the clueless freshman to be are brought up to speed. It was during orientation that I received a piece of advice that influences my life to this very day. It was the worst advice that I ever received in my entire life: "Don't neglect your social

life.” Clueless as I was, this seemed like good advice to me. It never occurred to me that getting an education necessarily entailed neglecting one’s social life.

So, I partied my way through college, right up to a couple of months before graduation. It was then that I realized that I wouldn’t. I was not going to make it. When I informed the family that I had wasted four very expensive years, they put on the full court press. My father talked to all my teachers. My brother showed up to crack the whip over my sorry rear end. I squeaked through. Act II, short but disastrous, was over.

Act III: Brilliant. Thanks to my being an underachiever, I left Stanford with rather remarkable GREs, good enough, in fact to get me into UT Austin’s graduate school in psychology. Following the path of least resistance, I moved myself to Austin and enrolled in a few classes. After a week or so I made the most marvelous discovery. My time warp had gone away and, indeed, reversed itself. I was no longer clueless. In fact, I was the most clued-in grad student in the department. I was so clued in that everyone else came to me for clues in how to succeed, so clued in that I was offered a fellowship without even asking for one.

Ever since that time, I have bounced around between clueless, wasted, and brilliant, never knowing where I would wind up next.

When I look back on my life, I can see some clues about my character. I am not an ambitious man. I’ve gone where the wind blows me and usually taken the path of least resistance. When I do take up a cause, it is usually a hopeless one, leaving me plenty of good excuses for failure. I’ll be happy if I can leave the planet having done nothing more than make life easier for a few folk.