CHAPTER 8

Introduction

As described earlier, my undergraduate degree was in what my university (Queen’s University, in Kingston, Ontario) called Life Sciences—what others might have once called pre-med. Many of us wrote the Medical College Admissions Test, or MCAT (as I did, though, as admitted earlier, I did not score so well, as I recall), but not all of us got into medicine (as I didn’t, but as my roommate did). In our first year, we took courses in Chemistry, Biology, Physics (each of which also had its own three-hour weekly lab, of course), Calculus, and Psychology—the last being an elective, but everyone pretty much took it. In other years, I enrolled in such courses as Organic Chemistry, Genetics, Biochemistry, Histology, Abnormal Psych, Anatomy, Statistics, Brain and Behavior, Physiology, etc. I would imagine that some of my classmates who, like the vast majority of us, did not get into medicine, have ended up in one of the many adjacent fields—such as going on to do a Master of Science degree in Microbiology (“Micro” for the initiated), or eventually going into, say, Pharmacology—either to do research, work for a drug company’s marketing division (as one friend did after getting his Ph.D.), or owning your own pharmacy (the route taken by yet another good friend from my undergraduate days). But who knows what all careers my onetime classmates have found for themselves?

As for me? I ended up getting a Ph.D. in Religious Studies from the University of Toronto. What a waste of that undergrad degree, no?

Maybe my point is obvious: not unlike many students who pursue a degree in that broad domain called the Humanities, many who earn an undergraduate degree in the so-called hard sciences also reinvent themselves once they graduate. But—and this is the interesting part—no one seems to see this as a problem in the sciences, while it worries us terribly in the Humanities (and by “us” I generally mean parents and politicians). Although no one, as I recall, at least, questioned my choice of undergraduate major (after all, who doesn’t want their child to be a medical doctor?—what many today take to be the real kind of doctor), I’ve heard from many students with different experiences. When their family and friends learn that they are opting for a B.A. in Religious Studies, they are immediately asked, “What on earth are you going to do with a degree like that?”—and, given the economy’s crash in 2008, magazines, newspapers, and online career resources routinely feature “Philosophy/Religious Studies” among the top ten worst majors, since who employs a philosopher to
philosophize? But enroll in an Engineering degree and everyone somehow knows that you’re on the right track. But here’s the issue: that few of my own undergrad friends who did a degree in Engineering ever actually did any engineering in their careers—because they all enrolled almost right away in an M.B.A. degree and then ended up becoming managers who never picked up a protractor again—does not seem to tarnish that first undergraduate degree in their case, however; for, much like the Philosophy B.A. who does not become a Philosophy professor, or the English B.A. who does not become an English teacher, those Engineering students were also immersed in material that proved of little relevance to how they eventually earned their daily bread.

Or...was that first degree directly relevant, perhaps? “Relevant by what standards?” we might ask. I thought that my engineering friends, with the insane schedules and workloads that they had (they certainly had it worse than me in terms of hours per week in class, even though my 5 classes, each meeting three hours per week, plus those three three-hour labs each week, made my time pretty hectic—though yes, I skipped my fair share of classes, too...), were actually being trained in how to manage their time, how to meet deadlines, and how to juggle multiple balls—learning the hard way which would bounce and which would shatter and thus needed more careful attention. That is, especially when they all started doing business degrees after graduation, it seemed to me that they had actually been taught skills and not content in that undergraduate degree, skills that would be handy to them, whatever they should decide to do.

Looking back now, it seems to me that the seemingly practical application of their degrees (an application few of my Engineering friends ever realized, don't forget) provided cover for their professors to—intentionally or not—teach them skills basic to any education and relevant for almost any career. It never really was about the content of those classes, after all.

Well played, Engineering professors, well played.

I didn't do the final year of my Bachelor of Science degree, which means I earned a B.A. in 1983 (that's how the Canadian system was: a four year B.Sc. degree was known as a B.Sc. Honors—there was no plain, three-year B.Sc. option). For after three years of learning about neurotransmitters, regression analysis, and the carbon cycle, I had also moved on to other things. As I discussed earlier, after a brief detour in Divinity school (earning a Master of Divinity degree in 1986 and, in an effort to gain experience writing a thesis, a Master of Theology degree in 1987) made plain that, while studying religion was fascinating, training to be a religious functionary was not (something evident in just the first year of the M.Div.). But looking back now on my undergraduate degree, I think that the sort of analytic problem-solving skills that I learned in those three years, the way to break something down into