

Dear Uncle Mike,

Please say something about academia, something I can post on my wall to make me laugh. I am trying to read about Euripidean drama. Why are academics so dense? And please tell me a fun place to go to college, where the teachers are still human and it is like the sixties, except without all the stupid conflict (like the White Album done by Joan Didion), where people talk about things and are friendly, non-competitive, and enthusiastic. No, it's too late for me to go back to kindergarten. Please help.

Shirley in Kingman, Arizona

Dear Shirley,

You've presented Uncle Mike with a serious challenge. Of the much that can be said about academia, precious little of it is funny. Centuries ago, when Uncle Mike was at the university, the pomp and pedantry that seem naturally to drift, like swamp gas, over factories of higher learning were at least being seriously poked by the sort of questions that naturally come up during great social upheavals. Let the complacent say what they will about the sixties, it was a time when large ideas were in vogue. We live now in a time of small ideas; ideas so small they can be correctly confused with petty reactions.

Historians will call this the time of the bean counters. Just as newspapers are now run by those who worked their way up through the sales department, the ship of academia is now largely run by those whose real talents are writing grants and training people to make money. Behind all the bells and whistles, universities have never been pretty. Their role in society is to preserve the dominant culture. Actively pushing the envelope of knowledge is, in Uncle Mike's experience, something that happens mostly over coffee and pizza. The secret heart of academia lies in its architecture: what other part of life occurs in rooms where all the chairs except one are facing the same direction?

Uncle Mike is glad you're reading Euripides, a very wise fellow; much wiser than the literature wonks who make their living explaining his tragedies two thousand years after the fact. Why are academics so dense? Because the audience they write for, future academics, admires and longs for it. Confronted with such dreck, Euripides would have got stinking drunk. As for the institutions themselves, Uncle Mike would love to think there are colleges where learning is still an enlightened activity, where the search for understanding has an energy and loft equal to the magic that was afoot in the justifiably notorious sixties. To be honest, he finds it much easier to believe that Bill Gates has our best interests at heart. The root meaning of the verb 'educate' is: 'to draw out'. This implies that the root of learning is inside the student. For Uncle Mike, education is the product of a good reading list, interesting people to talk to, and years of curiosity and unbridled wonder. It's reward is a life lived well, as opposed to one spent counting beans and watching HBO. Education is what you pay for. Learning is what you do. And none of us are too old for kindergarten. Play well.

Dear Uncle Mike,

Do you think motorcycle riders should be required to wear helmets?
Aaron L., Seattle

Dear Aaron,

In a word, no. It is, after all, their head. If they don't place value on it, that's between them and the universe. They should, however, be required to be organ donors and not count on priority service in the emergency room.

Dear Uncle Mike,

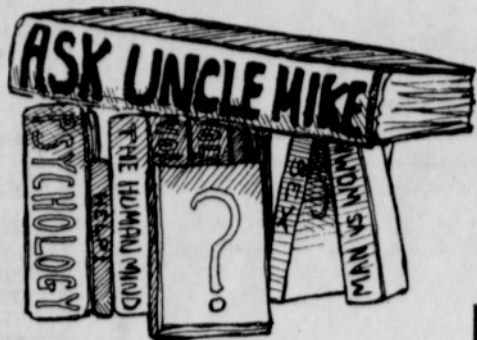
I had a dream with a dragon in it. Then I had a dream where I was a fairy, and then a dream with a tooth that was sort of like a shell, except it was a tooth and rather intricately designed. Is it a phallic symbol? What do these dreams mean?

Jelly Bean (not my real name), San Mateo, CA
P.S. The dragon gave me the tooth.

Dear Jelly Bean,

Of the many skills and talents Uncle Mike lacks, dream analysis is high on the list. This said, we wade in. Dragons are good because they need to be confronted. Dream dragons don't just hang out, whittling a stick or smelling flowers. They're windmills for the Sancho Panza in all of us. A chance to be flung down to the earth or up into the stars. Fairies (or, more correctly, faeries) are even better than dragons. Sadly, you failed to mention what kind of faerie you were. There's a different one for each element: fire, air, earth and water. There is, as you can imagine, a big difference between a gnome and a sylph. Teeth are for biting, for cutting through. Shells are the mothers of the pearl of creation (unless you consider the mollusk itself, which looks like the internal organs of a rock). And it's really an intricately designed tooth. So there you are, a faerie confronting a dragon who gives you an intricately carved tool for cutting through the shell of the Great Secret. Good job, kid. And you managed it without a single phallus.

Letters to Uncle Mike may be addressed to: PO Box 1056, Cannon Beach, OR 97110



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