

ESSAY

Magnificent Regression

BY LAWRENCE SAVELL

I HAD BEEN performing my daily ritual of transferring from in-box to garbage can the latest pile of professional skills seminar announcements. The titles had become familiar: "Wading into Admiralty Law," "White Collar Crime Without Losing Your Shirt," "How to Spin Off a Merger & Acquisition Practice." And then I saw it: "Plain English For Lawyers."

I was confused. I had spent tens of thousands of dollars and three of the more neurotic years of my life learning to overcome my unfortunate natural tendency to communicate clearly and concisely so that I could, finally, sound like a lawyer. Indeed, I prided myself at having attained a level of proficiency such that total strangers could discern my occupation after only a few seconds of conversation.

But this announcement was telling me that my efforts had been misdirected. And for only \$395, they would, in a few hours, undermine my legal education and — gasp — have me speaking and writing like a civilian again. I instinctively reached for the Maalox.

But I shouldn't have been upset, because the idea that development can occur through regression is not that unusual.

Indeed, lawyers, as well as doctors, executives, and others with abbreviations after their names, spent time, money, and effort to go through professional school so we could rely on our minds instead of our bodies, and become thinkers instead of laborers. Having achieved such status, however, we spend hundreds (or thousands) of dollars on gyms and spas so we can perform grueling physical efforts — that are totally nonproductive. We run or pedal without going anywhere; we lift without moving anything; we walk up endless steps without climbing any higher.

We spent years as students living spartanly and working doggedly in the hope of earning a sufficient income so we could afford luxuries like eating in fancy restaurants. But now, we patronize restaurants where we can get, at premium prices, salads without dressing, chicken simply broiled without sauces, plain fruit for dessert, and imported bottled *water* to wash it all down. And still, we are convinced that we are never skinny enough.

We work ridiculous hours to earn enough money to pay ridiculous rents and mortgages, but instead of a big house in the country, we sink our earnings into apart-

ments of dorm-room-like dimensions, on noisy, treeless avenues, only a few blocks from housing costing a fraction of what we are paying. On top of that, we put a premium on an apartment that forsakes clean, dependable central heating for that anachronistic and attention-requiring urban rarity, the fireplace.

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AT "HOME," we have "necessities," like cable television, so we can watch colorless reruns of long-canceled programs we viewed as children free. We spend huge sums on furniture and accessories made before modern manufacturing techniques and on which unknown strangers have slept or eaten. But we call them "antiques" and we must have them.

If we enter a grocery store, we gladly pay extra for foods that are made the way they were before modern processing methods were developed. We view white rice as tainted. We consider soaps made without fragrance as innovative.

And we pay to take courses so we can be taught, when dating, to be ourselves. And then we wander determinedly through a continuous stream of discos, bars, and museums in an endless, frustrating search to find the girl or boy next door.

We are amazed and impressed by couples that stay together. Our awe increases towards those that undertake the expense and effort of another seemingly unnatural activity, having children.

But is all this a bad thing? Maybe not. It may be no more than our belated realization of the attractiveness of simplicity and basic values. As life gets more complex, we may be seeking, consciously or subconsciously, to reduce our overall level of stress and confusion by seeking refuge with the simple and the familiar: the vigorous exertions and aerodynamic dimensions of youth, the comfortable tangible items etched in our memory, the support of the family. The way of life we worked so hard to leave behind may be the life we now work so hard to embrace. So pass the corn flakes (and the skim milk); "Gilligan's Island" is about to begin.

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