

Chapter 16

Graduate School 101

" ...Aleph McNaughton Cantor matriculated from Zelosophic University on June 17, 1959 with the degree of Bachelor of Science. From brilliant beginnings Mr. Cantor descended quickly into an abyss of mediocrity and stayed there for the rest of his academic career. Despite renewed and undeniable evidences of his innate moral and mental insufficiency , a small yet distinguished contingent on the Zelosophic faculty continue to maintain that, to the contrary, Mr. Cantor is endowed with exceptional gifts. Several have gone so far as to qualify them as genius. Very much against my better judgment I therefore permitted Mr. Cantor to enroll in graduate school , which he did in September 1959 at the age of 24, to begin work on a doctorate in biology ."

Dean Hardball , transcript of Aleph Randal McNaughton Cantor.

So completely do my 5 years in graduate school epitomize the hibernation of the professional student that I may well have effected a revolution in this stereotyped. I might have launched a successful career as a Hollywood actor by playing myself. Without hope or ambition, lacking experience or desire to acquire same, with neither dreams nor day-dreams , my mind was kept alive by scientific curiosity alone; and, at least for the first few years, even that of a somewhat flaccid quality. No personal relations were

#2...

formed, no bonds forged, no travels undertaken, no adventures sought. The only serious efforts that my situation drew from me were in the form of resistance to any innovation in my way of life.

The realization that I'd begun to walk with a shuffle filled me with pride : as a badge of cultivated indolence it could hardly be improved upon. Neither community service nor political activism held any attractions. I could be depended upon to add little or nothing to any conversation or interaction with the surrounding community. It would have made little difference to anyone had I been sitting with Shelley in his boat, discussing Goethe's metaphysics on the day of his fatal accident.

Despite the absence of any diaries dating from this spent decade it can be stated with reasonable certainty that I did not communicate a single inspired , thought-provoking, clever or even amusing idea, to anyone . I don't recall any romantic attachments. They couldn't have been very deep, since I've forgotten them all. Had those years been devoted to turning screws mindlessly on an assembly line in a Detroit automobile factory, it would have been all the same to me; and I might have been doing something useful for others.

This description of my spiritual condition is far from uncommon. For many people graduate school is a period in life much as I've described it. What made it particularly humiliating in my case was the ignoble contrast between the incredibly high hopes accorded me in the past , and the person I'd become; or so it appeared. Even persons who'd always been overtly hostile to me, in whom envy, whether justified or otherwise , had been inflamed

#3...

to incandescence by the Aleph Cantor phenomenon, took stock of the extent of my fall from grace and became deeply ashamed; whether of themselves or of me was never terribly clear.

My livelihood was assured by odd jobs, including a part-time position in a prep school in a poor downtown neighborhood teaching remedial arithmetic to high-school drop-outs and otherwise preparing them for college, of all things. I never showed up in the Math Department. In addition to having redirected my interests to Biology (which occupied buildings in which one was certain of never finding a mathematician) the ordeal of having to face all those heads bowed in shame would have been beyond my resources. Many people in the department must have thought I was dead, or - much the same thing - descended into total obscurity.

There was one exception to this general rule, one person to whom all that had happened to me meant nothing at all, to whom I still was, and would always be, the "chenius": Dr. Alter Buba.

" *Ach: Aleph!* ", he would grumble when I met him on the street or the school cafeteria, " Don't you lissen to zet peck uf schlemiels! History vill tell. Vat ebaut Ysak Newton, ven he vas takyng thirty years to write his Preenkipya ?! *Ach! Peck of lousy schlemiels!* " Buba would continue on in this vein, muttering curses under his breath against the pettiness of a world unable to accommodate its great men.

Buba's vote of confidence was greatly appreciated: I liked to imagine that he possessed a special kind of insight, almost a mystical gift that enabled him to see into the heart of the real

#4...

Aleph, dismissing all external evidences of incurable mediocrity. Indeed, many people would have been astonished to learn that I continued to believe myself as someone uniquely endowed, indeed the vessel of divine inspiration, destined, given enough time, to execute deeds of incredible importance for mankind.

The fact remains that there was something truly marvellous in the banality of my immediate performance. In my third year a small research fellowship supplemented the fees coming in from the prep school. My odd jobs included paper-marking, substitute teaching, and helping out in the local bookstores at the beginning of the term.

I was also beneficiary of cheap housing and the numerous discounts available to students. Later I discovered that by holding onto my student card I could extend the period in which I was entitled to these discounts another 5 years.

The consensus opinion among my colleagues, teachers and fellow students was that I'd found a permanent niche as a professional student, in the same way that a panhandler or gangster finds his true calling after years of floundering about. Incoming Freshmen might manifest a brief initial respect for me on the basis of my erudition and glib patter; yet it was only a matter of weeks before they would be receiving the first of a series of warning lectures, with Aleph McNaughton Cantor as the prime example of the dangers of pushing one's mind over the brink in one's youth, with no hope of return.

I liked to imagine, and even told others that I was always out of bed by 7 in the morning. In point of fact when I got up

#5...

depended on whether I'd remembered to wind up the alarm clock the night before. I often forgot to do so. After awhile I only wound up the clock when there was some morning appointment. Most other times I lay awake in my bed doing nothing until 8, or even 9.

After washing up and shaving - the beard would come many years later - I left the hideous Gothic cloister where the graduate students were housed, to walk across the patches of crabgrass that did service as a lawn to an authentically seedy American diner 4 blocks away. Its *specialité de la maison* was grease, decomposable through an infusion of old coffee grounds in hot boiling water, mitigated by soured milk. No doubt disgusting at first encounter, I soon grew fond of it. This breakfast ritual was an indispensable component of my way of life, providing the unique opportunity in the day for establishing contact with the rest of the human race. Apart from the odd occasion there would be no further interaction, however cursory, with laborers, waitresses, dishwashers, jackhammer operators, clerks, truckdrivers, people who, by devoting almost none of their priceless hours to agonizing over the meaning of life, aren't paralyzed by a conviction of the futility of all effort.

My vulnerability in placing myself in this novel environment was compensated for by a considerable amount of condescension in dealing with it. Upon reflection, it's my hope that the other customers, understanding that I was young, ignorant and confused didn't take it personally. Before coming in for breakfast I made sure to load myself down with textbooks, papers and looseleaf binders, enough to make an effective barricade against the potent

#6...

threat of their cordiality. These were hastily deployed over the Formica table in my booth just before the arrival of the watery eggs, burnt toast, French fries dripping in the blubber of despised mammals and the rancid coffee. It made for an impressive fortress, stating in no uncertain terms that intruders weren't welcome.

From behind this firewall of studious obsession I flashed forth dark, dirty glances at regular intervals like the pulsed beams of a rotating lighthouse lamp, taking in my environment in bite-sized pieces together with my scraps of bacon, eggs and odd items of information gleaned from my textbooks. One might describe it as pointillism in action: a bit of egg followed by a suspicious glance to the back of someone's head, a brief flirtation with a waitress, then another bit of egg, etc. There is no doubt that the human stomach gets the same thrill out of finding nourishment in garbage that as farmers themselves do, breeding potatoes and tomatoes from dung-fertilized dirt. The food was awful and my manner of digesting it even worse. It is amazing that I didn't get sick once over a five-year period from this insalubrious provender. I think back upon that diner to this very day with considerable fondness and nostalgia.

Breakfast finished I would saunter semi-comatose to my assortment of odd jobs, seminars or other routine obligations. As a general rule my day was arranged to allow me to be in my lab in the basement of Agassiz, the Biology building, by 3 PM. Here I might remain, with my animals, experiments and studies until midnight or beyond.

#7...

At least one weekend out of each month was put aside for visits with the family. It became a fixture in my routine and I didn't give it any thought. Anyone sitting in on these visits might have gotten the impression that my parents deemed it their religious duty to demonstrate a total lack of faith in the character or abilities, or both, of their eldest son. They took turns in warning me that if I didn't want to end up as a bum - that was the term my mother used, my father used more genteel equivalents - I'd better start preparing myself for a career as an elementary school teacher. By 1962 they were offering to finance my certification as a teacher of kindergarten or pre-school .

I never doubted that they loved me - whatever that means. Certainly their total contempt for my abilities and their supposed love for me went hand in hand like a pair of newlyweds. As Mom had been born into circumstances of grinding poverty she was obsessed with the fear that I might starve to death; in modern-day America it's more likely that I might die of exposure. Into my father's earnest efforts to get rid of me I tried to read the benevolent concern that my intrinsic inadequacies would not cause me great unhappiness through a lifelong dependency on them.

He'd learned that it wouldn't do just to throw me out. During my year at Marigold Meadows the family had move to upscale surroundings in a suburb 20 miles to the west of Philadelphia. The new house was spacious, with an acre of grounds to the back, much of it growing wild, and an empty meadow on the south side. Through letters and telephone calls we'd worked out a date and

#8...

time for my return to the bosom of the family. On the afternoon of the stipulated day Dad sat in a chair waiting for me on the front porch. When he saw me walking up the driveway he came down to meet me at the foot of the steps. We shook hands and exchanged a few innocuous words. I recall that he commented on my weight, and how much healthier I looked since the last time he'd seen me. Then he bent down towards my left ear and whispered that I should go around to the back. He had something important he wanted to say to me.

I followed his instructions, went around and waited by the screen door. 15 minutes later Dad came traipsing out the door. In his right hand he waved a much folded and frayed five dollar bill. In a single sweeping gesture he (in a manner of speaking) threw the money in my general direction and made a pirouette back to the door. Crying "Go!" - the situation was already out of his depth - Dad ran back into the house.

I sat down on the back steps and asked myself if 5 dollars could buy enough poison to commit suicide. A few minutes later Agatha, my 10-year old sister, came running out the door. Mom had sent her out to find out what I was doing sitting all alone in back of the house. I told her what had happened and she went back inside.

Agatha's return threw the household into a uproar. A short and exciting fracas involving shouting, banging and angry stomping around was followed by the predictable slam of the

#9...

front door indicating that Dad was handling the family crisis in his usual manner, escape. Mom came storming out through the screen door, grabbed me under the armpits and dragged me inside. She cooked up a huge meal then, as I ate, sat at the table weeping over me. Over and over again she berated herself for not having done enough to prepare me to stand on my own two feet. If they family had only remained in Freewash! she whined, I would at least be making my own living as a coal miner by now!!

The collapse of my father's strong-arm strategies was but the prelude to an evolving ritual that eventually vitrified like a block of nuclear waste: oppressive family conferences. They settled into a niche in the dead time of a Saturday afternoon, went on to dinner then continued all through Sunday: *What was Aleph going to do to make something of his wasted life?*

How could their poor, darling little Aleph extract what little remained from the dregs of his squandered opportunities? What was Aleph Randal McNaughton Cantor, who'd fooled all the professors at Zelosophic University into thinking he had brains, going to do with the rest of his life, now that the truth was out that he was, always had been and always would be, a total nothing? Now that it was clear to the whole world that the myth of his mental endowments said more about his acting abilities than it did about the folds of his grey matter? Their poor, unhappy Aleph, who'd so messed up his life that he'd reached his late 20's without a single skill, with no trade or profession, nor promise of a career. Without focus, goal, aim, ambition, hope! Not even a rich fiancée to support his innate incompetence!

#10...

These conferences were tedious beyond the narration of them. Yet I was not the one who suffered the most from them. Their real victim - and I say this without a twinge of sympathy - was my mother. Mom did all the suffering for the 3 of us. Even Dad attended them only because he didn't have the will power to refuse. In the end I debited them as part of the price to be paid for my peculiar lifestyle. She worried so much that I became afraid that the real catastrophe would occur on the day when she realized she had nothing to worry about.

"Aleph!", she moaned, "If you get married your wife can look after you. Then I wouldn't have to worry so much about you!"

"That's right", I can hear Dad chiming in, "And you aren't getting any younger!" How could I explain to them that I didn't want to get any younger?

"I just haven't met the right girl."

"So what?" Mom countered "You ought to be grateful for anything you can get. Every day your chances narrow down!"

Sometimes Mom could actually be funny. Once she said to me:

"Aleph, why don't you advertise?"

"Advertise for what?"

"Maybe you can get a wife that way! There are magazines that carry all kinds of ads, like *Lonely young man seeks companion* ; *Interesting future offered to girl with the domestic virtues* - you know what I'm talking about."

After the discussion about the wife came the inevitable wrangling over a trade. In this regard my father showed more sense

#11...

than my mother. On several occasions he suggested that I might become an electrical engineer: "Why don't you take up electronics? You can make a good living at it, and with your mathematics ability it should come easily to you." I was allowed little time to consider the possibility before Mom would be sure to break in:

"Aw no Abe!! He's so clumsy! The next thing you know he'll stick his thumb up the wrong place on a TV, and burn his brains out!!" Whenever it came down to specific proposals Mom believed me incapable of handling them. Most of the time in these sessions was devoted to abusing me for the wreck I'd made of my life:

"Aleph, face it: you're a failure at 25! Aleph! Are you listening to me? I said you're a failure, and you're only 25! I don't know any other young person I can say that about! I don't think you're listening! Aleph? Aleph?" Of course I was listening. What else was there to do on a Sunday afternoon in that insufferable household?

"I'm listening! I'm listening!"

"Well: haven't you got anything to say? Are you just going to sit there?" She sat back and glared at me in triumph, daring me to come up with an answer.

"I was only thinking that an impartial examination of my present circumstances would suggest that the concept of 'failure' in my case is well-nigh undefinable."

"Abe ! Abe! Do you hear that? More crap!" My mother leaned forward on her careworn elbows, throwing the full force of her self-perpetuating anguish into her words:

#12...

“Aleph! Aleph! When are you going to make something of yourself?”

I suspect that one will not find anything unique or atypical in my family. In one way or another its habits and modes of relationship are reproduced in the majority of families across America and around the world. Travel through India. I've never been there but I'll warrant you'll find that the domestic squabbles of its most miserable, famished and disease-ridden families, with a dozen mouths to feed and no resources for keeping up appearances, will nevertheless look a bit ridiculous in the eyes of any disinterested outsider.

In every household one finds a rocking chair over which there are recurring feuds around who has a right to sit in it ; a son destined to turn out bad or a daughter doomed to a wasted life from the age of 7; a ritual about the kitchen, or about dinner, or about cooking; an aunt or cousin or in-law whom no one likes but who has rights no one can question; sporadic rebellions which merely reinforce prevailing patterns; disgusting habits which have no option but to get worse; a general sense of mustiness as from old socks and bandages; and hosts of unresolved grievances which never will be resolved because resolving them would leave an even greater void than any previously existing. Despite this stagnant cesspool of agglomerated misery the belief prevails that there is a sacred "something" in family life that must be preserved whatever the cost, financial, moral, psychological, political.

In my shameless heart I was quite happy in my career as a professional student. I found nothing unpleasant in coasting

#13...

along as a bored, dilettante, depressed as much for form's sake as in reality, for the indefinite future. Once in awhile an old acquaintance from Mathematics, surprised to encounter me on the street after not seeing me for so many years, would invite me up to his place for dinner. I welcomed these invitations, yet prepared myself in advance for the inevitable round of questions: *"What happened to the old Aleph McNaughton Cantor? Where's your research in mathematics? Why aren't we reading new communications from you in the research journals? How could you betray our faith in you? Where have all our hopes disappeared to ? "*

I became skilled in fielding this line of interrogation with snide comments like:

" Remember what Solon said to Croesus : 'Count no man happy until he has reached the end of his days.' . ' or

"Expect lots of surprises before the Big Crunch."

I was not just being supercilious. The sole nourishment of my inner life at the time consisted of fantasies in which every claim ever made about me would be vindicated. Immanuel Kant was in his 80's when he began his Critique of Pure Reason. Sophocles wrote Oedipus at Colonus when he was in his 90's. Milton didn't write any poetry between his 20's and 50's, then labored on Paradise Lost for the rest of his life . Sooner or later I convinced myself, my research was destined to take a turn for the better. In the meantime it troubled me little sit around doing nothing.

I tutored my students at the prep school; did my other rudimentary jobs to everyone's satisfaction; puttered about in

#14...

my lab; played the recorder; went to movies and concerts;
picked out notes on the piano; and mused about the
profession I'd custom-tailored for myself: *evolutionary
ethicist* . There was satisfaction to be derived from
monotony. Whenever I was able to suppress the inner voice
of duty which insisted that I had an obligation to think of
myself as unhappy, I must have been happy as well.

