

EAST NORTHPORT, L.I. Though I vowed, on graduation from high school in 1969, that I was leaving the suburbs forever, I now live in a town that is just 20 minutes from the one I grew up in. For all its problems and faults, suburbia offered me a superior public education, and I wanted my sons to have one, too.

Yet no sooner did we enroll them than I began to have misgivings. Their work did not seem to engage them, to challenge them as much as I remembered being challenged. It wasn't until last month that I was able to confirm my suspicions.

My eighth grader brought home a research paper assignment for his American history course. Thirty-one years ago, I took a similar course—and I saved my papers. Comparing the two assignments left no doubt: the older assignment was vastly superior.

Back in 1965, we were given this quotation—from a turn-of-the-century commentator named Lloyd, in a book called "William Jennings Bryan and the Campaign of 1896"—and asked to agree or disagree with it:

"The Free Silver movement is a fake. Free Silver is the cow-bird of the reform movement. It waited until the nest had been built by the sacrifices and labour of others, and then laid its eggs in it. . . . The People's Party has been betrayed. No party that does not lead its leaders will ever succeed."

It took mind-splitting work just to decipher the quotation. And then, to fulfill the assignment, my classmates and I had to explore and understand three distinct phenomena. First, we had to digest gold and silver monetary standards. We had to research the reform movement, tracing the evolution of the People's Party from its origins. We had to sift through the politics of 1896, in which the Populists had to decide whether to field their own candidate and risk losing the election, or join the Democrats and risk annihilation.

After all this, we still had to figure out for which cause Lloyd was the mouthpiece. The passage, I finally realized, was an attempt to rally the Populists to take their own course—advice not taken. They nominated Bryan, who lost to William McKinley, thereby destroying the People's Party.

I concluded by urging Lloyd to grow up. The point is to have your issue prevail even if your party doesn't. The People's Party may have fallen on its sword, but it did so in a good cause.

In their assignment, my son and his classmates had to answer three questions. To the first, "Did we have to drop the bomb on Japan?," my son argued that Harry S. Truman, as well as many others, had no idea of the full devastation the atomic bomb would cause. On the second, whether it hastened a Japanese surrender, he equivocated. To the final question—"Is it fair to use the knowledge we have in 1996 to judge decisions made nearly 50 years ago?"—he wrote, "The simple answer is no."

We both received the same grade on our papers—100.

I do not intend to disparage my son, who has always been a highly conceptual thinker and an A student, or to exalt myself, for I was not alone in my high grade. ~~But~~ I think these two assignments illustrate a profound diminution of educational expectations.

When my classmates and I fulfilled our assignment, we couldn't help but learn that the world was much more complex than we could imagine; that we had to absorb reams of information before staking claim to an opinion; that objective "information" existed only within a context and issued from a point of view, both of which had to be fully understood.

From my son's paper, I see no evidence that he has absorbed any of these lessons. The newer assignment—three straightforward questions positing three answers—is premised on the modern view that we are all entitled to an opinion, no matter how little we may know.

To be honest, the ins and outs of the election of 1896 have not stayed with me. What has endured is the value I place on scholarship, argument and critical thinking. My teacher's high hopes for us, which at the time seemed far too ambi-

tious to be fair, became the scaffolding upon which we built our careers and the ways we define ourselves.

As for my son and his classmates—the class of 2000—I'm not as hopeful. We expect terrifyingly little of today's students, and they are responding in kind.³

³ *New York Times*, June 18, 1992, Sec. A, pp. 1, 12. See Chapter 7, pp. 212-213 for additional analysis of this essay.