

TO BE A CARIOCA, continued

How can I explain something like that to an American?

--Luiz Carlos S. Joaquim

DAVIDSON

Hattie's is crowded. You see the myriad of faces, personalities, temperaments, emotions, problems--some dry, some bloodshot. The smoky haze stings your eyes enough to give the illusion of atmosphere. Lots of people, lots of noise, lots of smoke, lots of beer. Hopefully the alcohol will give the illusion of escape.

Twenty miles north of Charlotte and one mile east of U.S. Highway 21 lies a small town called Davidson. A sleepy, peaceful protoplasm whose docile nucleus is a college bearing the same name. Some thousand students and numerous janitors, teachers, and campus policemen reside on this academic Everest. There comes times in the lives of men when evaluation becomes necessary - for survival, sometimes for maintenance of sanity. College is such a time, a ferment of curiosity, tradition, change, enthusiasm. College is often the last time for evaluation. Davidson, curiously, provides the traumatic shock of ferment and the wall of safety which stifles it. The freshman, most curious, most eager, least protected, is most susceptible to the shock, and as summer turns to winter and freshman to senior, the spirit is numbed, grows more secure, or perhaps, more sensitive.

The psychologist tells us that every action and reaction we perform, every idea and impression that is cast upon the screen of our mind is a result of, in effect, is caused by four things: the behavior of the organism--the man, the college student, the freshman, is a product of his physiological equipment (as far as we are concerned, his intellectual capacity) --, his previous experience (all the things which have happened to him since his creation as a living organism, his physical and mental condition, and his present environment.

We assume from college propaganda and admissions department publicity, that the Davidson freshman is endowed with superior academic abilities and high college board scores, a result of his high intelligence. The freshmen vary widely in the nature of their past experience, nearly all possessors of numerous awards of achievement in high school and nearly all are by nature and choice southern Anglo-Saxon protestants.

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The small drops of sweat stick to the can and the large drops role down the side, sliding into the ring of water. The more rings, the better. The suds are white and pretty, and sort of pure: The beer...the beer is wet, cold, and...not delicious, but it tastes better than it did the first time. Two or three more and it'll taste much better. Three or four more and it'll taste much better. Three or four more and it'll go down like water...tasteless and good. Everything's a little blurred and foggy. You clean your glasses. Everything's still blurred and foggy. You lean back against a painted gorilla, Davidson fades. This is good. Davidson's gone. Time sips by. Everything's tolerable. That damn fool over there must not be so bad afterall. He looks as happy as you are. Are you happy? What difference does it make? You must be happy.

Davidson's a thousand small towns, one main street, a few stores, moral, law-abiding. Color it quiet in the summer, red and brown and orange and yellow in the fall, maybe a little dark and lonely in the winter. From the air it looks mostly like trees. From the ground it looks like mostly trees, with a few houses, buildings, and streets. Plenty of birds and leaves. Plenty of silence. The mail comes two or three times a day. Sometimes it brings magazines, sometimes newspapers, always it brings church bulletins, once in a while it brings a letter, maybe a letter from home, maybe money, maybe from a girl. Mostly it brings nothing. The train comes once or twice a day. White people live on one side of the tracks, black on the other. One or two old faces lean against walls or doorways. Young faces collect on the corner and laugh and joke. The old faces wait and the young faces wait-for tomorrow, The day after that, and the day after that. They don't anticipate. They only wait.

Across the street is the college. Lots of trees, lots of grass, a few sidewalks, some old buildings, some new ones, radiate from its heart. Through its arteries and veins flow students and teachers, blindly, intently, passively. Its heart nourishes its product, its ideal, its image, and its beat is timed to shape its goal - a graduate with sophistication, a keen sense of discrimination of values, wrapped in modern-day gentlemanly virtue - a Davidson Gentleman. Six times a week students learn of history, science, mathematics, culture, language, and their fellow man. Three times a week they hear recognized and unrecognized authorities speak with varying degrees of authority and skill, but always the student's minds and ears are finely tuned, and always the benefit. Knowledge is the thing, knowledge, and learning to reason, to understand, to use knowledge with reason and guide it with understanding never achieved, without high grades. Accordingly, grades are

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the thing, and knowledge and grades follow, as surely as the night does the day.

The freshman comes to Davidson with sound intellectual potential, and to develop it, he needs an atmosphere of calmness, of non-transient structure, of little distraction, of no temptation. His academic development is secured, and the proud parents are sure also that he has been sent to a nice place where, untempted, his mind will remain sound, his soul pure, his character strong. His moral development must stay on the right track, for he already knows what is right, what is acceptable. Watching over him night and day, in bed and in class, the code of honor is his guardian. He remains chaste and assured of salvation, and with understanding, faith, and enthusiasm. He learns a place of worship is provided, and he need not feel persecuted and cannot possibly doubt, for he looks around, and everyone attends, with his faith, with his enthusiasm. To be the leader he will someday be, he must learn to be a willing and obedient follower, and efficient following and able leading are adequately developed in an exciting military program.

Confident of his choice, proud of its purpose, the freshman arrives in the dying warmth of summer. In stead of the God-fearing, law abiding persons like himself, he finds a microcosm of humanity, and only a few hold like himself to what is right, what has been, what always will be. He finds his traditions attacked, his ideals rationalized, and he wonders what is right. In his mind comes toleration of others, and then doubt in himself. He wants to test the new freedom his intellectualism has released, that he may shape his present and future accordingly. But he cannot, for it is unethical, immoral, untraditional to violate the past. He wishes to test his new ideas mentally, if not physically, but he has nothing to go on, and he can only sit and watch those who live the new philosophy undercover, behind closed doors, in open rejection and hidden violation. Perhaps he may decide to join the fun, destroying the past, and acting without reason, perhaps the future.

Whether his stay is a semester or four years, a different Davidson is stamped on the mind of each student. The physical Davidson changes only from time to time, but Davidson is an emotional experience and what he is and has been colors the looking glass of each. In time his new environment may change what he sees, so that in time he sees a different environment, a different Davidson. The condition of the organism, of the student, changes and in doing so, changes Davidson, bringing it in and out of focus. The freshman comes to school curious, excited, enthusiastic, confident he has chosen the right path. Work

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and monotony and failure - sometimes frequent failure, dull the student, and through tired eyes he may see no Davidson at all, only the impossibility of finishing yesterday's work before tomorrow. Freshman turns to senior, learning the ropes, the tricks. Sometimes curiosity and challenge remain sensitive, ready and unafraid to act. Sometimes senses are dumbed and hardened, and the student sees only a Davidson he doesn't like, but can't change, which he despises and tolerates. He can be cool and indifferent. He lives with it, he goes around it. So the student arrives at Davidson, confident of its perfection. Sometimes slowly, sometimes abruptly, always painfully, he sees imperfection. He may fight, ignore it, or perhaps valiently try to change it. He may care. He may not. He may be tired or he may be eager. He may be drunk and then it doesn't matter.

The beer is warm and bitter. Bits of foam cling like tired spit to the sides of the can. Through your numb eyeballs you see the little man sweeping off the tables. Time to go. The door opens and closes and opens and closes. Haze filters into the night but the room stays blurred.

So what is the purpose of Davidson, of college--to teach us, to learn about life and how to live it, to live with ourselves, with each other? What is God and what is His nature? What is man and what is his nature. What is right? What is wrong? We go to college to learn, to learn to think, to reason, to find a guide for our lives, and perhaps a purpose. We use the basis we get from college to evaluate, but how do we evaluate our basis?

The poem that is a morning in spring-soft sounds, gentle breeze, pale colors, is a thousand miles from the dark sleepless hours of the night before. Perhaps the poem hides the truth, perhaps the still of the night. The fire that burned between dusk and dawn flickers and smolders. The storm turns to lazy morning mist, then melts before the sun.

You suck the cool night air into your lungs with a sickening shudder as your stomach climbs halfway up your throat before collapsing with a thud. The stars, still there, wander around, then slowly settle into place. The sky is black, black and deep.

--Jim McMillan