

UP

One Man's Journey to Feminism

Peter W. Pruyn

he / him / his*

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Cover photo: 7,500 feet over Galveston Bay early on a Saturday morning. ©2020 Peter W. Pruyn.

Up

One Man's Journey to Feminism

Peter W. Pruyn

he / him / his*

Content warning:
Contains descriptions of physical and emotional violence

* Pronounced “prine”. He/him/his: This is the set of pronouns I ask others to use when referring to me. People who identify as transgender or gender nonconforming may use pronouns that do not conform to binary male/female gender categorizations, such as “they, them, theirs.”

2: Ithaca

Age 18-25
(1985-1992)

“Never let your schooling interfere with your education.”

— Mark Twain

My father never earned a college degree, but all my life I heard him say that he'd always wanted to go to Cornell, in the town of Ithaca in central New York State. While I chose Cornell primarily for its computer science program, in retrospect, his unfulfilled dream no doubt strongly biased my wanting to go there.

While I learned many lessons at Cornell, the most enduring was in how power structures treat those who have the least power. It was also where I stumbled into my first formal introduction to the study of gender.

Writing as Women

On a hill overlooking Ithaca and Lake Cayuga, Cornell's sprawling campus can be intimidating to navigate. It's the first week of classes my freshman year, and I'm looking for Uris Hall. Centrally located on-campus, the building's intentionally rusting, squat, steel structure makes it look like something that was abandoned in a shipyard in the 1940s. In contrast, once on the inside, the chrome-like spherical doorknobs on the classroom doors look like toys I want to play with. I navigate the maze of white hallways and enter one of Uris' spacious, antiseptically white, windowless classrooms where my freshman writing seminar will be.

Believing that all undergraduates should be able to write, Cornell instituted a requirement that all freshman must take writing seminars. Seminars are offered on a multitude of topics spanning the university's diverse academic departments. When I first looked at the list of potential seminars, one course title caught my attention: "Writing as Women." Crossed-listed with both the English Department and Women's Studies, I could not help but be curious. I had just attended an all-boys school for twelve years. A little voice suggested that I could stand to learn something about the topic.

With the understanding that not everyone will get into the seminar of their choice, freshmen are asked to rank their top four choices. After weighing the other seminar topics, my schedule, and my curiosity, I listed "Writing as Women" as #1.

I got in.

I now find myself sitting at a large rectangular table with 16 freshman women, the only male in the room. While pensively waiting for the teacher, I mull the name of the course over in my mind and wonder how this is going to go.

The instructor soon arrives, a female doctoral student in Women's Studies named Judy who looks like she's in her late 20s. Personable and engaging, Judy has us go around the table and introduce ourselves. As the introductions gradually approach my side of the table, my heart beats harder. It

gets to my turn, and I feel all eyes in the room on me. Before I can say anything, however, Judy turns to me and says with a slight smile, “So, I guess this class was your last choice, Peter?”

It’s a complicated moment. On one level, Judy’s comment feels ‘othering’; a bright spotlight is being shined on my difference, and I feel the heat. But there’s also something about Judy’s smile, slight tilt of her head, and tone that suggest her intention is the opposite; perhaps she’s trying to make me feel welcome by naming the elephant in the room. Without processing any of this consciously, my brain decides to respond to this intention factually, rather than its emotional impact: “No, actually … it was my first choice.”

When I would mention to male friends that I was taking the class, they would often insinuate that I had a social agenda. What other reason could there be for a man taking a Woman’s Studies class? Eventually I just stopped telling people.

So the first lesson I learned from the class was: if you step outside of gender norms, everyone—both men and women—will find your intentions suspect. All I could do was focus on the work.

Thus began my semester of women’s studies as a gender minority.

For our first assignment, Judy asked us to write one page about our expectations and any anxieties we had about the class. As an 18-year-old boy feeling like I had to justify being there, I wrote the following.⁹ (I’ll transcribe Judy’s hand-written comments on the page after.)

⁹ Computer aficionados over 50 may recognize the Geneva 12-point font that was printed on an Apple Imagewriter II printer in “high quality” mode from a Macintosh Plus. Ah, the Good Old Days

Peter Pruyn
Writing As Women

9/3/85

Assignment #1

Expectations and Anxieties

I enroll in this course with the hope that it will teach me what it means to be female and how and why women act differently from men. I hope that my incorrect ideas about women will be corrected, and I will be very interested to find out the origins of these misconceptions. In this way I will not only learn a great deal about the opposite sex, but I also hope to learn about the peculiarities of being a male and why I am the way I am. I am very happy that this course will concentrate more on subject matter than it will on the actual mechanics of writing.

One of my fears is that my male presence in the classroom will hinder the very personal class discussions that will occur. I can fully understand a classmate's hesitation in discussing ~~their~~^{her} body with me. I can only hope that they will see the sincerity, concern, and seriousness with which I treat the subject and that they will respond in kind. I also hope that if I make a comment that to them seems to be sexist or chauvinist, they will understand that I do not mean in any way to offend, I mean just to learn.

Your anxiety about being a sensitive class presence is well taken, Peter, as is your determination to be serious. From my experience with this course I've found that the one man in a group of women generally gets absorbed fairly easily. Basically, the group remains a group of women, and the man's gender ceases to be prominent. Tell all what happens.

Your writing, from this short sample, looks fine.

Here are Judy's comments from the bottom of my paper:

Your anxiety about being a sensitive class presence is well taken, Peter, as is your determination to be serious. From my experience with this course I've found that the one man in a group of women generally gets absorbed fairly easily. Basically, the group remains a group of women, and the man's gender ceases to be prominent. We'll see what happens.
Your writing, from this short sample, looks fine.

Judy's syllabus divided the semester into four major topics: Beauty/Bodies, Mothers, Love, and Work. Readings included excerpts from Simone de Beauvoir's *The Second Sex*, Toni Morrison's *The Bluest Eye*, Adrienne Rich's *Of Woman Born* and ... a Harlequin Romance. We also spent time analyzing advertisements in *Cosmopolitan Magazine* and Alfred Hitchcock's construction of a woman in his film *Vertigo*.

Each week one student would read her paper on one of the four major topics out-loud to the class, and we would then discuss it. I wrote my paper on the topic of bodies exploring my lack of interest in playing competitive sports. At the end of the course, Judy realized that I'd never had an opportunity to read one of my papers in class. Part of me was disappointed, but, given the title of the class, another part of me wondered if it was for the best. I think it's fair to say that I talked less in this class than in other classes of the same size. I felt I was there more to listen.

Judy had been right; my gender generally faded into the background.

While I wouldn't say the class made me a feminist, it did put gender on the map of my thinking in an explicit way it hadn't been before. I was more likely to wonder how gender might be underlying behaviors I was seeing around me, including my own. It raised my awareness. A lesser consequence of the class was realizing that I'm O.K. with never reading another Harlequin Romance.

The class also taught me something else: you learn more when you're a minority. Not only do you have to learn the curriculum of the majority; you also have to figure out how to teach yourself the curriculum of how you're different.

Undergrad

I wanted to go to Cornell for three reasons: its computer science program, its undergraduate course in computer graphics¹⁰, and its Air Force ROTC (Reserve Officers' Training Corps) program. I saw the technical degree and path to the Air Force as my best chance for a successful astronaut application.

Unfortunately, I discovered fairly quickly that many of my professors didn't seem to care very much about undergraduates. At a large research-oriented university, it seemed like teaching was the price professors paid for being able to do their research. It didn't help that some of my graduate student teaching assistants didn't speak English very well.

Academically, I felt lost.

At the same time, I was immersing myself in Air Force ROTC. ROTC was the first experience of my life that focused on teamwork and group dynamics in a meaningful way, and I ate it up. I made most of my best friends in ROTC. They felt like family at an institution that could often feel impersonal. In addition, I was never someone who participated in competitive sports, and ROTC was my first experience of feeling personal satisfaction from physical fitness.

¹⁰ I cut my computer graphics teeth in high school on an 64K Apple II+ with dual 5.25" floppy disk drives and taught myself assembly language on its 8-bit 6502 Synertek microprocessor.

Contrary to a militaristic stereotype, we also had a lot of fun. At the end of every semester groups of cadets would perform comedic skits for the entire Detachment based on events of the semester. Earlier that year we had had a fighter pilot from a nearby Air National Guard base as a guest speaker. Unfortunately, he fit the stereotype of an arrogant fighter pilot, so I felt his talk was ripe for satirizing. For the skits I borrowed a roommate's black cowboy hat, spoke with an exaggerated drawl, and swaggered a lot. Much to my surprise, the auditorium roared with laughter.

At the time, the Detachment's Cadet Commander was a senior named Doug. I knew Doug because he had been my Flight Commander when I was a freshman. He was also the first person I'd met with a Boston accent, which his peers wouldn't let him forget. I looked up to him.

After the skits were over and the performers were milling around down in front, Doug came down out of the seats in the auditorium, walked right up to me, extended his hand, and said in his distinctive accent, "*Good jawb, Petub!*"

It meant a lot to me.

Sophomore year I was caught between feeling repelled and disillusioned by my classes in computer science while feeling inspired by and drawn to everything-ROTC. Eventually, my grades suffered. I had been taking Russian for my language requirement and, looking for a simple solution to my academic troubles, I changed my major to Soviet Studies. My undergraduate advisor, an emotionally remote mathematician who insisted on calling me Mr. Pruyn, breathed an audible sigh of relief when I told him. Meanwhile ROTC assigns officer career 'slots' based on the academic majors that fit the current manpower needs of the Air Force. Changing my major from a technical degree to a non-technical degree had the effect of nullifying myself from the program.

It was a catastrophic loss for me.

So later that year, when I was invited by the upper classman in ROTC to be a trainer in the Detachment's Freshman Orientation in the fall, I was thrilled. This honor provided validation that nothing else did. If I had to leave ROTC at the end of my sophomore year, at least I would "go out with a bang."

A few weeks before Freshman Orientation, our Detachment's Colonel, Bob Sample, called me into his office. Colonel Sample was an Annapolis graduate, an Air Force pilot who had flown C-7 Caribous in Vietnam, and a former Wing Commander of C-5 Galaxies, the largest aircraft in the Air Force. Medium height, middle-aged, with always perfectly combed dark hair, he simultaneously projected an air of command and approachability. The story that I admired most about him was that when he was a Wing Commander, one of his pilots made the horrific mistake of landing a C-5 without lowering the landing gear. One can only imagine the grating roar and sparks caused by the underbelly of that enormous four-engine jet (a C-5 is larger than a 747) grinding down a concrete runway without its wheels down.¹¹ In the aftermath, Colonel Sample's commanding general ordered him to fire the pilot. Colonel Sample refused and told the general, "If you want to fire him, you have to fire me first."

Colonel Sample never heard another word about it.

What I took from that was that he believed he worked for his people first and his superiors second.

There in his office Colonel Sample explained to me that he could not allow me to represent the Detachment in Freshman Orientation. He needed the example of people who would complete the program. At the same time, he was sorry to lose me because, he said, "You're one of our best." Coming from him that meant the world to me.

While I understood and respected his decision, I was devastated.

Around this same time, due to my last semester's grades, my college "strongly recommended"

¹¹ This link appears to show a photo of that C-5 sitting forlornly on the runway:

<https://theaviationist.com/2017/12/11/this-photo-shows-a-c-5a-galaxy-after-it-performed-a-gear-up-landing-at-travisafb-in-1983/>

that I take a year off. It was the lowest time of my life to-date.

I took classes for a semester at a local community college, and after a successful experience there returned to Cornell. As difficult as even I found it to believe, I felt re-inspired to try computer science as a major again. Without ROTC, all my creative energies were now focused on schoolwork, and I earned Dean's List all four remaining semesters in a row. If anyone had told me during my sophomore year that I would have ever been capable of earning Dean's List in computer science—even once—I wouldn't have believed them.

In spite of this new-found academic success, however, every time I saw my former ROTC classmates wearing their blue uniforms around campus every Thursday, my body felt like lead. It would take me more than two decades to identify the underlying emotion: shame.

Deep down inside, I felt beaten down.

Memory: Footfalls

My father is sitting in his green corduroy easy-chair watching television in the living room. I am standing in front of him. I am about four years old. He is chastising me about something; I don't remember what.

In the middle of him talking, I suddenly have an impulse to walk away.

I abruptly turn on my heels and stomp down the long hallway that runs the length of our apartment to my bedroom. I slam the door shut and sit on the side of my bed covered with my light blue Chitty-Chitty Bang-Bang bedspread. I'm upset. At the head of the bed, my stuffed animals lie tucked-in next to each other in a row: an orange striped tiger, a red donkey, a small brown koala bear.

A moment later, I hear my father's heavy footsteps on the wooden floorboards of the hallway. At the end of the hallway you can either turn left to go into my parents' bedroom or turn right to go into my room. I can read his mood by the sound of his footfalls—and he's not in a good mood. As his footsteps get louder and closer, my heart pounds.

He's coming for me.

The door to my room slams opens against the opposite closet door, my father's face red with rage. I freeze.

He storms over to where I'm sitting, grabs me and thrusts my body down onto the bed face-first, my legs sticking out off the bottom edge. With his left hand on the center of my back, he pins me to the mattress, hard. His hands are giant. With his right, he grabs my belt and yanks down my pants. He makes no effort to loosen my belt first, so it digs into my thighs and stomach just above my genitals. I wince. I can't move. I'm crying.

My head is turned to the left towards him. Out of the corner of my eye I see him raise his right hand. As his meaty open palm comes down hard on my buttocks, he yells repeatedly, "I don't like it when you walk away from me! I don't like it when you walk away from me!" The "like it" is when he hits.

I'm terrified.

He is so big, and I am so small.



Figure 11: Top: Me and two of my friends in Air Force ROTC. Below: Two classmates next to an 8-bit computer we made on a circuit board for a class.



Figure 12: Air Force ROTC Bravo Flight, Fall, 1985. Doug is in the front row, third from the left. I'm in the back row, second from the right.

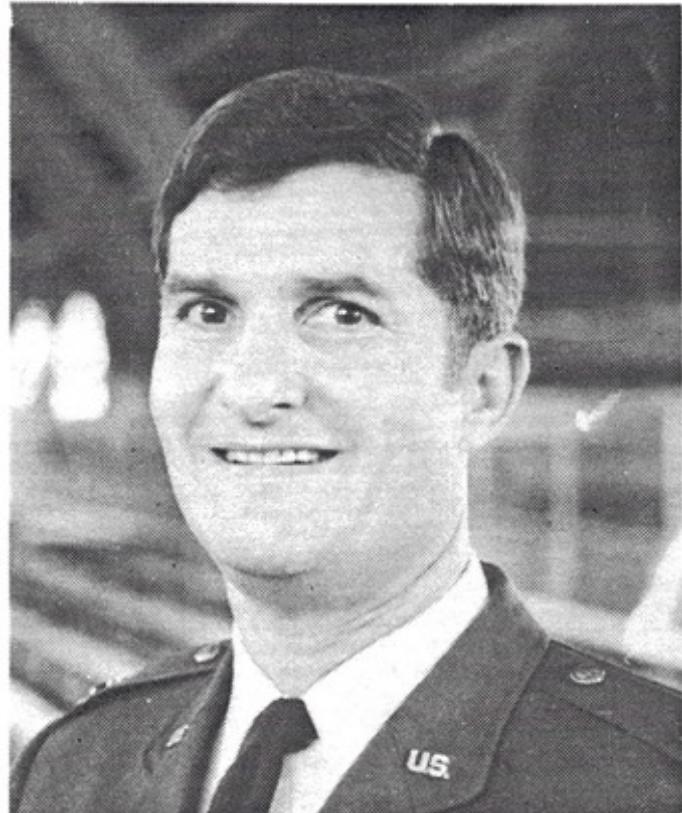


Figure 13: Colonel Robert W. Sample, Professor of Aerospace Studies and Commander of the Air Force ROTC Detachment at Cornell during my sophomore year.

Graduate School

A strange thing happened one day while I was sitting in the auditorium before my undergraduate class in computer graphics began. As the Teaching Assistants were setting up Professor Don Greenberg's carousel slide projector, I thought, "*Hub. So these guys do computer graphics all the time.*"

Pause.

"*Gee, ... that'd be neat.*"

Enamored by the course and the possibility of doing computer graphics fulltime, at the end of class I walked up to the podium and asked Professor Greenberg if I could speak to him sometime about Master's degrees.

In response, Don, an avuncular man with whitening hair who still had the build to play pickup basketball, shot me a look, raised his eyebrows, and responded expectantly, "I assume you mean computer *graphics* Master's degrees?"

I nodded.

On the spot, he invited me to have tea with him at The Dragon, the student café in the basement of the architecture building. He then gave me a ride to my next class in his 1970s-era metallic-green VW Beetle convertible. No faculty member had ever offered to give me a lift before. I felt treated like a person.

The conversation that began that day evolved into my writing a proposal to do an independent study project in Don's Program of Computer Graphics during the next semester. In explaining why he accepted my proposal, Don said, "You, know, Peter, it's really interesting from a teacher/faculty perspective to see the difference between students who take a course just to take a course and those who have a deep interest in the subject matter for its own sake. And you've convinced me that you have that. You've sold me." He added, "You're so polite. It's so nice to deal with polite people."

As I worked in the computer graphics lab on state-of-the-art computer graphics workstations, I got to know the graduate students and staff of the lab. They were personable, dedicated, and I enjoyed the lab's sense of community.

It was a mind-bending shift from wanting to get out of Cornell as fast as I could, to submitting graduate school applications to five different graduate programs in computer graphics, including Don's.

One day in the early spring of my senior year, Don opened the door of the dark freezing cold video lab where the only unoccupied workstation was for me to work on. He stuck his head in and said, "Peter, come in my office a second. I want to make you happy." Once seated on his 1960s-era earth-tone couch, he said, "Let's do it.... Let's forget about what happened your first two years and concentrate on the next two."

I was the only Cornell student he accepted that year.

Over the next two years, besides feeling immense gratitude, I marveled at how the same organizational hierarchy that had felt oppressive to me as an undergrad was now suddenly on my side. I had a spacious office in a brand-new building, a large window that looked out over the green trees lining Ithaca's gorges, and close friends as officemates. Most importantly, my thesis could be almost whatever I wanted it to be.

Living frugally off the lab's stipend and eating a lot of ramen noodles, I had enough money to earn my private pilot's license and instrument rating, the latter teaching you to fly in the clouds using navigation instruments without being able to see the ground. Most conventional cockpit instruments present information to the pilot two-dimensionally, while the task of aerial navigation is inherently three-dimensional. Meanwhile, I was sitting in front of a high-powered computer graphics workstation all day. I couldn't help but fantasize about what it would be like to bring the power of state-of-the-art computer graphics to the task of visualizing and integrating navigation information for

pilots in the cockpit. So for my thesis I did just that.¹²

When I graduated with a Master's degree in computer graphics two-and-a-half-years later, I heard Doug's voice say, "*Good jawb, Petuh!*"

¹² "Exploring 3D Computer Graphics in Cockpit Avionics", *IEEE Computer Graphics & Applications*, May, 1993. With Professor Donald Greenberg.

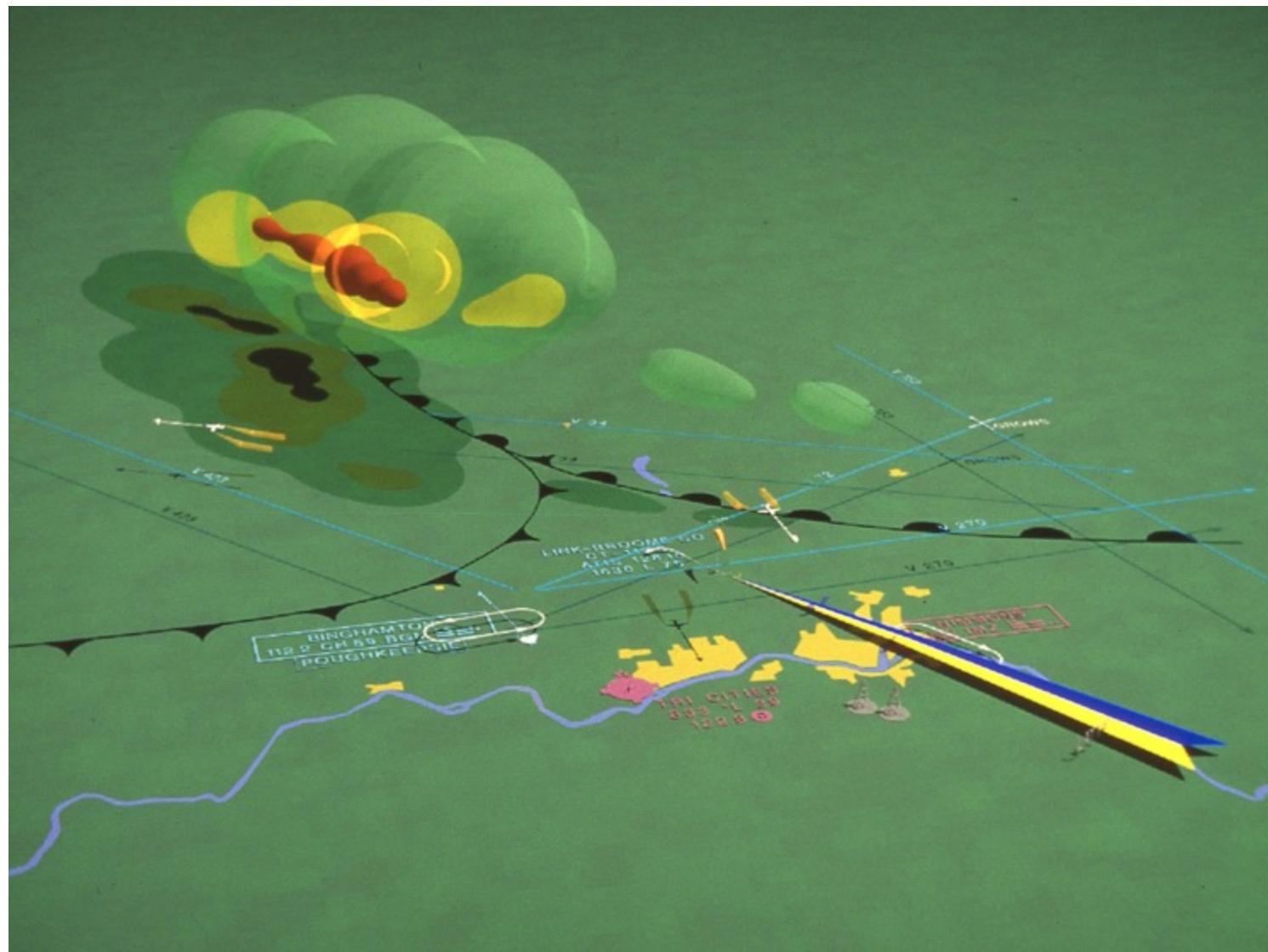


Figure 14: From my master's thesis, a computer simulation of the navigational aids and weather radar around Link-Broome County Airport in Binghamton, New York.



Figure 15: Standing with Don Greenberg, my graduate advisor in computer graphics, in front of his favorite car: a metallic-green VW Beetle.

The Class of 1989

Approaching graduation after a positive experience as a graduate student, I decided to write an essay about my difficult undergraduate experience to send to Cornell administrators. A copy of the original essay is below followed by the responses I received from: Frank Rhodes, President of Cornell; Bill Streett, Dean of the College of Engineering; and Professor Juris Hartmanis, Chair of the Computer Science Department.¹³

The letter from Professor Hartmanis was particularly meaningful to me for several reasons. First, Hartmanis is considered by many to be the grandfather of the field of theoretical computing and is a recipient of the Turing Award, the equivalent of a Nobel Prize for the field of computer science. Second, with some apprehension, I took his Introduction to Theoretical Computer course after my year off, and I got to know him fairly well as a result of spending many afternoons at his office hours struggling through his problem sets. In spite of his stature in the field, he was one of the most approachable professors I had had at Cornell.

Even though it was the briefest, I felt his letter took personal responsibility in a way the others did not.

I would never forget that.

¹³ A version of this essay appeared in the *Cornell Chronicle*, September 3, 1992.

The Class of 1989

Peter W. Pruyne
B.A. '90, M.S. '92

As I come to the end of a seven year stay at Cornell, I am trying to come to an understanding about what Cornell has meant to me.

I first visited Cornell in 1984 as an eager, high school senior in search of a high quality computer science major. I enrolled as a freshman in the College of Arts & Sciences the following August, excited that my first choice had accepted me.

By the spring semester of my sophomore year, I had become disillusioned about my major as well as my own capabilities. While I never actually failed a course, my four semester GPAs so far had been 2.96, 2.79, 1.55, 1.22. At the same time that I was finding out how theoretical the Cornell computer science major was, I was also immersing myself in Air Force ROTC. I felt that for every hour of work I put into ROTC I received ten times the rewards back, and for every hour that I put into computer science, I felt I wasn't getting anywhere. I also had the idea that to finish college in anything other than four years signaled some kind of failure. With this spurious guideline and having taken Russian for my language requirement, I decided to change my major to soviet studies, a less demanding, but hopefully equally interesting, major. My undergraduate adviser seemed as relieved as I was that I had finally recognized my limitations and was now on a more suitable academic course.

After the semester was over, my college "strongly recommended" that I take a leave of absence. After some consideration, I decided that all I really wanted to do was to major in computer science. I admitted to myself that soviet studies was more of a stopgap than a deep desire. So I took a year off, determined to find a college that had a more practical approach to computer science. I stayed in Ithaca and spent the first semester of my leave as a part-time student at Tompkins-Cortland Community College, with the hope of earning some grades that would make another college interested in me.

The more I looked around at other schools, however, the more I began to realize how special Cornell really was. Nowhere else did I find the combination of breadth and depth of subjects that exists here at Cornell. I withdrew from Air Force ROTC, and with a few good grades from TC3 in hand, I petitioned Cornell to enroll as a part-time student for the spring semester of my leave. I was told that if I performed satisfactorily, I could then re-enroll as a full-time computer science student in the fall. If I did not perform well, I was told that I would have to "go elsewhere."

To make a long story short, I did well enough in the semesters that followed to earn not only a Cornell B.A. in Computer Science, but also to be admitted to the graduate program of my choice, Cornell's Program of Computer Graphics. I was one of four Master's students accepted into the program in 1990. I will finish my Master's degree this August, seven years after first enrolling as a freshman.

Why was this all so hard for me? Some may put it simply: "Peter, you just didn't work hard enough." I submit that this is not a fair judgment.

President Rhodes has stated that it his personal goal to make Cornell University the greatest research institution in the world. I think that this goal is worthwhile, and I think that it is achievable. But at what cost?

Too many of my professors didn't seem very interested in undergraduates. Some rarely attended their office hours. Half of my TAs didn't always seem to know what was going on. Most of them were not lacking in knowledge, only in the desire and the skill to teach it. Undergraduate teaching was the price they paid for doing research. I learned to learn my subjects not from my professors or TAs but on my own. In other words, I learned that the person who looks out best for Peter W. Pruyn is Peter W. Pruyn.

Now, I do not wish to give the impression that there is nothing for undergraduates to like at Cornell. Aside from those professors mentioned above, I have also had the best teachers, professors as well as TAs, that I have ever had in my life at Cornell, and I know that what knowledge I have learned is close to being state of the art. I simply learned that no one will go out of their way to help you, so if you want to survive, you had better learn how to help yourself.

Perhaps this is good. If one can survive successfully in a large and impersonal school, perhaps one will be that much better prepared to survive in a large and impersonal world. On the other hand, my parents went into debt at the rate of about \$18,000 a year while I was an undergraduate. Their burden deserved more than a few teachers who had the desire to learn my first name.

And who can blame the researcher for not wanting to teach? What is the system of rewards and punishments that a professor faces at a university? What are the rewards of successful research? Getting published. Prestige for the researcher. Prestige for the department. Prestige for the university. Ammunition for the next grant proposal. What punishments exist for unsuccessful research? Peer sanctioning. Less chance of tenure. Less chance for future funding. What are the punishments for unsuccessful teaching? Poor comments on student evaluation forms. What are the rewards for successful teaching? The satisfaction of recognizing that a student, as A.D. Alexandroff once observed, "is not merely a vessel to be filled, but rather a flame to be lit." Self-satisfaction notwithstanding, the fact remains that there is no Nobel Prize for Teaching. No wonder mentors are so hard for undergraduates to come by.

I know that many of the leaders of Cornell understand all this, but it is a policy at Cornell that you can't actually make the faculty do anything. There are university-run teaching programs, but none can be made mandatory. As a result, the only people who show up are those who already have a sense of responsibility for teaching. The ones who do not show up are the ones who really need to be there. And although departments may stress teaching in tenure reviews, how effective can a group of people with questionable teaching ability be in evaluating whether or not somebody else can teach? I am not trying to criticize individuals here. I am criticizing a system.

I am one of the lucky members of the Class of 1989. I graduated, even if it was a year late. The question that I fixate on as I come to the end of my Cornell career is, "Where are the rest of the Class of 1989?" How many of the eager, young freshman that I sat next to during President Rhodes' welcoming address, who had their limitations pushed during their time at Cornell, actually made it through? And for those who didn't make it, to what extent will they be scarred for the rest of their lives because once upon a time at Cornell they stumbled and fell, and there was no voice around to whisper in their ear, "Come on! Get up! You can do it!"

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Office of the President

July 20, 1992

Mr. Peter W. Pruyn
588 Engineering &
Theory Center
Campus

Dear Peter:

Many thanks for your note of the 9th, and for your thoughtful comments about your Cornell career and experience. I appreciate that you have written with such candor and such feeling.

The problem you describe is a real one, and it is one which characterizes every research university. It is also one where, if we cannot provide a total solution, we can at least make incremental improvements year by year and so do a better job than we now do.

We have taken a number of important steps in this direction. One of these is the President's Fund for Educational Initiatives, which has so far distributed some \$3 million for innovative teaching programs for the improvement of teaching at the undergraduate level. We are also concentrating attention on more professorial contact with freshmen students in the College of Engineering, and I am asking Dean Streett, with whom I am sharing your letter, to give some details about this.

Beyond that, a committee under Dean of the Faculty Walter Lynn has recently suggested that teaching should be given considerably more emphasis in faculty appointments, promotions, rewards, and tenure decisions, and we are now reviewing ways in which we can implement this proposal.

None of this will change the climate overnight, but collectively these programs will make a significant difference. I want all our students to be proud of their Cornell experience, and I want them to have a significant number of faculty members to whom they can turn, not only as instructors but also as mentors and friends.

Mr. Peter W. Pruyn
Page 2
July 20, 1992

I hope you will allow me to quote from your letter, so that I can use it in a constructive way. Thank you again for your thoughtfulness in writing.

With all good wishes in your career,

Sincerely yours,



Frank H. T. Rhodes

cc: Dean William Streett

CORNELL

UNIVERSITY

Office of the Dean of Engineering

242 Carpenter Hall
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Facsimile: 607 255-9606

20 July 1992

Mr. Peter W. Pruyne
588 Engineering & Theory Center
Campus

Dear Mr. Pruyne:

Thank you for sharing with me your thoughts on seven years at Cornell.

You have written eloquently of perhaps the greatest shortcoming of research universities: their inability (perhaps "unwillingness" is a better word) to reach out and to nurture undergraduate students who are struggling and losing their way. This is not a new phenomenon. As recently as the 1960's (not so long ago in the life of a complex institution) the overall attrition rate in engineering was 55% -- that is, only 45% of those students who entered the Engineering College as freshmen eventually earned an engineering degree. That was also the national average in engineering at that time! (At Cornell many of the remaining 55% earned degrees from other colleges in the university, but I don't have the exact figures.) The official attitude of the college was, "Sink or swim, it's up to you". Although we have made some progress in addressing this problem, your experience supports my belief that we still have too much of that approach left in the system.

Today, about 70% of entering freshmen earn engineering degrees, and another 16% earn degrees from other Cornell colleges. The 14% failure rate (failing to graduate from Cornell) is about average for the entire university. What is of special concern to me is that the graduation rates from engineering are lower for women (62%) and underrepresented minorities (about 50%) than for White and Asian-American males.

I won't waste your time and mine attempting to justify the present system. It is clearly flawed and in desperate need of change. However, I can at least point out that there is another side of the story: the 45-year post World War II period in which the United States, as part of a conscious government policy, sought to build the nation's basic research capabilities in its universities. The generous government funding of university research that was at the core of this policy created the best systems of basic research and graduate education in the world. (More than half of all people in the world pursuing advanced degrees in science and engineering outside their own countries are in the U.S.) These successes clearly helped our country to maintain world technological leadership during most of that period, and contributed to the winning of the Cold War. Unfortunately this emphasis on research brought with it many of the problems you have identified in terms of the rewards and prestige for success in research compared to those associated with teaching and nurturing undergraduates. The challenge of achieving the right balance of emphasis in these areas is more difficult than it looks at first glance. For a broader perspective on this matter I recommend a short book entitled "Universities and the Future of America" by Derek Bok (Duke University Press, 1990) who recently retired after 20 years as President of Harvard University.

The last sentence in your essay is an eloquent statement of the crux of the problem faced by too many Cornell undergraduates: "...they stumbled and fell, and there was no voice around to whisper in their ear, "Come on! Get up! *You can do it!*" We must change this. Imagine how much more difficult and discouraging it is if the student who stumbles is a woman or minority, and in the back of their minds is the question, "Are they treating me like this because I am different?"

Among the initiatives undertaken in the last several years to get at this problem are the following:

- A college policy has been adopted requiring all faculty members to serve as advisors to undergraduates, keeping the number of advisees to about 15 -17 per faculty member. A system of feedback from students to faculty (and to the Dean) about the availability and effectiveness of advising will be implemented later this year.
- An Engineering Tutorial Program has been established, under which freshmen students can enroll in a one-credit pass/fail course in which all the advisees of a faculty member meet with him or her once each week for discussions of any topics related to engineering. The main purpose of this program is to provide a mechanism for students and their faculty advisors to get to know each other as friends. (So that later there will be someone who cares and who will say, "Come on! Get up. *You can do it!*")
- Cornell is the lead institution in an 8-member coalition of engineering colleges that has received a 5-year, \$30 million grant from the National Science Foundation to begin to restructure and revitalize undergraduate engineering education. The other colleges are Iowa State, Berkeley, Stanford, Cal Poly (San Luis Obispo), and three historically Black colleges, Southern, Tuskegee and Hampton. (It is one of four such coalitions funded by NSF.) We are still early in this program, but it shows real promise for improving many aspects of the system.
- Next fall Math 191 will be taught in sections of 25 students, with 9 engineering faculty and an equal number of math faculty as teachers. Some of the best teachers in the college have volunteered to teach in this program. At the same time, CS 100 will be broken down into smaller sections, and a new course with 25-student sections created for those who have no experience with computers. It is my hope that we can extend this approach to more freshman/sophomore courses in the next few years.

I would be pleased to talk with you more about your experiences, and how to make the college more supportive of its students. Please call my assistant, Mrs. Janes, at 5-9679 to arrange a time if you wish to do so.

One last thought. As time goes on I think you will realize (perhaps you already do) that you learned more from this experience than, "...the person who looks out best for Peter W. Pruyn is Peter W. Pruyn." You will realize that when faced with adversity you reached deep within yourself and found the strength and the resources not only to survive, but to excel. There will be many other times in your life when that experience, and the self-knowledge gained from it, will serve you well.

I wish you continued success.

Sincerely,


William B. Streett
Dean



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July 20, 1992

Mr. Peter W. Pruyne
588 Theory Center
Cornell University
Ithaca, NY 14853

Dear Peter:

I read your comments about your Cornell experience with interest and with some unease. The unease comes from the fact that WE should have done much better in our teaching responsibilities, not only in lecturing, but in knowing and understanding our students.

I will try to do my share as the current chair of the Computer Science Department. The Computer Science faculty is aware of the importance of undergraduate education, and I will try to apply an additional "force field" to increase our commitment and dedication to teaching.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to read "Juris".
Juris Hartmanis
JH:pc

Colonel Sample

As I approach the final year of my master's program, I reflect on what to do next. In the course of my studies I met a fellow student in the lab named Erin who was about ten years older than I was. When I learn that she had been a Peace Corps Volunteer in Nepal, I am fascinated. Up until that point I had lived my entire life in New York State, and the idea of living outside the U.S. appealed to me. The primary barrier for me actually doing something like Peace Corps, however, is that foreign languages had always been my worst academic subject. I feel I simply will not be able to do that part of the job.

Nevertheless, I cajole Erin into showing me her slides of living in Nepal. After seeing them, I am even more intrigued. Eventually, it occurs to me that Erin is not that different from me, and if she can do it, so can I. Nevertheless, it still feels like the biggest decision of my life, to-date. Most Peace Corps assignments last more than two years. I'm not going to rush into this. I feel like I need someone to talk to.

Over the years, despite my leaving ROTC, Colonel Sample kept his door open to me. Since I graduated undergrad, Colonel Sample retired from the Air Force and is now working for the College of Engineering. I reach out to him, and he is happy to meet with me.

Meeting in his new small office on the second floor of the gray stone Carpenter Hall, it is a little odd seeing him dressed in civilian clothes just like everyone else. It is not lost on me that when we first knew each other I was hell-bent on going into the Air Force; now I am seeking his counsel about going into the Peace Corps. I describe my interests and concerns. I characterize the decision to go into the Peace Corps as feeling like agreeing to marry someone without meeting them yet. He responds that perhaps it's more like moving in with someone.

He had a point.

Without prompting, he then summarizes his perspective on relationships: "Any successful relationship is a middle-of-the-road proposition." The emphatic nature of this declaration suggests that it comes from lived experience.

Returning to my present dilemma, he offers the following analogy about decision-making. He says, "If I hold a one-dollar bill in this hand and a hundred-dollar bill in the other hand and ask 'Which do you want?', that's not a decision because you have complete information. A decision means you don't have complete information." I glance down and take-in the wisdom of what he is saying.

One way to make-up for incomplete information is to cultivate what he calls "a loyal opposition", that is, people who believe in your mission and goals but aren't afraid to critique the strategies and tactics you are using to achieve those goals. In other words, talk to people and ask them what they think.

When it's time for me to go, we stand up and Colonel Sample extends his hand with a smile. I thank him, and he wishes me luck. As I walk down the hallway from his office, I feel heard and supported.

He had not tried to make the decision for me.

That summer, I submit my application to the Peace Corps.

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