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### HOW I HAD FOUR MAJORS IN COLLEGE

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At both Bryn Mawr and neighboring Haverford, there is Customs Week (elsewhere this is often called freshman orientation). Why these schools persist in using such an anachronism is surely subject to question. I suspect it is because Bryn Mawr and Haverford are proud of their traditions and want their incoming students to develop a sense of respect both for the institutions and themselves: they are being acculturated to the folkways of a very special place and should feel special about being included. It turns out what is customary at each school is not really what students are being introduced to as much as what are the rules and regulations regarding their conduct as students taking courses and living on campus. Looming large is the honor code at each school.

It is all part of keeping up appearances and projecting the image of an elite institution. Both campuses at Bryn Mawr and Haverford are laid out and groomed to imply privilege and status in ways that unmistakably suggest that the opportunity to study there is a special one. It can make students feel they have been anointed, but then again, that itself can also be intimidating. Bryn Mawr's campus in particular is stunningly misleading in its magisterial facade. It is a women's college that was started in the late 1880s by a man from Haverford who felt his sister and women like her should be able to get the kind of education that men at Haverford had been getting since the 1830s. In order to suggest that women were not being shortchanged, the buildings, as they were erected one after another over the course of the first century or more of the college's history, seem to have been intentionally designed to mimic the architecture of schools such as Oxford or Cambridge in England, to imply a much older institution with a more august lineage. Smoke and mirrors seem to be involved as much as bricks and mortar. The visage was and still is overwhelming. Bryn Mawr has buildings with turrets and flying buttresses.

In fact, Bryn Mawr is very serious about keeping up appearances, especially when it comes to those flying buttresses. The exterior of the major

auditorium on campus was refurbished back around 2000, and that included repairing the many flying buttresses that adorn the outside of the building. When the restoration was ongoing, I expressed concerns to my dean about the cost of maintaining such anachronistic architecture, saying we could better spend the money on other things, such as hiring more faculty or raising our pay. (Flying buttresses might have been necessary to support walls propping up roofs of some windowed cathedrals, but this one had very small windows and the buttresses clearly served no real architectural purpose. Their value was, in my mind, strictly symbolic, connoting the idea that Bryn Mawr should be seen as a much older institution than it actually was.) My dean responded by saying, yes, the college's administrators were well aware that the Gothic-looking flying buttresses on our medieval-looking auditorium were a major expense of questionable architectural value, but she nonetheless insisted they were necessary because it had long ago been proven that flying buttresses keep away evil spirits! It was a joke, to be sure, but one that was taken seriously by those responsible for maintaining the image of the school. The college did not hesitate to spend huge sums of money to restore its flying buttresses. Bryn Mawr tells itself many stories to justify its commitment to its customs, traditions, and even its anachronistic architecture.

Customs Week is another relic, no less durable than those flying buttresses, equally symbolic in value, if less physical in appearance. Part of the ritual of Customs Week is the opportunity to hear from faculty about what they expect from students and what they think it is like to be a student at that school. More generally, it is simply an opportunity to hear a professor speak about something other than one of the subjects in the courses offered. It is part of the process of humanizing the institution for new students.

I have given the same talk at customs for both Bryn Mawr and Haverford. It is entitled "Why I Had Four Majors in College." Like a lot of my titles and pronouncements, it is supposed to be somewhat misleading in order to make a point. Students often think that because I am a professor, I must be smart or some kind of academic whiz. So the assumption is that I simultaneously had four majors while breezing through my studies as an undergraduate. This could not be farther from the truth. I tell them that I did not have four majors in college at the same time (something that is actually prohibited at most schools), but instead I had four different majors in serial fashion, moving from one to another as it became clear that my grade point average (GPA) would suffer if I continued with my current major from that point on. In other words, I was not a whiz.

I tell the story during Customs Week to reassure students that they need not overstress the issue of having to choose a major, that they can switch majors as they go, that this is not unusual, and that it can all work

out in the end (even if you are not an academic whiz). If a non-whiz like me, who was a serial major, can make it as a professor, then they can probably plan on doing just fine during and after college. I am not sure if the story calms all fears among the first year students who hear it, but it gets laughs, and for that moment the levity must defuse some tensions felt by these newcomers to a very proud and possibly intimidating institution. Some students might actually start to feel they belong and deserve to be there.

My story begins at the end of my first year at St. Lawrence University, 1967–68. How I ended up attending St. Lawrence is its own story. In the spring of 1967, I had gotten a full scholarship to attend Butler University in Indianapolis, Indiana, where my family had taken me on a visit the previous summer. Probably because of the scholarship, my dad tried to tell me Butler was the Harvard of the Midwest; but that did not work since our neighbor, who was a year ahead of me in school, was finishing his first year at the University of Chicago. (I remember at the time thinking it odd that a city had a college all of its own, but my friend was to quickly school me on the established fact that Chicago was where it was at academically.) I told my father that Butler had a great basketball team (that I would never get to be on), but it was supposed to be my backup school, according Mr. Mazzone, my guidance counselor. The plan was that I was going to go to Brown University with my friends and we were all going to play soccer there, or at least try. (Two of my friends did in fact go to Brown and play soccer there on a team that was usually in the national championship tournament.) St. Lawrence was to be number two. I got a partial scholarship to St. Lawrence and was waitlisted at Brown. I sent in my deposit to St. Lawrence, honored to be partially subsidized. (It was not much money, but what it symbolized to my feeble brain was huge.) Subsequently, Brown admitted me, but I turned it down because I had already submitted my deposit to St. Lawrence. (It was not that much money, but to my feeble brain it was hard-earned money that I refused to give away.)

Subsequently, in my senior year at St. Lawrence, during what was called inter-term, I spent time at Brown, attending some philosophy classes with my friends and thinking I would have flunked out if I'd gone to Brown. When I returned years later as a professor from Bryn Mawr for a multiculturalism seminar, I was haunted by the fact that I had stupidly chosen not to attend Brown, as well as the idea that I probably had made the right decision because I was in all likelihood not good enough to have finished there. This ambivalence continued to haunt me more recently when the economist Glenn Loury invited me to speak there but then had to cancel when the more preferred speakers on his list agreed to present. Ever the ball of confusion and contradiction, I could never sort out my feelings about Brown.

My first year at St. Lawrence, though, went well. Located in remote northern New York just south of the St. Lawrence River and the Canadian border, St. Lawrence is a beautiful residential campus in the small town of Canton (population six thousand). This sort of remote campus does leave a student often with very little to do other than to trudge to the library to study with friends. In the winter, this was likely to be one of my longer trips outside. The result can be, at times, higher grades than might otherwise be the case. As a freshman, I declared myself a Physics major. (I was academically strong in math and science in high school, and there was of course the whole Sputnik craze.) In my first year, I aced both semesters of introductory Physics and did the same on the labs. I was evidently a physics whiz. When I went to meet my advisor, Professor Lufburrow, he wanted to know how I did it. Lufburrow was the quintessential physics professor, grey hair, moustache, wire-rimmed glasses and a bit of an accent (vaguely European). He seemed approachable up to a point. More importantly, he was delighted to have such a promising student under his wing and was curious to know how I approached my studies. In particular, he was especially interested in how I scored perfectly on those labs.

I told him I treated them like my Bar Mitzvah. This was not helpful on several levels, especially since Lufburrow was not Jewish. Professor Lufburrow looked at me like I was a dog barking and asked me what was I trying to say. I said that in order to become a man in the eyes of the Jewish religion, a boy had to read from the Torah in Hebrew during the Sabbath service on Saturday morning in front of the whole congregation, at the age of thirteen. (It seems in retrospect cruel to make young kids do this in order to be pronounced the man they still are yet to be—but this is not my point.) I told Lufburrow that in order to be able to prepare for your reading the rabbi gave you a 33 1/3 phonograph record with a recording of someone reciting your assigned passage in Hebrew. I took it home and proceeded to play it over and over until I memorized the singsong recitation. And here is the important point: I never for one minute knew what the Hebrew words meant. Sure, I went to Hebrew school twice a week for years and learned some Hebrew, but not nearly enough to speak it fluently or to translate passages or do anything that would approximate being literate in Hebrew. I knew next to nothing about Hebrew. I memorized the sounds so that I could emulate the recitation, regardless of my ignorance of what it meant about God, being a good Jew, or anything else. This of course raises profound issues about whether I deserved to be recognized as a real man in the eyes of the Jewish religion. And it evidently, upon this telling, raised real issues in the eyes of Professor Lufburrow as to whether I should be recognized as a real Physics major. He suggested I might want to think about another discipline in which to concentrate my studies.<sup>1</sup>

Lufburrow's suggestion was most appropriate. His point was that lab writeups reported on what you actually did, not your idealized understanding of what you thought you were supposed to have done. You were supposed to conduct an experiment, record the results, and write up the report. I conducted the experiments (rolling metal balls down inclines and other exercises), but I really did not understand what we as students were doing or why. What I did know was that there were equations for everything and I could memorize them and write out the calculations. I went through the motions of the labs and then just plugged in the numbers to the equations and wrote out the results. I was a zombie Physics major. Lufburrow, like most physics professors, believed in the importance of labs as an opportunity to learn by doing. The fact that I was not learning while not actually doing was in direct disregard of this whole pedagogical approach. I was sleepwalking through the labs and relying on my mathematical abilities to get me through. I was no real physicist. At this rate, I would never be able to conduct my own experiments. It made sense that I should look into other majors that did not require learning by doing.

This would eventually prove to be most ironic, since a part of my scholarship years later would come to be about promoting this very approach. I have been a big promoter of experiential learning at all levels of higher education and especially in the curriculum at the particular schools where I taught. I have published articles and books about this issue. I have been cited as an authority. I became a footnote on the basis of that which I had failed so miserably. My past evidently did not deter me. With never a reference to my youthful disregard for learning by doing, I spoke forcefully about breaking down barriers between theory and practice, student research and faculty research, the classroom and the community.<sup>2</sup> As if it were something I always embraced, I have expressed my heartfelt belief that students learn best when they get to be active participants in the research process. Eventually, I went farther, conducting research that featured being connected to the community as a better form of social science because we all learn from each other by being actively involved in the research process.<sup>3</sup> With time, I could understand why at the time Lufburrow was so disappointed that his prize pupil only existed in theory, because that student at that point only relied on theory and never got his hands dirty applying theory in the lab in a thoughtful and attentive way. One way or the other, I eventually felt his pain, took it to heart, and tried to make amends. Yet, back then, it was too soon for me to know why it was such a big issue for my advisor; instead, I just looked for another major.

Major number two was then not a surprise but in fact a full retreat back to theory—Mathematics (which I had been taking as part of my prerequisites for Physics). I had taken Calculus I and II my freshman year and

aced both. Yet, I should have known that my new home would prove to be only a temporary haven. At some level, I had already realized that I had aced both Calculus I and II because they never got beyond the calculus taught to me back in high school by the amazing Mr. Fife, a gangly Ichabod Crane of a teacher who was a bit eccentric, but boy could that guy teach. My high school was actually great in mathematics and perhaps only okay in the natural sciences. We had not only Mr. Fife but also Dr. Kambor, who, if you could believe it, was a high school teacher with a PhD in his area of instruction. Kambor may have been a roly-poly guy with a tendency to mumble clichés, but he, too, was an excellent instructor. But it was Fife who made calculus essentially a gut for me in college. But how long would that last?

I did not let any doubts deter me as I sought a new major at the start of my sophomore year. Yet, coasting through calculus started to end in the middle of the fall semester in Calculus III with Professor Van Dyke. Van Dyke was very formal, constantly writing theorems on the board, spending most of the class with his back to us. I was getting worried, and not so much because I was not developing a connection to this man I knew only from his back. Now we were in new territory, and deriving the proofs was proving difficult. I ended up with a B in the class (my perfect record in math was gone). I pushed on, hoping I would adapt to now actually having to learn new things. In the spring, I enrolled in Boolean Algebra. I was about to learn what I did not know and never will. To this day, it remains a mystery to me what exactly Boolean Algebra actually is. I got a 36 on the first test. I went to see the instructor, Professor Simpson, whom I had had for Calculus II. I asked Simpson: "Thirty-six out of what?" I was thinking it must have been scaled on some kind of curve (it was math, after all). No luck. Simpson responded: "Thirty-six out of one hundred, you idiot!" (Back then, professors were not so well schooled in nurturing students.) Simpson was like a friend or an uncle; in fact, he had an avuncular demeanor and a wry smile, with a tendency for bad jokes. He always joked with me in particular in Calculus II, like the time one day in class when he made fun of a song I had requested for my girlfriend the night before to our student radio station. (What he was doing listening to student radio that night I now consider just something odd.) I was not offended by his way of talking to me, but I was chagrined that I got such an abysmally low score. Simpson tried to reassure me by saying: "Don't worry, you did better than most in the class." Wow, we all flunked! This was not reassuring, but instead totally frightening. What was I to become as a Math major now that there was no more calculus that I could take that rehashed what I learned from Fife in high school? And who could I rely on if we all sinking together? I decided to switch majors again. I dropped Boolean Algebra (the only course

I would ever drop as an undergraduate) and went straight out of the hard sciences altogether, determined now to seek shelter in the supposedly more nurturing humanities.

I had been taking German along with Physics and Math (I think I imagined myself as a budding Jewish Werner Von Braun). So German was now my new refuge as my career in the hard sciences bottomed out in the middle of my sophomore year. I had studied German in high school with Herr Kerr, who called students “Chico” if they switched from German to English when speaking in class. Years later, my anthropologist son relayed to me that another anthropologist had made a study of what she called “mock Spanish,” as in “hasta la vista, baby,” ala *The Terminator*, suggesting that white Americans used mock Spanish in a racist way to imply a macho, tough-guy type of posture.<sup>4</sup> That was Kerr to a T, who could be tough, but was a very effective instructor nonetheless. I ended up scoring high on the German SAT test, and I think it helped me gain admission to colleges. I continued with German in college, acing courses as I went, and by the second semester of my sophomore year I was in an advanced German literature course with Herr Bühler.

Yet, German literature with Bühler would soon prove to be not the humanities haven I sought. My problems in Physics and Math actually intensified. My strengths in German were similar to those in Physics and Math: I was good at memorization and bad at creative application. I had a rich German vocabulary and could also strictly follow the rules of grammar, composing my own German prose in precise fashion. Yet, translation required creative leaps of interpretation. It was the language equivalent of applying theory to practice in a hands-on way inside a story rather than a lab—already proven not to be my real strength.

The fatal story I had to translate came late in that spring semester seminar. It was *Die Panne* (“The Breakdown”) by Friedrich Dürrenmatt who was heavily influenced by Franz Kafka.<sup>5</sup> At the time, the title did not alert me to what was just about to happen to me as a German major. Ever the naive one, the warning staring me in the face was hidden in plain sight. Part of the reason was that I idolized Kafka for his dystopian perspective on modernity, and, given Kafka’s influence, I was excited to read the lesser-known Dürrenmatt. Yet I ended up having a breakdown over translating “The Breakdown.” In spite of how the story resonated for me, I could not muster a credible translation. Bühler in fact decided it was so bad that he should read it aloud in class. As I said about Simpson, back then professors were not as versed as now in being nurturing educators. In fact, Herr Bühler was not really what I would call a real professor; he was just some fairly literate guy who knew a lot of German, probably because it was his first language, and he was hired to teach us. Bühler neither looked like

a professor nor acted like one; but he did indeed speak German fluently. Everyone laughed when Bühler read my translation, and I remembered sitting there frozen with fear that people would turn around and look at me. Fortunately, that did not happen (probably out of sympathy more than lack of ability to figure out who had blown the assignment).

After the laughter died down, I stopped by to see Herr Bühler in his office and we talked about what was lost in translation. Evidently, a lot. And so I quickly decided I was probably done with my third major. I did not panic, but things were now looking bad. Time was running out. I still had a decent GPA, hovering around 3.3 out of possible 4.0 (making me a B student). But that average was inflated by my early A's in Physics, Math, and German, all garnered before the roof fell in each major. Where could I go to sustain my GPA? Who would take me in and give me a place where I could shine? Given those collapsed roofs, I was now without a home, academically speaking.

I was unsure where to turn. At the time, I was profoundly distracted, but this actually was to prove to be my salvation. In the fall of 1969, President Nixon's plan for the Vietnamization of the war was not going well. Mai Lai was about to become the scandal that turned so many Americans against the war. I was already attending meetings of the Students for a Democratic Society (SDS); people were planning demonstrations, including a mass vigil in front of the ROTC (Reserve Officer Training Corps) building on campus. The killing of student protesters at Kent State would happen in less than a year, forcing campuses to close just about everywhere, but even before that we were increasingly mobilizing against the war. We rallied, we marched, we protested, just as they were to do at Kent State. We kept signing pledges to resist being drafted. One day, walking in line up to a large steel receptacle with flames rising, I burned my draft card.

Around that time, the protesting and the schooling merged. I thought about it and decided that my main extracurricular activity should become my major. Politics was already in the classroom. I would go to the library at night and it seemed as though everyone was reading C. Wright Mills's popular book *White Collar*.<sup>6</sup> We were discussing in class SDS's Port Huron Statement (in part inspired by Mills's critique of American society).<sup>7</sup> We talked as if we ourselves could become agents of change who merged intellectual and political work, just like Mills.<sup>8</sup> We were living *The Strawberry Statement* in real time even as we were reading it.<sup>9</sup> The table was set for me; all I had to do was sit down. I switched to Government in the History/Government Department. It was made easier by the fact that we were required to take History as part of our general education distribution requirements. I had already taken U.S. Government as well. I signed up for a course on the



war in Vietnam. At some point in the fall of my junior year, my avocation became my fourth major.

It turns out that St. Lawrence was a great place to focus on politics as an undergraduate major. We had wonderful professors such as Bernie Lammers, Ansil Ramsey, and Victor Wallis. Ansil taught the Vietnam course and was knowledgeable about South Asian politics generally. Victor was a charismatic, if soft-spoken, professor who motivated me to embrace radicalism. He had us read edgy stuff about the student protests of May 1968, about *favelas* in Latin America, and critiques of mainstream political theory. Bernie was an incredible force; he was full of life in the classroom; he made studying politics exciting. He adroitly combined theory (Hannah Arendt was one of his favorites) with concern for civics education in order to promote a more thoughtful democratic citizenry. (Years later, when I taught at Potsdam, ten miles from St. Lawrence, Bernie would run for Congress and I would be his campaign manager. We drove all over the North Country continuing the dialogue that had begun years before back in his classes. We lost the election, but I learned a lot.)

St. Lawrence also had a great speakers series of politically noteworthy people coming to the campus. It was remarkable for a small college in remote northern New York. When I think back to this series of prominent and politically relevant speakers, I think that it must have played a major role in my political education and an even greater role in my budding political consciousness. It would have been difficult not to become a politically aware citizen while being exposed to such a star lineup of important political thinkers.

I remember that in my first year we heard John Kenneth Galbraith, the great economist (who had been ambassador to India), speak about his writings, including *The Affluent Society*,<sup>10</sup> which I had read just the week before (probably as assigned). Not long after that, Ralph Nader, the then very young consumer advocate came and spoke about his concern for corporate malfeasance. His book, *Unsafe At Any Speed*,<sup>11</sup> about the Chevrolet Corvair, had been published in 1965. Saul Alinsky came and was hysterically funny describing the various tactics he used to trouble the people in power.<sup>12</sup> Michael Harrington, the author of *The Other America*,<sup>13</sup> spoke and was magisterial, though his explanations of his fallout with the New Left and SDS were not entirely convincing to us young leftists. (With Harrington, I committed a *faux pas*, when in a small group discussion I asked him, in mixed company with some older women present, to explain more about his disagreement with the New Left activists, including especially Tom Hayden and others in the leadership of SDS. I made the mistake of specifically asking him to amplify on what he had said in an interview in *Playboy* magazine.

Harrington pointedly noted that people could read his assessment of the disagreement in a number of magazines other than *that* one. I slumped a bit in my chair when he said “that one”!)

Yet the speaker who had the greatest impact on me was the political scientist Charles Hamilton, who came later in my junior year just before Kent State and spoke about the book *Black Power*<sup>14</sup> that he had co-authored with Stokely Carmichael (Kwame Ture). I sat with my Black History professor William Mallam, who was a great influence on me in spite of his rather droll sense of humor, which sometimes was at my expense.<sup>15</sup> I think sitting with Mallam really motivated me to engage Hamilton. I was about to get my wish. Hamilton spoke about the inner city as colonized by the white power structure and how decolonization via community control and self-help initiatives in the form of black capitalism were the appropriate responses. Black separatism would be the best route to realizing the fruits of black power. The black folks left behind by white flight needed to take charge on a neighborhood basis, go their own way independent of white society, and forge a black capitalism that would vault them to an independent existence of self-determination and self-sufficiency within but apart from white society.

I understood some of what Hamilton was saying, for personal reasons. I was born in Newark, New Jersey, but grew up in the suburbs. The issue had troubled me for some time. My family was part of the great white flight to the suburbs that had accelerated rapidly in the 1950s in metropolitan areas of the Northeast and the Midwest. That may explain why I was intensely interested in the issue of race relations throughout my college days and beyond. Having professors that urged me to think about it, given my background, undoubtedly helped. Admittedly, it was not something I came to on my own, but confronting this issue had become an important challenge for me by the time I attended Hamilton’s talk.

My personal relationship to the issue, therefore, might explain what I did that night. Impulsively, I just got up and spoke during the question period, without really knowing what I was getting into. I had evidently just learned (or perhaps invented) the phrase “economic distributive justice” and blurted out a question using that cumbersome term, asking Hamilton how could we realistically expect black separatism to ensure that African Americans would be able to get their fair share of the broader economic pie if they cut themselves off from the economic engine that white capitalism had become.

Hamilton treated the question as an assault on his dignity (or so it seemed to me). Upon reflection, I can see why. In any case, still burned in my memory is how he proceeded in animated fashion to mow me down in no uncertain terms about how deluded I was in thinking that whites would ever allow blacks to get their fair share if they pursued strategies of

integration. (Years later, Charles Hamilton would head a Ford Foundation project to fund research on poverty, and in 1986 he approved a small grant for me and helped me get on a panel he organized to present a paper at the American Political Science Association's annual meeting in Washington, D.C. I asked if he remembered our encounter and he said yes. He told me he had mellowed since then and had come around to my side of the argument. I told him I did not even know I had a side in the argument at the time and my question was something that just popped into my head and got spoken thoughtlessly.)<sup>16</sup>

Shortly after my encounter with Hamilton, we heard of the shootings at Kent State, and the semester ended prematurely (probably out of fear that something like that might happen on our campus). We all went home with incompletes and worked on term papers over the summer. I had a chance to get further into the study of movement politics, the war, and race, my three main areas of interest. Given everything that was going on, majoring in Government at St. Lawrence was starting to make a lot of sense.

So Government was a good choice for my fourth major. And the fourth time proved to be the charm. I did all right as a Government major. I ended up maintaining my 3.3 average. I was less than a great student, however; I continued to rely on my strengths and did almost nothing to try to correct my deficits. I could retain large amounts of information, but processing it was always a challenge, whether it was in a term paper on John C. Calhoun for American Political Thought, an analysis of the causes of the Russian Revolution in a course on the History of Communism, or an annotated bibliography on some now forgotten topic in Political Science. I was a mediocre student, underperforming and underachieving.

When I think back, I see that I could have done much more. I tended to coast. I was diligent about attending class, taking notes, doing the reading. I was a real student in that sense. (A couple of preppy fraternity underclassmen befriended me in my communism class, calling me "the scribe.") Yet the idea that I would somehow work hard to synthesize what I was learning and then present it in a lucidly written analysis that demonstrated some level of reflexivity was something that was just beyond me. There was too much other stuff to do, like hanging out, listening to music, smoking dope, debating the true meaning of Marxism, protesting the war, or chasing girls. Those things had higher priority than working on my intellectual deficits. I see now that it was good that I stayed in school all my life, so that I could finally get around to this issue. Slowly over time, first in graduate school, then when trying prepare courses as a young instructor, and then most critically while trying to become a published scholar, I found I could not delay addressing my limitations any longer. Slowly, I learned to resist the atrophy of consciousness and to try to think critically. At some point, it

started to kick in. I started to look beneath the surface to analyze what made something out to be a knowledge claim that deserved to be taken seriously. After a while, it became second nature, something I just did, without saying it or thinking it. You just do it. Yet it is still a work in progress. Writing this chapter has been its own opportunity to realize how I have continued to carry around unquestioned misunderstandings about how I think about these issues. And then there is the writing. Writing has proven to be its own learning by doing. So this chapter has been, for me, quite therapeutic, if anything. In the least, I hope it will enable more of us to choose a major a little more thoughtfully and then maybe stick with it.