



TIME

the revelator

Tom Palaima muses on the Greek ideal of reflective learning, his immigrant grandparents' dreams of a better life, the GI Bill's impact on America and the price of allowing universities – once places where thinking was not bound by arbitrary deadlines – to be debased into assembly lines



My thinking about how time is used – or wasted – in higher education began with a photograph of my paternal grandparents taken in 1944 in the backyard of the three-family house they worked so hard for and eventually owned in the working-class Lithuanian ethnic area of Cleveland, Ohio. If education is a tree, my uneducated immigrant grandparents are strong roots dug into a forbidding soil. I think of old olive trees growing, impossibly, on Greek hillside terraces. The retaining walls for those terraces are built of heavy field stones hauled and placed by different generations of families of farmers. The ancient Greeks called such wearying hard labour *ponos*.

For ancient Greek thinkers such as Aristotle, being a physical labourer, a creature of *ponos*, even a working farmer or skilled crafts-person, precluded becoming educated. Education, as high-minded and high-born aristocrats conceived of it, required *skholē*. This term is generally translated as “leisure”, but it is a much trickier concept to understand and translate in ways that convey its fuller sense to us. For now, we can drive home the power of this concept in the ancient Greek value system by pointing out that the basic word in ancient Greek for “being busy” or “being at work” was *askholia*, a negative abstract, literally “the state of not having *skholē*”.

Ironies abound, given that modern American, British and European systems of higher education open to the many (*hoi polloi*) are based on Renaissance values derived from ancient Greek and Roman culture where education was designed for the state of living of the very few (*hoi oligoi*). The Latin language, too, shows the same privileging of

elite attitudes as in Greek. To be freed of the cares of working was a state called *otium*. To be weighed down by the concerns of making a living was literally its negated form, *negotium*.

My grandparents and their children never knew what the ancients called *otium* or *skholē*. Nor do their grandchildren, including me.

Their photograph is in black and white and plays tricks on the eyes. What season is it? There are no leaves on the trees. But are there buds on the branches? My beloved grandmother Sophie and my grandfather Michael, of whom I have what I think are constructed memories – he died when I was five – are dressed in heavy clothing. It looks as if there might be a light dusting of snow on some parts of the grass. Is late winter turning into spring in Cleveland?

They sit on a simple wooden bench, most likely home-built, in the sun. Their dog, named Baby Dog, moves past in front of them. My grandfather smokes a pipe. My father told me once that my grandfather went around his house gathering up from ashtrays the butts of cigarettes his sons smoked. He crushed them into a mix that he then packed into the bowl of his own pipe. I can still feel, from my father’s anecdote, the strong-willed frugality my grandfather shared with my grandmother. Their Hesiodic habits of household economy and hard work gave my father and his brothers and their children, including my brother and me, the chances we have had in our lives.

In the photograph, both my grandparents wear glasses. My grandmother is eating what looks like a thick slice of bread or a rectangular piece of her simple home-baked pastry. If her image were transported to the present day, she could be using an iPhone. But she and her

husband never had their lives opened up, or intruded upon, by the modern communication and information devices to which most of us have surrendered the little time that we have that resembles *skholē*.

When this photograph was taken, my grandfather was 69 years old. He had worked his first three years in the US as a coal miner in western Pennsylvania. Shrapnel-like bits of coal were embedded in his face, a permanent reminder of the accidental explosion of a stick of dynamite with too short a fuse. In 1944, my grandfather was still working as a labourer or chipper in the steel mills in Cleveland. I have some tools that he used in his work and brought home. I can imagine him making the bench in the photograph with them.

He was born near Kaunas, Lithuania, on 10 October 1874. He came to the US in 1908 and made it to Cleveland in 1911. A First World War draft registration record for Mikolas Palaima indicates that he did some kind of military service in 1917-18.

My grandmother Sophia Bereckiute came to Cleveland from Lublin, Poland, in 1913, at the age of 26. Her ship, the SS *George Washington*, left Europe from Bremen. How she got to Bremen, or even saved the money for her passage, and why she was heading to Cleveland, Ohio, I will never know. My grandfather boarded the SS *Philadelphia* in Liverpool. He travelled to England from Romania.

My father told me that grandpa used to say he got his wife off a turnip truck. Sophie, without knowing any English, reached Cleveland from her entry point of Ellis Island in New York. The story goes that she had a note

pinned to her clothes indicating where she was to go. The driver of a vegetable truck, who could read a note in Polish, or could understand what she knew to say, brought her from the train or bus station to the Lithuanian-Polish districts on the near east side of Cleveland. My grandfather was the lucky man who helped her off that truck and to wherever she or the vegetable truck driver told him she should go. He himself could not read the note. Nor could she.

She married my grandfather on 7 September 1914. I have her Austro-Hungarian *Arbeitsbuch* that kept track of where she had been employed as a *Hausdienerin*, the virtually enslaved life she was escaping. In Cleveland, she worked as a cleaning lady in office buildings and raised four boys. Even in her seventies, she split kindling wood for and shovelled coal into the furnace that heated their house.

Neither my grandfather nor my grandmother ever spoke more than broken English. In early documents we still have, my grandfather signed his name with an "x". On later forms, after he obtained his naturalisation in 1923, my grandfather wrote our family name in whatever variant the authority figures who required his signature had contrived to spell it on their forms: Palaima, Palajmo, Palayma, Palima, Palino, Polajman. They had the power to grant or deny him what he needed. So he gave them what they wanted. I believe he had barely more than what is known as "name literacy". My grandmother never learned how to write.

In early 1944, they had been married almost 30 years. They had four adult boys. Two were married and working in war-related industries in Cleveland. Two were serving in armed forces in the Pacific Theater. My father, 27 years old and named Michael after my grandfather, was with the First Cavalry. His youngest brother Joey, just 20 years old, was a corporal with the 14th Regiment of the 4th Division of the United States Marine Corps.

Both had public high school educations. Both wrote letters to my mother. My father wrote her earnest and stylised love letters in an elegant script. My uncle wrote her letters with misspelled words, broken syntax and cruder handwriting, from different islands where the Marines fought. Their letters conveyed their love to my grandparents in words that my mother could read aloud to them. An only child, she thought of Joey as the kid brother she had never had. Joey's letters also expressed a desperate need for contact with my mother and his two married brothers back home.

Right after Joey fought in the hellish battle of Iwo Jima, the only engagement in the Pacific in which US casualties outnumbered Japanese, he writes that he cannot understand why his two brothers, from the comfort of their homes, write so few letters to him. He explains to my mother that he lost my father's military postal address while fighting on Iwo Jima and asks her for it. He also says that he never understood before why his mother, my grandmother, would cry whenever she

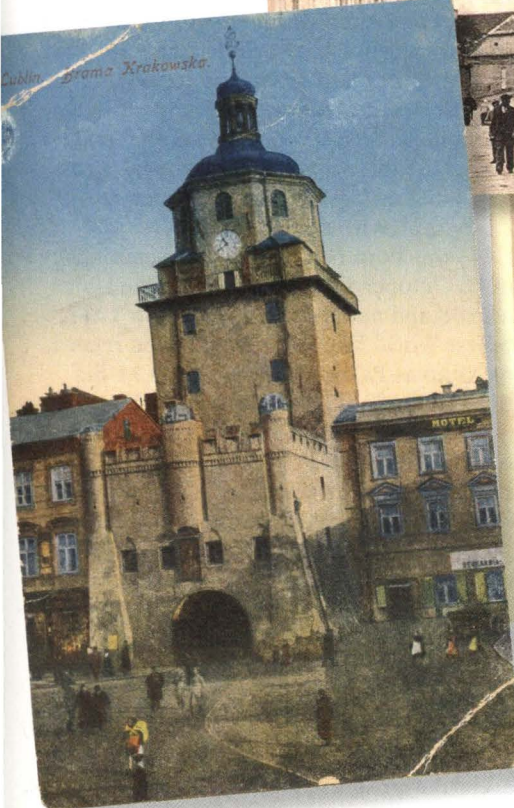
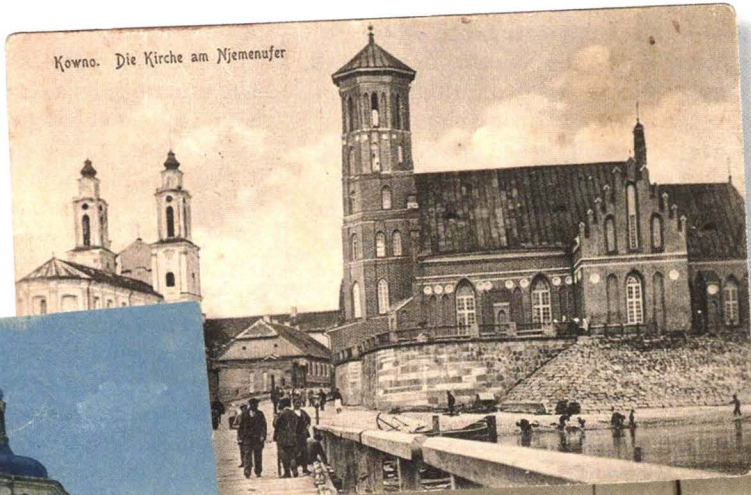
talked to him about leaving her own parents in Poland, but now he does. The great distance that separated him from home and his proximity to so much death made him feel what she felt in her heart, that she would never see her parents again. He had come to feel the same anguish. He beat the odds. He made it home.

Sitting on their bench in the late-winter daylight, what thoughts were Sophie and Michael having? What kinds of thoughts did they ever have? What words did they say

One out of eight Second World War veterans attended colleges or universities. The GI Bill helped increase completion rates by almost 50 per cent

to one another as they clawed their way successfully through the Depression, while my mother's alcoholic father, a harness maker by trade back in Lithuania, lost their house and drank up their little money? My grandfather's registration card for the Works Progress Administration, a federal programme to put the unemployed on public works projects, explains how he kept his wife and child from utter poverty. What kept Sophie and Michael together and going?

How did they view the larger world that their children, literate and becoming assimilated into a multi-ethnic American culture,



were getting to know? What had my mother read to them of Joey's Marine division fighting in the Marshall Islands in late January and early February, 1944? What would she read to them about later brutal battles at Saipan and Tinian and Iwo Jima? How did my grandmother react when my mother read to her Joey's words about her deep nostalgia (literally a wounding grief for homecoming) for her own parents? How would my grandparents take in the newspaper accounts she read to them about the war being fought by their far-off sons? How did they feel for and act around Joey when he returned home, a broken and physically sick man, a clear victim of post-traumatic stress disorder, who lived just three restless years before dying of tuberculosis? Joey's last address was a rented room attached to a coffee house.

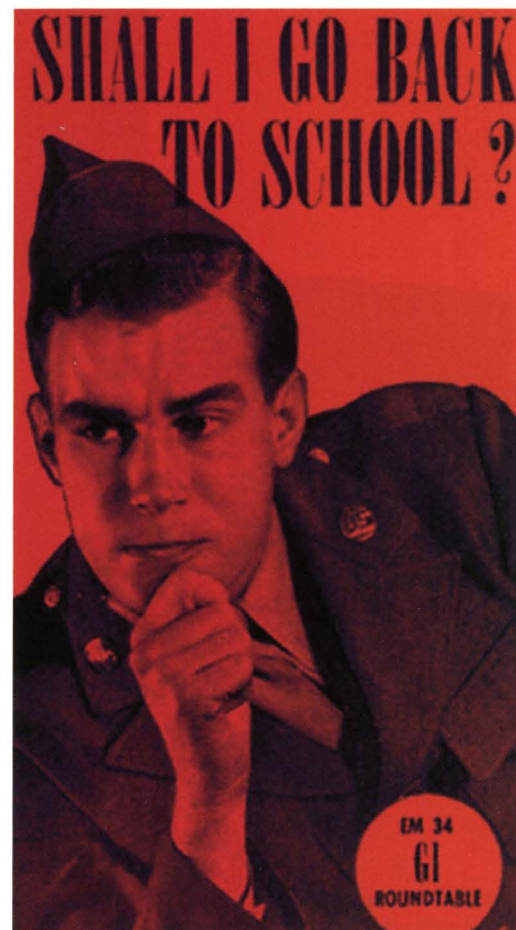
About the time their photograph was taken, the federal government, foreseeing the end of the war, was transforming higher education in the US. The Servicemen's Readjustment Act – popularly known as the GI Bill – was passed in January 1944. Later acts of Congress in 1952, 1966 and 1972 made it possible for large numbers of veterans to pursue higher education or job training programmes (by 1960, 18 per cent of the total number of American college-educated males had been subsidised by the GI Bill).

The impact of public education and the Second World War on US society and the

extended post-war economic boom, a period when the US was the only developed industrial power undamaged by the war, brought the children of immigrant families out of the kinds of lives illiterate foreign labourers could carve out.

As John Bound and Sarah Turner statistically document in a 2002 paper in the *Journal of Labor Economics* "the G.I. Bill led to 'what may have been the most important educational and social transformation in American history'". In the years following the end of the war, veterans made up about 70 per cent of all male enrolment in colleges and universities. Overall enrolment, Bound and Turner inform us, increased from 1.3 million in 1939 to over 2 million in 1946. Eventually about one out of eight Second World War veterans, over 2.2 million in total, attended colleges or universities. More significantly, Bound and Turner show that the combination of military experience and the GI Bill increased college completion rates by almost 50 per cent. Veterans were highly disciplined, mature students who had seen how precarious life could be, and the federal government supported their education. The GI Bill also offered affordable home mortgages that gave veterans an added incentive to work hard at bettering their lives.

In less than a decade, the essentially 19th-century European lives that my grandparents still lived would truly seem like lives out of the distant past. These transformations also made higher education an imaginable goal for the grandchildren of *ponos*, like myself.



GI Bills enacted in 1944 and 1952 opened up higher education to veterans of the Second World War and the Korean War. They also transformed it. As Marcus Stanley puts it (in a 2003 paper in *The Quarterly Journal of Economics*), "The reputation of this legislation is justified by its scale. Almost 70 per cent of all men who turned 21 between 1940 and 1955 were guaranteed an essentially free college education plus a substantial stipend under one of the two GI bills." Stanley cautiously calls these effects "evolutionary rather than revolutionary". He points out that "the GI bills may have made college more accessible for the children of the middle and upper-middle class, but apparently they had little effect among those of the working class". His astute observations encourage us to look at how higher education has continued to evolve.

My father did not take advantage of the educational benefits of the GI Bill. He was typical of veterans who were well above 20 years of age when inducted and below middle class. He did use its home mortgage provision. From the age of six, I grew up in a suburban socio-economic melting pot of families headed by blue-collar and white-collar workers.

My mother worked in school cafeterias and my father in the United States Postal Service. The childless couple next door were a chemist researcher with a PhD and a school psychologist. They were like an uncle and aunt to me. I absorbed from them patterns of thinking, thoughtful conversation and polite behaviour that I did not find in my home environment. My going to a Roman Catholic grade school with children from white-collar families surely influenced my parents to let me compete for a scholarship at the private Jesuit high school, something I might not have done had we lived



The past is another country clockwise from left: Lublin, Poland; Kaunas, Lithuania; immigrants at Ellis Island; battle of Iwo Jima; soldiers at Hürtgen Forest; miners in Philadelphia; the SS *George Washington*



Uncle Sam's undergraduates since the GI Bill of 1944, millions of war veterans have attended university in the US

in the working-class ethnic neighbourhoods in Cleveland, where public high schools were not “college preparatory”.

I went to Boston College in 1969. Just like the veterans in the late 1940s and early 1950s, we baby boomers entered institutions where education was still viewed as a process requiring something like *skholē*, an attitude of “leisure” that suspended the worries of everyday life so that we might have and share thoughts, some of which, in retrospect, might merit the adjective “higher”. We were nurtured in courses with small enrolments. We interacted with concerned faculty, sometimes one to one. We were not distracted by sports events that now consume so much time, money and cultural energy on US college and university campuses. The syllabuses of most of our courses were focused on student needs, not on displaying faculty erudition and contemporary scholarly trends. I eventually learned how to think for myself while absorbing the views and ideas of true scholars, writers, artists and thinkers. My peers did likewise.

By my fifth year of graduate school, I began to have original thoughts that were worth putting together and sharing with others in my field. This came after many term papers, class presentations and discussions, seminar meetings, comprehensive examinations, conference courses and a master's thesis. My peers and I never organised or presented papers at anything like the graduate student research conferences that are now commonplace.

I remember my healthy doubts that I could have thoughts. I remember my Jesuit-trained respect for those before me who had done original thinking of sufficient value to be preserved in books and in the scholarly journals that I began to read as an undergraduate. What if I had attended an institution with the values and large class sizes of the University of Texas

at Austin? What if I had been made to focus on the here and now and had felt the pressure to fill the many slots that did not even exist in undergraduate CVs 40 years ago? Would I ever have developed my capacities to think broadly, deeply, clearly, independently and respectfully?

I share the anxieties felt by university leaders as the first wave of veterans was pouring on to their campuses after the Second World War, the concerns the veterans themselves had about the very ways they were changing the nature of education within the institutions they attended, and the dismay of colleagues my age and older at how the precious time that should be available to faculty and students is now consumed.

Leaders like Robert M. Hutchins of the University of Chicago were worried, as Keith W. Olson tells us in a 1973 paper in *American Quarterly*, that “the vocational orientation of higher education” in the GI Bill would “demoralize education and defraud the veteran”. Veterans themselves meanwhile complained of overcrowding of the classrooms and of education that felt like a Detroit assembly line. Statistics show, in fact, that many veterans wanted anything but job-oriented educations. Olson reports how *Time* magazine summed up their mindset: “Why go to Podunk College when the Government will send you to Yale?” Veterans on the GI Bill had lived through battles such as Peleliu and Hürtgen Forest or had supported others who had. They needed time to figure out their thoughts about their past and future lives.

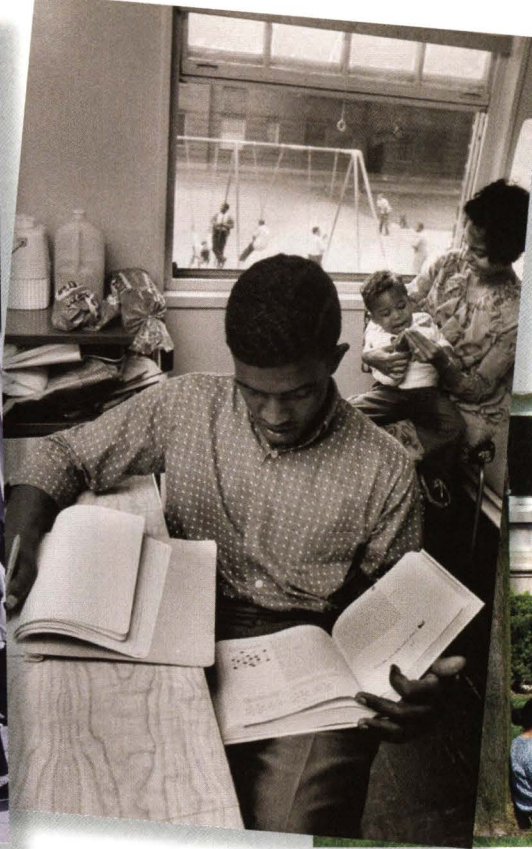
What do such anxieties, concerns and dismay felt and expressed now for more than 60 years have in common? In my view, they are all grounded in a belief that for both the individual and the collective good, students in the course of higher education and the professors with whom they learn have to have *skholē*.

In a fundamental study of the philosophical implications of the term 75 years ago, J. L. Stocks emphasised its distinctive qualities for Greek thinkers such as Plato and Aristotle “free time, absence of pressing duties and external calls”; time in which to cultivate habits of “autonomous self-directing activity” and, negatively defined, the opposite of how time is used in periods of war and in law courts, when the necessity to ward off serious threats to life itself and an atmosphere of “time limits and strict rules of relevance” make *skholē* impossible.

Responding to social changes after the Second World War, the Twentieth Century Fund commissioned a comprehensive study, published in 1962, of how time was used in the contemporary US (*Of Time, Work, and Leisure*, 1962). Its humanist editor Sebastian de Grazia argued that the concept of leisure had already been so altered in US society by materialism and industrialism and their emphasis on doing, acting and producing that free time in our busy lives, ie, our time off, was mistaken for what the ancient Greeks called *skholē* or “leisure”.

The contrast with the law courts points to a fatal public-relations flaw in education based on *skholē* that has led to its demise at most US institutions of higher education: its lack of definable relevance and its failure to account pragmatically for the use of time by students and faculty look to critics, now even among the new class of full-time professional university administrators, too much like frivolity and as if our hard-earned something is being used to do or get nothing.

This is a rather common, even hackneyed complaint, but its implications are not commonly observed and have always struck me as mean-spirited and short-sighted, although, given human nature, inevitable. Fundamentally, Americans cannot tolerate



the fact that our own children, or worse yet, someone else's, should have public or private support to spend four years learning about themselves and the history and scientific nature of our wide world and its many different cultures without constantly being held accountable for their time and for what they will look like as finished products. The positive gains in how graduates educated with *skholē* conceive of their future lives and their responsibilities to others in our society are not measurable.

The pity is that most students now come to our campuses already programmed not

Students focus on financial concerns rather than on how their education will best conduce to their future personal happiness and the needs of society

to question that in order to pay for their tuition and books, they should work many hours per week at part-time jobs that rob them of time to study and think. We are even led to think we are failing as teachers if we do not "get them through" in four years with the assembly-line efficiency that Second World War veterans decried.

The president of UT Austin has formed a large task force to fix this big problem. Only half of the students who graduate from our university do so in four years. But there is one elephant so big it cannot even fit into the room with this task force so as to go unnoticed. One of the main reasons for the high graduation rates in American higher education during the post-war years was that "the financial provisions of the [GI] bills were generous. The WWII bill provided full payment for tuition, books, and supplies at

essentially any higher education institution in the country, as well as a substantial living stipend that varied based on the family size of the veteran," as Stanley writes.

This wise public generosity was largely driven by an active veterans' lobby and memories of the Bonus March of 17,000 First World War veterans on Washington DC in 1932. But if we funded public education as we once did for veterans in a way that gave students time to concentrate on attending classes, reading, thinking, studying and writing, rates of graduation would surely go up and the number of years spent at colleges and universities would go down.

High tuition costs and federal student loans pressure students into choosing areas of concentration that they think will provide them with job security and enough income to repay the loans. The students themselves think the sooner they finish the better. They focus on financial concerns rather than on contemplating how their educations will best conduce to their future personal happiness and address the needs of society at large.

On the faculty side, careful work that takes many years literally "doesn't pay" in annual merit reviews. Time-consuming engagement with the history of scholarship is antiquated. As a normally non-acerbic colleague puts it, with a nod to Andy Warhol, "New faculty hires in my department publish a book every 15 minutes on what they themselves were thinking or feeling during the past 15 minutes." Is it any wonder then that students think browsing the first Google hit or Wikipedia entry is doing enough research on a topic?

More than ever, even the brightest students need time to learn how to think. This is not just a matter of socio-economic class and the quality of prior educational opportunity. Information tech-

nology and electronic media have robbed us of the sense that thinking about anything long and hard is important.

Required syllabuses are now viewed as formal contracts for information delivery, leaving no room for deviation to address the needs and interests of the students who are actually taking to the courses. I recall taking superb graduate courses that had no syllabuses at all.

Undergraduates now have "research weeks", research assistantships and research prize competitions. These need to be rethought. I say this having co-advised a student who a few years ago won the grand prize of \$25,000 (£15,542) for undergraduate research excellence at UT Austin.

Exceptional students might profit from such programmes, but such research achievement mostly comes from gaining a blinkered mastery of a few facets of a problem in a given sub-field of scholarship. Graduate research conferences, as I have already mentioned, are pandemic. But most graduate students would be better off spending time in their first three years of graduate school mastering the substance of being scholars before trying on the form.

American higher education now emphasises *ponos* and has forgotten about *skholē*, a mistake that surviving veterans of our greatest generation would tell us will have serious consequences.

The ancient Greeks said, "Time is a healer of necessary evils." It might also be the key concept for getting US higher education back on track. ●

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