

When You Graduate

By David Week

A screenplay in seven scenes

Opening scene: Berkeley 1975

Many years ago, when I was studying architecture at Berkeley, my route from apartment to school took me daily through Sproul Plaza – the central public space of the campus. On Sproul you'd find juice stands, rock guitarists, activists handing out flyers for various causes, falafel sellers, the occasional protest group, and hundreds of students passing through or sitting in the sun.

One hawker sold deeds to plots of the land on the moon. Ten dollars would buy you a deed to one acre. One line that got several laughs from his audience was this: 'Now just imagine. In ten years – when you graduate – your ten dollars, due to inflation, will be worth half of what it is today. But this piece of paper,' he would say, holding up the deed, 'will still be worth *exactly* what it's worth today.'

One of the laughs came at the phrase: 'In ten years – when you graduate – '. Getting a degree at Berkeley took four to six years, but everyone knew those grad students who managed to extend their education on and on, into their thirties, because they liked the student life. Some of the audience *were* such grad students.

Cut to: The Orange Papers

The Orange Papers is a site on the web devoted to the thesis that Alcoholics Anonymous is a cult. In the process of developing that thesis, the anonymous author sets out 'The Cult 100' – 100 characteristics of a cult, drawn from many different such groups.

(Aside: We don't like Subud to be called a cult, so for that reason we should take care to make sure we don't accidentally look like one.)

Number 4 in the Cult 100 is this:

4. No Graduates.

No one ever learns as much as the Guru knows;
no one ever rises to the level of the Guru's wisdom,
so no one ever finishes his or her training,
and nobody ever graduates.

Fade to: David A.

David A. is a friend of mine of many years, a former resident of Jakarta and Sydney, and a member of Subud. He used to talk from time to time about how much he'd learned from est.

Est, for those who don't already know, was one of the first ever 'personal development' courses, created by one Werner Erhard. Erhard (born John Paul Rosenberg) designed his Erhard Seminar Training (est) by drawing together material from Zen Buddhism, Dale Carnegie courses, Maxwell Maltz's Psycho-Cybernetics, Fritz Perls' Gestalt therapy, Abraham Maslow's transpersonal psychology,

Scientology, and Subud. Several current members of Subud North America knew Erhard. But since those times, Erhard and est have acquired a very negative image, as a 'cult', as 'mind control', as 'brainwashing' and 'manipulation'.

Now I'd heard many of those bad stories about est, so I decided to collar David on the matter. 'You say you got something out of est, but I hear very bad things about it.'

'Ah,' said David, nodding. 'That's because of the people who forgot to leave. We used to call them *est-holes*.'

(Aside: Subud is not est, so please don't take the analogy too literally.)

Fast forward to: Sydney 2000

Many years later, I got caught up in doing a part-time PhD at the University of Sydney. I started in 1989, and changed topic in mid-stream. By the year 1999, I had accumulated many boxes of notes, many hundreds of megabytes of draft, but no thesis. This was despite my supervisor having warned me at the beginning: 'Only 10% of those who start a PhD finish it. But 97% of those that finish writing their thesis, graduate.' In other words, the challenge came in the very task of *completing* one's thesis.

The reason for this was soon apparent. Writing a PhD thesis is an exercise in self-confrontation. First, there's the difficulty in writing something which reflects what one feels is the clarity of one's perceptions. Second, the years of effort leads to a desire to produce something really significant, which leads to perfectionism, which leads to incompleteness.

Most PhD students run up against these two self-imposed barriers, and hence another of my supervisor's standard warnings: 'Remember, you are writing for an audience of only three people: the examiners. Once they've read your thesis, no-one will ever read it again. A thesis is not a book.'

This advice I duly ignored.

As a consequence, after ten years, it looked likely that I could go on for another ten years. Then came a letter that changed all that. It said, basically, 'Dear David. Lovely to have had you as a student, but since you aren't completing your thesis, we're dropping you from the program. Have a nice life.' This raised a spectre I'd never before considered: passing from 'PhD in progress' to 'PhD, failed'. To cut a long story short, the next four months I rose at 4am daily to finish my thesis, submitted it, and gained my degree.

Without that letter, I would never have finished.

Cut to: Vox pop observations about Subud

- Nothing changes. Go back to the group after 10 years, and it's the same people doing the same thing.
- There are no new members to speak of: just children of members, and their spouses.
- The early days, they were the best days: the most change, the most exciting.

- Congress resolution: 'Being present in the world.' (Question: What made us absent from the world?)

Dissolve to: A modest proposal

What if we introduced graduation? What if, eight years after opening, we gave each member a certificate of graduation: here you are, you've reached the point of diminishing returns. If you stay much longer, you may start to become absent from the world. No examination required – or rather: you are your own examiner.

There are several things that attract me to this idea:

- Very uncult-like. None of this 'member for life' business.
- It puts the pressure on each member to work with the latihan. Falling into a rut or just waiting till next year is not an option.
- It enforces turnover: no helpers groups in which every helper has been there for 30 years. No groups in which every member has been there for thirty years.
- No in-groups that make it harder for new members to feel at home.
- It's counter-intuitive. Almost all proposals look at ways of getting new members and keeping new members. This proposal suggests the opposite: getting all members to exit after a while.

Would we need some long-termers to act as 'professors', keep continuity and corporate memory? Possibly. But that's not the main point of this proposal, which is:

If Subud is a training, then all training comes to an end. If you become a permanent student, then just like those 30+ grad students at Berkeley, you may find yourself absent from the world.

But just like in real universities, after 10 or 20 years in the real world, students would be welcome back to do a few years of further membership... after which: out, again.

Denouement: Will this really work?

By graduating people after eight years, won't we just quickly reduce Subud to zero? Possibly, if it were done crudely, like that.

But if we gradually introduced a culture of graduation, and thus began to embody and live the dictum that Subud is a training, not a lifestyle, Subud might become more vibrant, less entrenched, more attractive, oriented out and to the future.

But whether it is feasible or not, I like this proposal for the way it breaks a settled way of thinking, by asking:

What would happen if you graduated?

The End

Roll credits

Disclaimer: The author does not claim to have graduated. Yet.