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The Strange Game of Prestige Scholarships

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As the "haunted" Rhodes finalist whom Lia Rushton accurately cited in her essay, I would like to provide some context for that reaction. I also wish to discuss some disquieting conclusions I have reached about prestige scholarships through my own experiences as a candidate, as an advisor to multiple nominees, via personal and family knowledge of nearly twenty Rhodes Scholars ranging from the Class of 1910 to the Class of 2000, and during twenty years as a faculty member at two universities.

What stood out most about my final Rhodes interview was its tone of bigotry and belligerence. I am the son of a gentle, well-educated, mainline Presbyterian pastor, and I am named for the founder of Scottish Presbyterianism. In my Rhodes essay I referred to my hopes to bring my studies in English language and literature at Oxford and my career in meteorology together with my faith. These words apparently inflamed the committee chair, then Rice University president George Rupp, whose first biting words to me at the night-before-interviews dinner were, and I quote verbatim, "So, you think you're *predestined* to be a Rhodes Scholar?" Rupp later spent time during my interview lamenting my passion for the poetry of Keats in the most pejorative term he could think of: "it's . . . it's . . . almost *religious*."

Ironically, I later learned that Rupp was at one point a mainline Presbyterian minister himself (Kleinfeld)! Few of us would let our personal resentments or demons so completely color an important interview situation that we were chairing. However, the Rhodes Scholars operate with a freedom from the usual societal norms of fairness, an impunity found only in the most elite realms of power. Basically, anything goes.

For example, I learned during my Rhodes experience that a candidate from Mississippi had encountered what he considered to be racism during the interview process and (as I recall) chose to compete in another district the next year to have a fairer chance. Two years after my Rhodes experience, a strong candidate and Truman Scholar from UAB was confronted by an Alabama state Rhodes committee member who remarked cuttingly on her weight. We all learned, too late, that anything from religion to race to gender to body type is considered fair game for mocking commentary by committee members during high-prestige interviews. Insults to one's chosen profession are also in-bounds; during my interview, a committee member referred to the scientific discipline of meteorology as "a trade, not a profession."

To be an unwarned candidate in such situations is to be set up for shock and sorrow that the presumably august members of such committees would have the temerity—and the lack of conscience—to attack college students in such ways. But the Rhodes is big business, with money and power riding on the decisions. The great majority who emerge from the interviews without a scholarship are forever "losers" in this game.

This "loser" sense is reinforced today by universities that are desperate to have winners of the Rhodes, Marshall, Truman, and other prestige scholarships—not as evidence of academic excellence but as eye candy for recruitment brochures and webpages. Back in 1987, when I interviewed for the Rhodes, this pressure was limited to just a few elite schools; now, it is ubiquitous. I know of one university president who made less-than-supportive comments to a Rhodes finalist not very long after the student "lost." The president was evidently concerned at the student's having deprived the university of another scholarship winner's name cut in granite on the school's honors program wall and of having prevented a new and higher number of Rhodes Scholars to be shown in the university's public service announcement that is televised during football games. This conduct, too, is unconscionable. No nominee should ever be told anything less than, "Thank you for representing our university so well in this prestigious competition."

The moral rot in both the interview process and in the PR-driven world of university administration is paralleled by the spoilage of the fruit of these scholarship competitions. To be blunt, Rhodes Scholars are often more famous for being Rhodes Scholars than for actually doing anything memorable during or after their Oxford experiences. The longtime Warden of the Rhodes House at Oxford observed, "If you were an American and entirely on the make . . . the motivation is to get [the Rhodes]. What you do here doesn't really matter so long as you enjoy yourself," but even the enjoyment of a "free trip to Europe," in the Warden's description of the Rhodes, can be short-lived (Schaeper & Schaeper 183). Calvin Trillin's *Remembering Denny* chronicles a classic example: a tragic memoir of a slam-dunk Rhodes winner who eventually became an underperforming and suicidal college professor. Bored by their studies (Segal) and half-submerged in a world of privilege and possibility, prestige-scholarship recipients may ultimately find the experience as limiting as it can be liberating.

For example, the slam-dunk Rhodes winner at my final interview was a young woman who was clearly prepped from the womb to go to Oxford. She had the politically appropriate background and the killer résumé, and her elite private university had put her through a battery of mock interviews. She even went around to each of the other eleven finalists, pumping them for information about the questions that were asked and writing down each question carefully in a notebook to add to her university's database for mock interviews. When I tried to engage her in conversation after our initial discussion, she rebuffed me with an air of "Excuse me, I already debriefed you." What did this master of the Rhodes game do in the world in the ensuing three decades?—aside from serving on her state's Rhodes selection committee, nothing very different from many others of her generation.

The other winners from my region were an introverted scientist who became an excellent researcher/bad teacher at the 531st-ranked research university in the U.S. and two others who bolted Oxford after the first year of the Rhodes and eventually went into oncology and finance, respectively. The easiest way to find any of the four online is, of course, to Google their names with the words "Rhodes Scholarship." That's what they are mostly known for, even today, after a half-century on the planet. The Rhodes circle even has an ironic in-joke about this common fate: "All Rhodes Scholars had a great future in their past."

For an even larger sample, consider the following: in my spare time I am the chair of the national alumni association of the United States Presidential

Scholars, all of whom were honored by the President as high school seniors for their academic excellence. In this alumni association were 102 Rhodes and Marshall Scholars at the time of the organization's fiftieth anniversary in 2014. However, of the 32 exceptionally accomplished alumni chosen to profile in interviews for the anniversary commemorative book (Knox), only one was a Rhodes winner, and only one was a Marshall winner.

Perhaps the most sobering statistic, however, can be gleaned from a retrospective on the Rhodes Scholars first published in 1997 (Schaeper & Schaeper 276; 305; 311–314; 354). At that point, of 2,800 American Rhodes Scholars fewer recipients had been President of the United States or a U.S. Senator or a U.S. House of Representatives member or a U.S. Supreme Court justice or a governor of a U.S. state or a Pulitzer Prize winner or a MacArthur "genius" grant winner (a grand total of 35 different individuals) than had committed suicide (about three dozen). Of the rest, Schaeper and Schaeper observed that "the great majority . . . have had solid, respectable careers" (314).

Based on these examples, a question arises: if the prestige-scholarship experience is so important for the students that we put them through the fresh hell of the interview process, then wouldn't you want to see more return-on-investment than this? Where is the "value added"? Wouldn't these top students have had "solid, respectable careers" anyway? Privately, Rhodes winners and others will tell you that the "losers" do as well in life as the winners. Frequently the "losers" outperform the winners, having been motivated by the scarring experience of the interview to disprove the system that mocked and branded them. But even that lemonade-from-lemons outcome is warped. Some "losers" spend their entire careers as wanna-be's, absorbing the values of the system they despised in the process of trying to one-up it.

So far I have focused on the students as individuals, and my Rhodes application was a hundred percent my own. No play-it-safe scholarship advisor would have let a mathematics major and future meteorology professor propose to study the poetry of Keats at Oxford. These days, however, it takes a village to craft a prestige-scholarship nominee's application, from advisors to essay-readers (until March 2014, when The Rhodes Trust finally put its foot down) to mock interviewers. This gaming of the system has become something of an arms race among institutions, with the individual disappearing inside the shrink-wrapping of the perfectly packaged product. As an example, fifteen years ago one nominee's essay received vetting not only at his college but also over six hundred miles away, at our home. My wife, Pam, caught a repeated spelling error of the crucial word in this nominee's essay, a glaring

error that had somehow gone undetected by the author and other readers. That nominee later went on to immortality at Oxford, but Pam should have been credited with an assist.

The blurring of the individual in the university scholarship applicant factory provides the slimy environment out of which grows the moral rot of blaming nominees when they don't bring home the bacon. Some nominees are privately relieved when they don't win: they get their lives back again, which is arguably a better outcome than enjoyed by either the winners or the more embittered "losers" (Pan). This blaming is, of course, a complete corruption of higher education.

The corruption has, to my deep disappointment, infected the honors programs of some universities with which I am acquainted, which is sadly ironic given that a major figure among the American Rhodes alumni community, Frank Aydelotte, is credited with the expansion of honors education in the United States (Rinn). College honors scholarships are now often given to high school students who will later not necessarily be excellent students and citizens of our country and world but instead strong candidates for the Rhodes, Marshall, Mitchell, Gates, Truman, Goldwater, Udall, and other named national and international scholarships. Excellence and national scholarships are not synonymous; many highly desirable educational outcomes are not aligned with the requirements for students who fit the profiles for these scholarships.

Honors programs, as home to the highest test scores and highest GPAs on many campuses (for reasons that are not particularly justifiable), can thus become assembly lines for prestige-scholarship applications and their dangling appendages, the applicants themselves. As honors programs become cogs in universities' PR machines, they decouple from their deeper and more important missions. Surely, Aydelotte envisioned something more substantive for honors education than a revolving door from honors to Oxford and back again. This industrial production of scholarship winners is not the life-changing education I received in UAB's honors program, where I was spared the production of "excellent sheep," in the evocative title of William Deresiewicz's provocative book.

As a college professor, I want no part of "excellent sheep"-herding. Partly as a result, my association with honors programs as a faculty member has—quite unexpectedly—been very limited compared to my deep involvement in honors at the university (UAB), regional (SRHC), and national (NCHC) levels as an undergraduate. To cite the title of another of my favorite books

on higher education, the prestige-scholarship obsession has been "Killing the Spirit" in honors (Smith). I have chosen to let the dead bury their own dead while I recreate that spirit in my non-honors classes and my extracurricular activities with students.

The gamed-to-the-nth-degree prestige-scholarship rat race is just that: a game. It is a simulation of real life rather than the thing itself, and it ensnares many—both scholarship winners and those who are rejected—in mindsets that prevent them from becoming themselves apart from their experiences and expectations generated by the game. It also compromises the mission of honors programs. Lacking clear winners among the participants, it is a strange game.

Birmingham's John Badham, as the director of the enduring more-than-a-teen-movie *WarGames*, provides us with insight into a similarly strange simulation. In this film Joshua, the computer, explores the many options of global thermonuclear war and concludes, "A strange game. The only winning move is not to play." That is precisely the advice I have given to my own college honors student son, himself a recipient of a named college scholarship: use your college education for learning, for knowing thyself, not for becoming one more prestige-scholar pawn in a university's PR machinations, one more name chiseled in granite, one more statistic in a halftime ad. The disadvantages can outweigh the advantages, and the best move is simply not to play.

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