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On Not Leaving Things at the Ramada Inn

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Among the most common mental attitudes hindering the pursuit of a genuine education by young people is *fear of failure*. When the focus of the student's attention turns away from the subject matter of a course and how well it is understood and applied, concern will be directed rather to *formal* considerations like "how much has to be done in order to pass this test?" "how many pages must be written for this report?" and "what will the final grade be on my report card?" Whether or not one can use algebraic formulas successfully, can write a clear and grammatical sentence, can appreciate the literary merits of Shakespeare, or see the fallacy in materialistic philosophy – all these and similar, educational concerns are lost in the scramble to make sure that one has enough points to pass the course. The worst thing that could happen, in the mentality of many students, is that they would receive an F for a course, rather than that they would have failed to *understand* a course.

It stands to reason, then, that parents and teachers who want students to receive a genuine, intellectually maturing, personally enriching *education* – and not simply *formal marks* on a report card filed away – will aim to overcome the student's obstructive fear of failure. Why do students have such fears? Generally because they have not developed successful habits of study (inside and outside the classroom) and are *aware* of their lacking. They are just not sure how to tackle the challenge of new work, new concepts, and stiff assignments. What help can we offer them? What are some principles of educational success? In this and following articles I will attempt to provide some answers to these questions.

The *first* piece of advice which we can give students who fear failure is not to leave things at the Ramada Inn. Let me explain that remark. This last summer my family took a vacation, traveling up the coast to Monterey and San Francisco, then across to Sacramento and Reno. In Monterey we stayed at the Ramada Inn. Imagine that when we left the Ramada Inn we inadvertently left behind the overnight case, only to realize that fact an hour and a half on the way to San Francisco. What a painful discovery that would be! We certainly needed the items in the overnight case, and yet to get the case we would be forced to backtrack an hour and a half on the road.

If this had actually happened to us, what do you suppose we should have done? Well, one thing we could have done is to continue traveling up the road, bemoaning the fact that we were going to be inconvenienced. We could have complained that the Ramada Inn was an hour and a half (now an hour and three quarters) drive back to Monterey. We could have driven on and on, hoping against reasonable hope, that the overnight case which was an hour and half (now two hours) behind us might miraculously catch up with us before we stopped that night. But when all the murmuring and imagination had been indulged, the fact would have been that we knew we had to go back to the Ramada Inn. The trip could not successfully continue until we went back and picked up what had been left behind. The sooner we realized that hard fact, the better for the continuation of the vacation.

The same principle applies to school work. As a course progresses through a semester, more and more new material and new concepts (or skills) are set forth to the student. Later material presupposes the foundation laid by earlier material. Growth in understanding is cumulative. Consequently, when a student does not understand something which has been taught, does not do the necessary homework which has been assigned, does not complete the reading which goes with a unit of teaching and *yet continues on in the course*, that student is set up to fail the later portions of the course. Understanding the later material depends on a previous understanding or exposure to the earlier material. When something has been left behind, the trip cannot successfully continue.

Students are sometimes funny – unrealistic, really. They figure that they can tune out part of a lecture, omit a reading assignment, or not bother to ask for help when they do not understand something in a course, *and then tune in and begin understanding at some later point*. But as with vacation travel, so also with schooling. The sooner we realize that we *must* go back to the Ramada Inn (or to the material, which has not been read or understood), the better it will be for us. Students simply must keep abreast of what is being taught in the course, not hoping to go back later and fill in the gaps in their understanding.