



# My Education

by Alexander Plotinck

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*Speech delivered at the Conference on Adolescence, Acceleration, and National Excellence at Simon's Rock College of Bard, Great Barrington, MA, June 19, 1994.*

I'm not a normal kid, but it took me a long time to realize it. It wasn't that my parents tried to hide it from me, it's just that I never thought about it until a couple of years ago. Ever since I was very little, my parents have always had me around other very bright kids, and it wasn't until I started at the Community College (which I'll get to in a few minutes) that I realized I really am strange. I am unusual in the sense that I have never really followed without question the traditional path of learning that most Americans follow. My ability to assimilate information very quickly, coupled with a desire to learn as much as possible, allowed me to pursue an education that was, well, strange.

When I was about six, I started first grade at a private school in Blue Bell, PA. Oak Lane was a great place, but through both the second and third grades I felt that I was being held back from learning the things I really wanted to learn. I remember quite vividly the second grade; I was bored almost all the time. What I had absorbed in a day or two, most of the class had to spend a week on. I would come home every day and complain to my mother about how bored I was, especially in math. In third grade, my teacher was a little more understanding about this fact, but there was very little she could do about it. My teacher, like so many others, was forced to teach to the lowest common denominator, and this upset me a great deal. So, after the third grade, my sister, Ashley, and I began our careers as a homeschoolers.

At the time, homeschooling was the ideal education for me. I was not only able to work at my own pace, which was wonderful, but also I wasn't forced to be dragged along through a structured curriculum. I could learn whatever I wanted to. My mother required me to keep a journal every day for writing practice. I wasn't too thrilled about this, but I did it because I knew that however much I complained about writing, it was a skill I had to develop eventually. But other than that journal, very little was actually required of me. I did most of my learning of my own accord.

Math had always been my favorite subject, and at home I was able to study it at a rate that could keep me challenged. My mother was able to provide many different math curricula for me, and I worked through most of these in a matter of months. Most exciting were the ones very rarely, if ever, used in regular schools. With the help of cuisinair rods, fraction tiles, base ten blocks, hands-on equations, and other interactive learning tools, I was able to advance very rapidly. Math was not the only thing I studied, but for me it was always the most fun.

As a homeschooler, I had a lot of time to devote not only to quantitative studies, but to artistic ones as well. With more time to practice, I increased my violin skills immensely. Furthermore, for several years my sister and I took weekly art lessons at the Philadelphia Museum of Art. Every Friday, we went into Philadelphia for the day, though our weekly excursions were not just for entertainment. We went to various museums, including the Franklin Institute, the Academy of Natural Sciences, and of course, the Art Museum. We visited many of the

numerous historical sites in and around Philadelphia, learning history at the sites where history was made. Our Friday trips were always educational, and they were always a lot of fun.

As a homeschooler, I spent a lot of my time reading. I read all kinds of things: science, science fiction, fantasy, math, history, historical fiction, mystery. There wasn't much I didn't read. My mother was often yelling, "Will you put down that book and go outside!" I would eventually go out, usually taking the book with me. But I wouldn't just read the books; I would have fun with them. When I read books about Robin Hood, I would go outside and make bows and arrows from saplings in the woods. When I read science fiction novels, I would construct incredibly detailed model spaceships out of Legos. But of all the books that I read, I think the math and science books were my favorites. If I had a question about what I was reading, I could ask my father, who is an electrical engineer.

Toward the end of my homeschooling years, I learned much of my math through books that I read on my own. Unfortunately, my mother couldn't move as quickly as I could with math, and my father wasn't available until late at night. It finally got to the point where I wanted to continue with algebra, which I had started to learn, but I couldn't continue with it on my own. So, in the fall of '91, we called Bucks County Community College and asked them if I could take an algebra course there. They said that as long as I could pass the entrance exams, they would be happy to have me.

I started at Bucks with just one course, Intermediate Algebra, and found it challenging, without being too stren-

uous. When I started at Bucks I was 11. The people in my class all looked at me a little strangely at first, but once they got to know me they just accepted my being there as a slight deviation from the norm. I was called "Doogie Howser" more than once, but I didn't let it bother me. I had been warned by the head of the math department that many of the students were not as motivated as I was, and I found that, indeed, to be the case. I was genuinely surprised at the number of people who didn't care at all about learning the material, but were interested only in passing the course with the minimum possible amount of effort. But I enjoyed the class anyway, and decided to take more classes there the next semester.

After my first semester, I discovered the Math Learning Center. This was a place where students could come in and receive free tutoring in any math course offered at Bucks. You could stay there and do homework, and, if you had a question, you could ask one of the student tutors for help. I liked the whole idea of the Learning Center, and after my first year at Bucks became a volunteer tutor for Basic and Intermediate Algebra. I had discovered that the tutors there were all very intelligent, highly motivated students who had many interests very similar to my own. Many of my friends at Bucks were tutors in the Learning Center.

One interesting aspect of my working there was the fact that most of the students I tutored were unaware that I was so much younger than they were. If someone told them how old I was, at first they would ask me questions like, "You're really 14?" or "How did you get into college at your age?" or "Gosh, you must be really smart." I usually told them that I considered myself advanced for my age, but not really all that smart. They would look at me funny for a couple of minutes, but after a while they

seemed to just forget it, and accept me for who I was. It was a little uncomfortable at first, but after 50 or 100 people asked me almost exactly the same series of questions, I got used to it, just as they got used to me.

It was, I admit, a little odd being at Bucks, and I often felt as if I were leading a double life, with my 25-year-old friends at school and my 14-year-old friends at home. But I was happy to be at Bucks, since the courses I took were hard enough to be challenging, without being impossible. I was at Bucks for three years, and I graduated in May 1994 at age 14 with an Associate of Arts degree in mathematics. My real interest lies in theoretical physics, but math was the closest I could get at Bucks. My final course there was an independent study course in Vector and Tensor Analysis, which I am currently taking with my friend Rob and my physics professor.

I hope to continue my studies in math and physics at Simon's Rock College this fall. It will probably take me two years to complete my bachelor's degree, after which I plan to go on to graduate school for a master's degree or a Ph.D., most likely in physics. I would eventually like to do research, possibly at a university or college.

My education to date has been somewhat out of the ordinary. But it is my hope that, eventually, things like homeschooling and going to college early will become commonplace in the education of bright young students. Many of my friends are graduates of their local public schools, and from what I have heard from them, so-called "gifted education" programs in most public schools leave much to be desired. I would very much like to see students with the ability to excel academically placed in programs that can challenge their abilities. I'm grateful for being given that chance.

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## Entering a Women's College Two Years Early

by Michele J. Cargain

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*Speech delivered at the Conference on Adolescence, Acceleration, and National Excellence at Simon's Rock College of Bard College, Great Barrington, MA, June 19, 1994.*

After finishing a rather unusual educational path, I would like to share some observations of my examined life.

I've just graduated *magna cum laude* and Phi Beta Kappa from Mary Baldwin College, a small liberal arts college in Virginia. I majored in biology, and as part of the graduation requirement designed an original research project. For this work, I was awarded distinction in my department. A paper I co-authored with an advisor at UVA has just been accepted for publication in *Ecological Entomology*. I've just turned 20.

I had an exceptionally happy and stable childhood. My parents provided me with much encouragement, support, and independence. They encouraged a variety of activities including music, dancing (I began lessons at age four), art, and just about anything else I was interested in at the time. I attended a small elementary school of only 16 students. Individual attention from teachers allowed me to work on special projects, either alone or with a few others, during recess or in lieu of standard classroom activities. Projects included advanced reading, math, and computer programming.

I took a special interest in computers and subsequently was enrolled in a summer course in programming at a

community college. I had just finished third grade, and the other students were in high school. I wrote a program in which a face appeared on the screen and the caption was composed of questions for the face to answer; the face then "replied." I enjoyed class, and the age difference did not bother me. Strange glances were cast in my direction on the first few days of class, but I suppose the students just got used to me.

At this time, my aptitude for art was recognized. A poster I drew in the first grade won first prize in the school district. My work continued to be judged, and I often won money and ribbons. Later, especially in high school, I would spend many hours sketching, painting, and watercoloring, hinting that I would continue to pursue studio art in college.

After the fourth grade, the students were transferred to a larger school for grades five through eight. There, I was placed in all of the accelerated programs (reading, math, art, and science). The classes thinned out; by eighth grade we had a core of 10 accelerates. The classes (especially the science laboratories) bonded us. We knew each others' strengths and weaknesses and were accustomed to friendly competition. I made some of my best friends in these courses.

In high school, we were placed in honors classes and accelerated by one year. I especially enjoyed my art and biology classes. I made friends with upperclassmen, and many of my junior friends were taking the SATs. So I took them, too. I was grossly unprepared, not even knowing the scoring rules.

However, I was bombarded with mailings from colleges and universities, including NYU and Brown. Among the catalogs and brochures, I received information about the Program for the Exceptionally Gifted (PEG) at Mary Baldwin College. This was surprising to me, as I never had considered myself "gifted." I have always been a perfectionist and had risen to the top of the class. I believed that everyone had a "gift" and that perhaps mine was a talent for academic endeavors. I still believe that, although I think my accomplishments have been the result of motivation and perseverance as much as anything else.

At that time, I was in the 10th grade (ranked 2nd) and attending a public high school of about 500 students, most of whom I had been with since fifth grade or earlier. I was involved in many extra-curricular activities, including orchestra, chamber music ensembles, dance classes, leadership roles, and advanced art classes. Although I remained in accelerated classes, I felt that I was not being challenged enough, so my decision to come to PEG was not difficult in that respect. I was uncomfortable with the idea of leaving my family and friends for a school 10 hours away I'd never heard of. I also feared I would be friendless, since my closest friends were male. Where would I find good friendships at a women's college?

I entered the program after 10th grade. I was a junior transfer and lived under the PEG rules for only one year before entering the campus at large. Rules included signing in and out of the dorm, restrictions to campus, and