

Oberlin Itches, So I Scratch

A Private 50-Year Fight With My College

By Robert Krulwich

I have been almost fifty years gone from this college. That's a long time. So long that this place, in my head anyway, should now be a fond memory: settled, tamed, perfume-y with scenes of young me at 18, 19, 20 — excited to learn, doing crazy things I would never ever do now.

College was the one time in my life when I had my own dog, my first and only (Gudrin was her name), who left me after graduation and moved to Alaska with some humans who worked on the pipeline there. Gudrin, I'm sure, has been in dog heaven for many years now.

And Oberlin and I? We should be in our separate spaces: me in the now, and Oberlin, my Oberlin, in a quiet, long-ago corner, collecting dust, visited every so often when I need a quick sip of yesterday.

But no. That's not what happened. Not at all.

Instead, for the whole fifty years, through each and every decade, Oberlin has pricked and taunted and irritated me, like a pea under my mattress. I have never stopped being angry, proud, disappointed, thrilled, pissed off — just *bothered* by this school.

And it's not just me. I have met and worked with many Oberlin grads, and they often say the same thing.

So many of my friends who went to other colleges are yes, fond of their schools, but for them it's "that was then, this is now." They don't have this insistent, pushy sense that their college won't leave them alone, won't shut up.

Oberlin and I have been not getting along for so long that when I got this generous invitation from the library to come back and talk one more time, I decided to use this chance to ask myself what did this school do to me — what does it keep doing to me — that both pleases and hurts me at the same time, to this day? What happened to me when I was here?

I first heard about Oberlin when I was nine, in fourth grade, because my favorite teacher, maybe the most dashing teacher I ever knew, had gone to a college called — and here I think I just must have misheard him — "Berlin." I somehow missed the "O," so it sounded kind of German to me.

But Lloyd J. Farrar — that was his name — he was hardly German. He was a Mainer, from the state of Maine. He was tall, gangly, losing his hair. He had a big round shiny head, a hugely friendly face, and many, many passions, which he told us all about — for his neighborhood Greenwich Village, for Adlai Stevenson, for storytelling, and for beer.

It's not normal for a fourth-grade teacher to rhapsodize to nine-year-olds about lagers and stouts, and how delicious it was to mix Guinness with Pale Ale — but that's what Mr. Farrar did. He'd go on and on about "bee-ahr" using those long New England vowels that President Kennedy used to use — "Haavard" and "caaah'r" and all — how much beer mattered to him, how hard he worked to get it for free. This was apparently some kind of Maine thing, the ardent pursuit of free beer.

So what he'd do — and he told us this (often in great detail) during English class — is, he'd write totally made-up letters to big breweries, famous companies like Schlitz and Pabst Blue Ribbon and Miller, and tell them that he'd just popped open a bottle of their always excellent product, but, as he poured himself a tall glass of whatever, to his horror (and his eyes would get all buggy), a dead wasp or a cigarette butt — or sometimes, when he was really feeling it, a severed human finger — had come tumbling out of the bottle, totally shocking him and his fragile young wife (which he did not have one of). So he vowed, and wanted them to know, that he would never, ever, ever drink another bottle of Schlitz or Pabst or Miller ever again. And the beer company, whichever one he'd written, would then, he told us, automatically send him a booklet of coupons redeemable at the grocery store for maybe 16 bottles of beer, totally free, which he would consume while composing his next letter to the next beer company about the fingernail or the thumbtack that tumbled out of their Oktoberfest lager.

Now to a bunch of nine-year-old boys, this was different, and dangerous, and adult, and glamorous, and one day would be useful information — not like remembering the year that King John signed the Magna Carta. So it made us feel educated in things that mattered, that you couldn't find in books, making Mr. Farrar the coolest teacher that any of us had ever had.

So six years later, when I was a high school junior and it was time to find a college, I wondered about the

institution that had produced the gorgeousness that was Lloyd J. Farrar. So I went to him (he had left the school but I knew where he was), and I said to him, "Where did you go, again?" and he told me "Oberlin" with the "O." So I looked it up and told my mother we should go there.

I had other reasons for wanting Oberlin. Since fourth grade, I'd been at an all-boys school, and I found that, uh, *limiting*. I liked the company of girls, and I wanted them around. East Coast private colleges in those days were mostly all-male, but Oberlin, famously, was not.

Plus, I wanted off the East Coast. On my trips to Oklahoma to visit my mom's relatives, I'd noticed that people in the middle of the country dreamed different dreams, behaved differently than people I grew up with in Manhattan, and I thought maybe I'd learn more by moving away from what I knew to what I didn't. I wanted to test myself, see if I could grow in a different climate.

Because ... I knew what I was. I was a Manhattan boy, born and raised. I liked city politics, traditional politics, like my mom. I hung out at the local Democratic Club, like my mom. I liked theater, like my mom. I told stories, like my mom. My father was quiet, conservative, cautious, wary of extreme behavior — and in those things, I was like my dad.

People, says the essayist Montaigne, are swept into their adult beliefs by custom, habit, and parenting, "as by a tempest," he wrote, "without judgment or choice." If you don't pause and take time to figure out things for yourself, you will become, by default, too much like your parents. I wanted to separate, to have a time for myself, and Oberlin, I thought, would be just that: a break from what I knew, to explore, to think, to experiment ... just a little.

I wasn't a radical. I am not by nature a rebel, angry or particularly brave. I wanted what my parents wanted, a good education at a prestigious school, which Oberlin was, being very highly ranked at the time. And I imagined that after four years of Midwest seasoning, I'd go straight back East and get on the fastest escalator I could find to some, glamorous-ish career — glamorous *how* or glamorous *what*, I wasn't sure, but whatever I'd be doing, I'd be doing it with smart, clever, admirable people. That's what I wanted.

And in those days, for me anyway, the escalator of choice was Yale Law School. That's where the sharpest kids went, I thought. So that was my long game: Oberlin first, Yale second, and after that ... some kind of fabulousness.

But meantime, being eighteen and very pre-fabulous, I arrived here in the fall of 1965. I didn't know it at the

time, but I was walking into a place about to go through enormous changes.

There were forces — and this was true of colleges generally — building, boiling just below the surface. Bob Dylan had just written "Like a Rolling Stone." The Beatles, a few weeks after I moved into Barrows Hall, my freshman dorm, released their new album, *Rubber Soul*, pushing Julie Andrews' *The Sound of Music* from the No.1 LP spot. And in the room across from me, my new friend Jeff Moore would sit with his guitar trying to master the chords of "Michelle, Ma Belle" and then "Norwegian Wood" and then "Nowhere Man." Culturally, we were about to swing in a whole new direction.

Politically, same thing. The President, it turned out, was secretly bombing Cambodia. The civil rights movement was splintering, Malcolm X on the rise, Dr. King on defense, Ronald Reagan ascendant in California.

On campus? Changes there too.

That first year, I dined at Talcott Hall, where there were dress rules, especially on the weekends: ties and jackets for the men, skirts, I think, for the women. At dinner time, the ladies would descend, two by two, down a staircase from the second floor, proceeding into the dining room. The seating was fixed: man, woman, man, woman. On Sundays an appointed "chaplain" read the doxology:

"Praise God, from Whom all blessings flow;
Praise Him, all creatures here below;
Praise Him above, ye heavenly host;
Praise Father, Son, and Holy Ghost."

And then we'd eat.

One year later, that prayer, the dress code, the seating — all of it was gone. We students had organized and forced the change. And the school bent to our will.

I was part of that. I was part of a lot of things. I had my hand up in class, constantly. I had opinions, lots of them, which I was happy, more than happy, to share. The quieter kids gave me room, because after all, I was from New York and hadn't yet realized there were other people in the room. But I knew I was in new territory.

I remember my first hour at Barrows Hall, when my parents had just left and I was still unpacking. A boy from across the way, Tom Griffin from Tennessee, came over to introduce himself.

We got to talking and he said, "So what does your dad do?" And I said, "My dad? He's a camel dealer, actually. Buys and sells camels."

"Oh," says Tom. "I thought you were from New York."

"Well, we don't talk about it much, but Manhattan camels are excellent in traffic, good with luggage, and up on the hump you have a wonderful view ..."

"Uh-huh," said Tom very quietly, stepping back and away.

And then maybe five minutes later he returned, this time with a new boy, Peter Paden, from St. Paul in Minnesota, and Tom says, "This is Robert Krulwich. His dad buys and sells camels in New York."

And Peter looks at me, and says, "Camels?"

And I say, "Not really. That was ... a joke."

"Oh," says Tom. And then looking at me like he's really puzzled, he says, "And what was the funny part?"

"Uh-oh," I thought. "They don't have irony here! I'm going to have to make some changes."

And I tried. I tried to adjust. But Oberlin was not easy. There were times when I was really unprepared for what I found — particularly with the more outspoken political students. They had an anger and boldness that was new to me.

Many nights after dinner, before it got too cold, lots of kids gathered at the Arch on Tappan Square, the monument to the Boxer Rebellion. These meetings were called Arch 7's, because they began at 7 o'clock and anybody who wanted to could climb onto the monument and talk to the crowd.

No rules. No strictures. No censorship. This was our bit of Berkeley, our free speech movement, and what I heard some of those nights I had never heard before. (And I'm from New York, where you'd think I'd have heard a lot.)

Maybe I came from too conservative a home, but I'd never heard anyone call the President a war criminal. I mean, you can, of course, but should you? Out loud? In public? If you plan to burn your draft card (which is a crime, by the way), do you announce this? To a crowd, where everybody can hear?

I particularly remember one guy, an upper classman named Joe, who matter-of-factly declared himself a Communist. He just *said* it. Like it was a thing you could say.

But to me, Communists were boogeymen; in my mind, they hid in shadows and did treasonous things. They didn't have sign-up sheets for bus trips to Cleveland.

So I would stand there, and I could hear my inner Dad whispering, "You don't want to be here. This isn't safe. Walk away." But the 18-year-old in me was saying, "No. stay. These people are amazing. They're fierce. They're not scared." And so I showed up night after night because I wanted to see more, hear more, know more. So many students at the Arch 7's were cocksure, boldly and bravely committed to social justice. And me? What was I committed to?

There was, of course, a war on. And every male my age was subject to the draft. So our four years at college were like a scimitar, slowly descending, closer and closer to our necks. At some point, we knew, we'd have to choose: to serve or not to serve. And this question, unlike foreign policy today, was deeply personal. You could postpone it for a while, avoid it if you could, but if you were healthy, you were expected to serve. That was the law. And if you refused? There would be consequences.

And the war was — well, why mince words? It was *wrong*. It didn't make sense for a country as powerful as ours to come crashing down on a small, distant, very different population, spray them with poisons, rain down bombs. And for what purpose? They were Communists, we were told. We were for freedom, but the freedom we were for seemed to involve the Diem family, who were petty dictators who ruled South Vietnam by fiat. So we were being asked to put ourselves at risk to protect who? To defend what?

My housemates, particularly in my junior and senior years, were convinced that this war was amoral, imperial, and murderous. They opposed it. Every one. Peter Blood, who lived with us, had turned in his draft card, mailed it back to his draft board.

Not long afterward, a pair of FBI agents showed up at our house on Morgan Street one morning to question him. When they rang the doorbell, I was there, but unfortunately, so was a houseguest, a kid who'd come in from Cleveland who was having morning sex with his girlfriend in the front parlor, and they were making a lot of noise. I wasn't sure if I should let two guys with badges, suits and ties into the house when there was so much groaning and bouncing going on — and pretty much in plain view, as we didn't have a parlor door. So, a little bit embarrassed, I asked the agents, who weren't that much older than me, if they'd consider coming back a little later. And since they could hear what I could hear, they said, yeah, they'd be happy "to get some coffee up the road." That's what they kept saying, "get some coffee up the road." It was a stock phrase for them, from the Awkward Moments FBI phrase book, and I wondered why was I was feeling embarrassed for FBI guys when my roommates were morally embarrassed by an indefensible war.

Clearly I had priority problems. I mean, I was against the war. But for me it was complicated.

The war was a bad mistake. But a universal draft, the idea that America should draw its soldiers from the whole population, that military service be required and the nation should fight its wars together, everybody in — that seemed right.

So I hated the war but approved the draft, which put me in a pickle. I didn't want to serve, but I didn't think I should avoid the draft because I admired the draft. I didn't know what to do, and the months were ticking down.

There were many guys like me. We were everywhere. But a guy like me at Oberlin, surrounded by good friends who seemed so willing to resist, to put themselves in jeopardy, made me wonder, why wasn't I as angry or as principled or as bold as my friends?

It all came to a head in October, 1967.

I was in art theory class at a table next to Gayna Uransky, and we were doing color charts of hues, values and intensities. I was cutting up yellow squares, barely yellow, mildly yellow, very yellow, extremely yellow, and I was gluing them onto a sheet when we got word that just outside our building, on Main Street, there was a Navy recruiter trapped in a car. Trapped by students who didn't want the U.S. Navy on campus trying to recruit Oberlin kids to join the war.

Some of my housemates were involved. I knew they were staking out different streets, wondering which route the recruiter would take, and when they found him they surrounded his car, with him in it, and I think they threw a log or something in front of the tires, bringing him to a halt.

I went out to see, of course, with Gayna. And there, on the street in front of Hall Auditorium, were 40, 50 people, their arms linked, surrounding this car. The recruiter eventually asked to go to the bathroom and was allowed to leave, provided he come back. He didn't. So when I got there, the car was empty.

I've since looked at photos from that day and they show John Dove, Jan Ting, Eric Frumin, Eve Goldberg — these are people I knew, and liked. My housemate Peter Blood was there, and even though I believed recruiters should be allowed on campus and be free to talk, I watched the police moving up Main Street in a phalanx, then all of a sudden throwing what looked like grenades. (They were tear-gas canisters that dated back to World War II. John Dove saved one that said, "Don't use after May 1954.")

These canisters landed on my friends who were spread across the hood of the car, their faces streaked and smudged, and the gas or the smoke or whatever began to billow, and people around me began to scream, and I got this roaring flash of hatred, a kind of reptile fury — I *hated* those cops ... and the firemen who then turned on a fire hose and power-washed my friends off the car, sending them careening down Main Street. All around me, people were rushing into the street, away from the street, crying, sobbing, mad with anger.

And I stood there, watching. Just standing on the curb along Tappan Square, feeling so — so mixed up. Why wasn't I by that car? Yes, I was for the draft, for free speech; I had my reasons. But my friends had theirs, the napalm, the bombings, the arrogance of American power. Why can't I move, I wondered. Why aren't I angrier? Why am I so knotted up? Why am I standing here?

It occurred to me maybe I was afraid — that an arrest would keep me from Yale Law School, from Step Two of my life plan. Yet my friends, I imagined, were just as ambitious as I was, and there they were, gassed and hosed. What was holding me back? Principle? Cowardice? Was there something wrong with me? Or right with me? I didn't know.

And then (and this is a strange turn to the story, but this is what happened, so here we go), I learned something. I had an insight.

I mean, I didn't have the insight. I was told it, taught it, by a massive-headed, broad-shouldered, towering professor — that's how I remember him — with a jutting chin, a wide forehead, a big mop of white hair, and a voice that could command a room like Daniel Webster: the Danforth Professor of Religion, world authority on Jonathan Edwards, chairman of the Religion Department, Professor Clyde Amos Holbrook.

There's a sculpted version of him that you can visit when we're done here. He's right next door. As you go to the old Theology School building, there's a colonnade to honor former theology professors; and as you walk along, if you look up, you'll see a series of heads, like medieval saints, resting on top of each pillar, and Clyde Holbrook is up there. His head is bigger than everybody else's, I think because it was added later. It doesn't match. He's oversized.

But, you know, that kind of fits, because the same year that my friends surrounded the Naval recruiter, Professor Holbrook taught one of the biggest, most overwhelmingly popular survey courses at the college. It was called, and this may surprise you, "Modern Religious Thought,"

a survey of contemporary religious writing on ethics, faith, doubt.

And one winter morning that year, in class, he addressed my issue. What do you do when you believe two things, have two opposite thoughts in your head at the same time, both pulling at you, and you must choose. How do you act, when you are in doubt, in conflict?

And as vividly as I remember that tear gas day, I can just as vividly see myself sitting at my desk in the King Building when Professor Holbrook strode into class, straight to the lectern, and began preaching to us in the person of Reinhold Niebuhr.

I say “preaching” because that’s what he’d do. Professor Holbrook didn’t lecture, not in the usual way. Instead he’d assume the character in speech and manner of different theologians, a different one each time up. So one week he’d walk in as Swiss Protestant Karl Barth, next class he was the Lutheran Dietrich Bonhoeffer, next class he was Jewish Martin Buber.

But on this particular day, he was an American-born Union Theological Seminary thinker, Reinhold Niebuhr, author of a book “Moral Man in Immoral Society.”

And somewhere in the middle of what was a sermon on social change, he took an odd turn: instead of celebrating people who fight for what’s right and do what has to be done, Holbrook surprised me.

He talked about the danger — the *danger* — of presuming to know what’s right, the sin of pride, of perfection, of being too sure of yourself. And I remember thinking, “Wait, wait, wait, this is ... this is ... interesting.”

The twentieth century, said Holbrook, is chock-full of people who knew for absolute certain that what they were doing was the right thing. They just knew. They’d seen the light. Doubts dropped away. That happened to Lenin, and to Stalin, and to Hitler, and to Mao, and to many more minor American crusaders for all kinds of causes. And all these people, because they were *so* sure, they felt free to dictate, to command others to their view.

And then came the moment that I most remember: when Holbrook-as-Niebuhr said: “Absolute certainty is a kind of sin.” That’s the word he used, “sin.”

Feeling totally in the right invites one to act without empathy or doubt, and absent doubt, people can do bad things. Sometimes they do terrible things – in the name of virtue. But what looks like virtue to you, may not to your neighbor. Even if she’s your best friend. You never know if what you believe is going to come out right. You can’t. You are too small. The world is too large. There is

too much you don’t know. There are things we may never know.

So the only thing we can do, Holbrook as Niebuhr preached, is wake up every morning determined to act and do good and yet know — at every moment — that everything we think, everything we believe, everything we want, might be wrong.

And that contradiction shouldn’t paralyze us, shouldn’t make us pull up the covers and stay in our beds. And here was the part that had me all the way forward, practically out of my chair: Being in doubt needn’t cripple you. That to choose, even though you might be wrong, if you do it humbly, is the deepest way to go.

“Frantic orthodoxy,” wrote Niebuhr (and here I’m quoting him directly), “is never rooted in faith but in doubt. It is when we are unsure that we are doubly sure.”

Let me say that again: “It is when we are unsure that we are doubly sure.”

Whoa. I sat there feeling almost dizzy. Here I was, caught between two irreconcilable positions, hating the war, favoring the draft; I had to choose. I knew that. The problem was, I didn’t know how.

And here’s Niebuhr offering me a way: to take not my commitment seriously but to take my doubts seriously.

So what I can do is weigh the virtues of a draft and weigh the growing vileness of the war and decide, in humility, with a little gulp, to do what I’d hoped is the right thing.

I would never be sure. But working from doubt, whatever I did, at the very least, would honor what I believed — once I figured out what that was. Which I wanted to do, with all my might. But I’d do it humbly. I liked that. I really did. And I knew that I’d have to solve myself by myself. Moral decisions are personal. And they can hurt. Sometimes they hurt like hell.

One time, long ago, I was sitting at a table with a person I loved. Loved so hard and so impossibly it was like a living ache, because frankly she wasn’t all that interested in me. At some point during the meal, in order to get her to say something, something about her feelings, I asked her if she’d ever been in love. And she looked right at me and said, “I’m in love right now.”

And a shock, like a spurt of crazy joy, whooshed up my spine, lifting me up off my banquette into the air, literally (so great was my happiness) ... until she finished the sentence. “[I’m in love right now] with Jerry (or Phil, or someone who wasn’t me).”

I was still mid-air when she said that, on my way to heaven. So the crash, the crushing, horrible fall to earth, came so suddenly that all I could do, on the inside, was laugh. I laughed at my pathetic self, but it wasn't an accusing laugh. It was a fond, "good-for-you, Robert" laugh, because at least I was willing to be hurt.

Love takes courage. And so do moral choices.

When you face problems that scare you, that push you out of your comfort zone, that force you to gulp and dare — that is frightening. As Kathryn Schulz puts it in her book "Being Wrong," the fear of being wrong makes us "small and scared. [We] sacrifice some of our self-knowledge, lose our sense of where we belong in the world."

But you lose yourself ... to find yourself. And you do this alone. You have to.

And the problem I was having at Oberlin back then was that the school wouldn't leave me alone. I felt pushed. Told how to think all the time. Here I am, at 19, 20, trying to talk to my doubts, and all around me, there was certainty. There was no Arch 7 for the confused, for kids who didn't know what to think or what to do.

No, by my junior year, Oberlin had gelled. The public Oberlin, the noisy part, was speaking in, it seemed, one voice. All around me, from my friends and from their friends and from the campus generally, there was a strong pressure to conform to the norm, to oppose the war and therefore oppose the draft. And the bravery I so admired, of those kids around the car or doing civil rights work in Mississippi, would sometimes morph into a kind of snifty smugness. They were not just right, they were self-righteous. And I didn't want that. I wanted to get off my curb and do things. But humbly, not with the smugness.

At Oberlin, it was hard to find people to doubt to — to talk to, humbly. Oberlin didn't have a lot of those. At least they weren't talking to me.

And then I found one. Not here, but in Kansas, under a tree.

It was 1968, at Kansas State University, in Manhattan, Kansas. Five, six hundred students had gathered there from all over the country to talk about — well, a lot of things. The Soviets, while we were there, invaded Czechoslovakia; it was an election year; the Democratic Convention was a week away in Chicago, and a lot of kids were going to protest.

Many of us were editors of our college papers. We were meeting in a big tent-like building called the "Cow Palace," which had once been used to house dairy cows. And it was hot. Very hot. And I was tired, having come off a long bus ride. And it was noisy.

So, I slipped away, found a grassy corner of the campus where there was a big tree, and lay down in the shade and closed my eyes. I wasn't sleeping exactly, I was just resting, and I heard or felt someone approaching.

When I opened my eyes, there looking down at me was this tall, skinny guy, blondish, his hair all wispy, narrow shoulders, in a work shirt, blue jeans, wearing wire-rim glasses. He had a gentle, open face, and I remember him asking very politely if he could join me, because the sun was blazing down and apparently I had the best tree.

So we sat. And we talked, inevitably, about the war and the draft. And I remember he didn't ask me what I was going to do. Instead he just told me, *confessed to me* really, about his own struggles, how he'd wrestled with his conscience. How he'd found his way, painfully, not eagerly, to a place where he'd finally been able to turn in his draft card and say to the government, no. I won't join this. I can't. And you can't make me.

He seemed surprised at himself. Not proud, not pushy, not at all. Just ... done. He'd figured himself out.

And as I listened, I was hearing a Niebuhrian sermon. This guy had faced his doubts, thought things through, and found a place to stand. As Professor Holbrook explained, "It's when we are unsure, that we are doubly sure." He'd discovered conviction. And I sat there, listening, but mostly I was jealous. Jealous of his calm, of the quiet he'd found. And that conversation — its gentleness, its melancholy, its humble power — has stayed with me all my life.

What he didn't say, because there was no reason to say it, is that he was married to Joan Baez, the world-famous folksinger. That he'd been a high school hero, "Boy of the Year" in Fresno High in California, on the football team. He went to Stanford, dropped out, went to Mississippi to register voters, came back, was elected class President, reformed the social rules, won the college poetry prize, and had his head shaved by a bunch of masked fraternity brothers who favored the war.

And then, just months before we met, he'd been arrested, tried, and sentenced to federal prison for draft evasion. While we were under that tree, he was out on appeal. I knew none of this. Not even his name, David Harris. I learned all that later. Months later.

But the point is, under that tree David didn't tell me what to do. He just told me how hard it had been to ask himself, over and over, "What do I really believe?" And to keep asking till he found safe ground and could say "Here I stand." Doubt was his method. His sword. It set him free.

Well, also it sent him to prison. He served about 15 months in various federal penitentiaries, was isolated for three months as punishment for going on hunger strikes, and was released in October 1970.

Me? I knuckled down and asked myself my own hard questions. I graduated Oberlin, then served for two years in the Domestic Peace Corps (VISTA) working in New York prisons, which got me deferred. Then I got a lottery number, not a good one; it made me highly draftable again. I took my army physical, but they didn't call me. A year passed, and President Nixon, running for reelection, decided not to draft people who'd been eligible that year, so all of a sudden I was free. Free from that incessant self-examination. And free to go to law school. Not to Yale, alas. Yale turned me down. So much for my Plan B.

Thinking back on that time in my life, I learned there was nothing fundamentally wrong with me; I'd just grown up differently from some of my friends, so I had different questions. And I dealt with that, but the problem was ... Oberlin made that harder, because it lacked diversity.

I wish there'd been a wider range of kids to argue with. There were some pro-war students on campus, I'm sure, but they stayed very quiet. I could fight with my roommates on the left, but where were the folks who'd challenge my most basic principles, who'd make me listen, doubt and defend?

In the 1960's, Oberlin talked mostly to itself. We celebrated our anti-war heroes, our civil rights heroes, our antipoverty heroes, but we didn't mix it up with the anti-taxing, law-and-ordering, government-fearing, conservative tide that was rising all around us, that elected President Nixon, then President Reagan, then changed the courts, the laws and ultimately produced Donald Trump — we didn't have them here. We didn't want them here. And we liked it that way.

Well, I didn't. I wanted to mix it up with those people. One day, I knew I'd be working with them, selling to them, talking to them. They're not the "outside world" — that's what we used to call people who didn't go to Oberlin, "the outside world" — I planned to live *inside* that "outside" world. And I should have been more prepared.

A college, I think, should make its students nervous. It should stick their noses into smelly corners, surprise them. When you leave here, you know you're going to bump smack into ideas you don't like, people you don't like. And the right way to prepare, I think, is to have your first collisions here, where you can learn how, get a feel for it. Because if you haven't grappled with an ugly idea or an irresolvable dilemma, you aren't prepared for life. So that's my beef with this place. It isn't open-minded enough.

And reading about Oberlin lately (not just this campus, but others too), I wonder about these efforts to keep students "feeling safe," trigger warnings and the rest. They seem wrong to me. Feeling *safe* — that I understand. But feeling uncomfortable? College shouldn't be about making you *comfortable*. Quite the opposite.

And look, I know I'm an old guy, and maybe I'm not reading this right. My niece, who graduated here a few years ago, would tell you not to listen to a word I say. She would point out that I'm privileged and white, male and entitled, and noisy — always standing in the middle of the room doing all the talking — and — well, look at me! (She's not wrong.)

But having said all that, I'm still my father's son. I'm still wary, easily intimidated. I'm still that guy on the curb watching the braver people taking bigger risks. I still fear that in a pinch I'll overthink a situation and not act. And I want to act.

I still wonder, every day, if I'm doing what I do well enough, and for the right reasons. And it's at those moments, when I'm tired and discouraged — and I'll admit it now — that's when Oberlin does its other thing. Because there are two Oberlins in me: the one that irritates, and the one, as it turns out, that I need, that gives me a kind of strength. At least I think it does.

I'm going to tell you one last story. During the second Gulf War, I was one of 51 or so correspondents at ABC News: some embedded with troops, some at the Pentagon, some at the White House, some in Kuwait. And I was told, Robert, follow your nose, come with your own stories, which I did, and they turned out a little unusual, but that's kind of normal for me.

For example, I wondered since we were sending lots of tanks north from Kuwait, armored battalions, I wondered how many miles a gallon does a tank get? To my surprise, the answer was something like one to two miles per gallon. Wow, I thought, they must have big gas tanks. But no, that's not right, because if they get hit by anti-tank shells, they'd blow sky-high like a bomb. Too dangerous.

So how do our tanks get 100, 200 miles across the desert without running out of gas? And the answer I found (involving odd Snuffleupagus refueling vehicles) was pretty cool.

So on the opening day of the war, I was at ABC headquarters with eight or nine ready-to-go stories like that, about the technical business of war. And the way it worked was the anchor, Peter Jennings, would sit center stage in the main studio, hour after hour, non-stop, live, and introduce tape and interview people.

The floor director would say, "OK, Peter, here's what you could do next. We've got reporter A standing by with General Schwartzkopf, reporter B on a Kuwaiti hilltop, and Robert Krulwich with his gas-tank thing." (And this was all done on loudspeaker so everyone could hear.) "Peter, you choose, which do you want?" And Peter would say, again on loudspeaker, "Well, no Krulwich — how about Schwartzkopf? Let's do Schwartzkopf."

And then 15 minutes later, it would happen again. "We've got reporter A; reporter B, and Krulwich with the gas tank," and Peter would say, "No Krulwich." All day long, hour by hour, over and over, the "No Krulwiches" kept happening, until they became a chorus. Soon people in the newsroom would chant it together, "No Krulwich!" They weren't being mean (and maybe I'm embroidering a little), but it was not one of my favorite days. I barely got on.

And late, late that night, in the elevator, Peter said — well, he didn't apologize, he just said, "Look, you're not like the rest of us. You think in your own way, and on many days that's a good thing and we want that. But today was a classic news day, and on a classic day, we do our classic work, and we get a rhythm going, a look here, look there, go to the battle, go to the general, go to the blast. And you — you don't fit that rhythm. You break our beat. So that's what happened all day. I couldn't fit you in." And I looked down at my feet and thought, "Well, you should have. Because my stuff was a lot more interesting than 'Peter, here come the tanks!'"

But over the years this happened to me a lot. I've had success, for sure, but job after job — at CBS, at ABC, at NPR, at Pacifica, at Rolling Stone, at PBS — all my life I've been the weird one, the one that doesn't quite fit the mix, the one who sees things differently. And a lot of time it's been lonely. But every time up, it was my choice, and I kept making it. To this day.

I sometimes wonder what makes me so stubborn, so unwilling, almost unable to bend to convention, and I think part of the answer is ... this college.

There is something about this place that tells you — and I'm not quite sure how it happens — that you don't have to fit in, that in fact, your job is to walk into the world, notice the things that need fixing, and fix them.

I have this sense that people who go to this school are exposed, like I was, to this irritating hurricane of messianic, roaring exceptionalism, a big fat dose, not of Obama's "Yes, we can," but of Charles Grandison Finney's "Yes, you *must!*"

Finney's our founder. He set the tone, the imperative that says you may not look away, that you must find conviction and dare to act, even if you're too tired, too riddled by doubt ... that's no excuse! You don't stand by. You *do* things. Fix things.

When I joined the news business, I saw things that needed fixing. And years later, when I met Jad Abumrad, my partner at our show *Radiolab*, he was just as restless, just as crazy and just as driven to make something new and beautiful as I was. I'm Class of '69. He's Class of '93. Both Oberlin.

I don't know if Oberlin's responsible for either of us. All I know is this place leaves its mark. It's not gentle or kind, it just pushes and pushes and has pushed all manner of graduates into the world — some who roar, some who murmur, some who tinker, some who mend. So many of those people have made remarkable contributions to American theater, and science, and ice cream, and music, and politics, and literature, and, in my neck of the woods, the news business.

And I'm sure from time to time they've all gotten tired, but because of this school of ours, this irritating, pushy, narrowminded school, they can't stop. They can't quit. Plus, I've got Rheinhold Niebuhr in me, saying "Maybe this'll work, maybe it won't. But keep trying."

That's the power of this place. Even on days when I'm thinking "can't, can't, can't," it says "must, must, must." There are days when I hate it and days when I need it.

And now — here in the very room where I first read Rheinhold Niebuhr's book, here at the twilight of my run — I guess it's time for me to turn to this school and give it what it deserves, a full-throated thank you.

Thank you, Lloyd J. Farrar of Maine, for introducing us.

Thank you, Clyde A. Holbrook, for giving me doubt.

And thank you, Oberlin, for in some mysterious and deeply irritating way, helping me ... be me.