

One O P E N I N G D A Y

The students looked up from their conversations as Sam Gordon entered the classroom. He was tall and lanky. His walk was the unfolding of a marionette, all knees and elbows swinging briskly as he hurried into the room. His dark curly hair brought out the paleness of his skin. He wore khaki pants with a jacket and tie. The tie was a once-a-year ritual for the first day of class.

Before speaking, Sam looked heavenward. By the end of the year, having seen him look up so many times, his students assumed that the answers to all the questions in economics must be inscribed on the ceilings of the Edwards School. But Sam was only gathering his thoughts.

Sam wrote his name on the board, took a deep breath to still the butterflies, pushed his wire-rims up on the bridge of his nose and turned to face his students.

"My name is Sam Gordon. And this is Life Skills 101," he said.

A student giggled.

"Actually, this is the senior elective, 'The World of Economics.' There is no prerequisite for this class other than an exceedingly open mind. Quiz time!" Sam suddenly announced with delight. "Take out a piece of paper and put your name at the top."

A few quiet groans rose up from the students.

"I know," Sam said. "First day of class, senior year of high school, and already a quiz. Don't worry. It's easy."

He went to the board and wrote down two numbers: 531,000,000,000 and 16,500,000,000.

"The first number, 531 billion, is the amount of crude oil, measured in barrels, that's still under the ground. They're called reserves. The second number is the world's annual consumption of crude oil. Here's the quiz: when will the world run out of oil? You have one minute."

"One minute?" a protester blurted out. "Can we use a calculator?" asked another.

"Yes," Sam said.

"Do you want it in days or years or hours or minutes?" asked another.

“That’s up to you.”

As the students pounded on their calculators, Sam looked peacefully around the room. The Edwards School was a beautiful place to teach—richly patterned, full-grained oak everywhere, from the door frame to the crown molding to the desks arrayed in neat rows. Sam felt the sweet ache of nerves and anticipation that marks the first day of a new school year.

There were 18 kids in the class. A tall blond-haired girl slouched in the third row, staring off into the distance, refusing, it appeared, to even try the quiz. The others continued to scribble feverishly and work their calculator keys. “Ten seconds!” Sam announced. More groans.

“Time’s up. Circle your best guess, please.” Sam walked down the rows, picking up their papers. He leafed through them as he made his way back to the front of the room.

“What’s your name?” Sam asked, stopping in front of the blond girl in the third row.

“Amy.”

“Amy, what was your answer?”

“I left it blank. I think it was a trick question.”

“Ahh. And why is that, Amy?”

“Because this is an economics class, not a class on how to use a calculator. Or a calendar.”

“So what’s the trick?”

“I don’t know. I don’t know enough economics to figure it out, but I’m still thinking.”

“Thinking is the goal of this course,” Sam said, moving to the front of the class. “Be skeptical. Think for yourself. And remember a few core principles of human behavior. Learn how to use

them and you will excel in this class. The right answer is that we will never run out of oil.”

Sam stopped and let his words sink in. A student in the last row turned to his neighbor and whispered, “What kind of answer is that? This guy’s crazy!”

A lot of people thought Sam Gordon was crazy, but few people knew him well. Birds of a feather flock together. Being a strange bird, Sam was part of a very small flock. Later in the year, when his troubles would begin, no one would know the real story. The rumors that filled the halls were only guesswork.

It was surprising that a school as staid as the Edwards School had hired him in the first place. Perhaps the most prestigious private high school in the nation’s capital, the Edwards School was tucked into a quiet residential neighborhood in the north-west quadrant of the city, a few blocks from the Washington National Cathedral and the Zoo. In the early days of the school, in the early part of the twentieth century, the teachers often exploited this proximity to remind students that man lay poised between the angels and the animals, the divine and the profane; it was the job of the Edwards School to push man in the right direction. In modern times, the school was merely content to push young men and women northward, in the direction of the Ivy League colleges.

The Edwards School hired Sam because he had a master’s degree in economics and four years of previous teaching experience. He had turned thirty the previous summer. In his first year at the school, he had taught a couple of sections of the advanced placement course in economics along with a class on government and politics. This year he had added his first elective, “The

World of Economics,” where he had free rein to teach whatever he wanted.

“Think, think, think!” Sam was telling the class. “There is a finite amount of crude oil in the world. We use immense amounts of it every day. Obviously, we’ll run out of oil some day. Won’t we?”

Sam paused and looked out at the rows of faces. Would anyone answer?

“Well, it *appears* we’ll run out of oil,” said Amy.

“Amy, do you like pistachio nuts?” Sam asked her.

“Doesn’t everyone?”

“Suppose for your birthday I gave you a room full of pistachio nuts in the shell. It’s a big room, say the size of this classroom. The room is filled with pistachio nuts up to a height of five feet. There are millions of them. Happy birthday, Amy. Welcome to the Nut Room. The nuts in this room are yours for the taking. Any time you want to come in here and help yourself, there is no charge. Bring your friends if you’d like. Just wade in and have a pistachio party. You’re thrilled of course—”

“Thrilled?”

“OK, mildly happy. Work with me.” Sam said, smiling. “You’re happy because you love pistachio nuts. Outside the Nut Room, they’re expensive. Inside, they’re free. There’s only one rule in the Nut Room. As you eat the nuts, you’ve got to leave the shells in the room. You can’t take them out with you. At first, that’s no problem. For the first few days and maybe weeks and months, the pistachios are plentiful. But as the years go by, it takes longer and longer to find a pistachio. The shells start getting in the way. You come in with your friends and you spend hours wading through the shells of pistachios you’ve already eaten in order to

find one containing a nut. Your friends say, we've got to stop meeting like this. 'Why?' you ask. 'Don't you like free pistachio nuts?' And what do your friends say in response?"

"The nuts aren't free any more," Amy said.

"Exactly!" Sam shouted in triumph. "After a while, you're better off paying for nuts in the store rather than spending hours trying to extract a nut from the depths of the pile. The cost of the nuts in the Nut Room has gotten too high. It's the same with oil. Years before the last drop of oil is found and extracted, we'll walk away from oil as an energy source. It will be too hard to find new reserves. Or too expensive to extract the reserves we know about. Long before we run out of oil, we'll switch to cheaper alternatives. Remember the pistachios!"

The kid in the back row leaned over again to his friend. "I told you he was crazy. Too much time in the Nut Room."



Down the hall from Sam's classroom, Laura Silver tried to calm her nerves. While Sam Gordon had butterflies at the beginning of his class, Laura Silver felt something more sizable, perhaps bats, flapping away at her insides. Teaching at the Edwards School was her first real job. She wrote her name on the board, and the class, English Literature.

"I'm Ms. Silver. This is English Literature. And our first assignment will be to read *Great Expectations* by Charles Dickens."

Laura looked up from her notes. Expressionless as fish, the class waited for Laura to continue. She wore a long patterned skirt and a ribbed top. Her cascade of auburn hair was held back from her face with a black hair-band. She wore no make-up. She

went to the board and wrote, "Getting and spending, we lay waste our powers."

"Does anyone know who said that?"

"Shakespeare?" someone ventured.

"Always a good guess. Then try Alexander Pope or the Bible. But this quote's from a poem by William Wordsworth. Before we talk about it, let's move these desks into a circle so we can talk."

The physical task brought the class to life. When the fifteen desks were in place, Laura added her chair to the group. She then walked around the circle and had the students introduce themselves and mention a favorite book.

"Now," Laura said when they had finished, "I'd like you to take out a piece of paper and try to put in your own words what you think Wordsworth is trying to say. There is no right or wrong answer. Just do the best you can and then we'll talk about it."

Laura was lucky to be teaching at the Edwards School. She was only twenty-four. She had majored in English at Yale and had spent the past year on a kibbutz in Israel, picking fruit and working in a box factory, then stopping off in Italy for the summer to explore Florence and improve her Italian. It was unusual for the Edwards School to hire someone with no experience. But her letters of recommendation from her college professors had been raves and her guest lecture on Dickens to a twelfth grade elective at the school had clinched her appointment.

She planned on teaching at the Edwards School for two years. Then it was off to law school. Law school seemed as inevitable as growing up. Both her parents were lawyers. She loved to argue. She wanted to do her part in repairing the world.

"OK," Laura said, after a few minutes had passed. "The poet

says, 'Getting and spending, we lay waste our powers.' What do you think he meant by getting and spending? Getting and spending what?"

The first day of class is always like a blind date. It is particularly hard when a first-time teacher faces ninth graders who are new to the school. Laura's question hung in the air for a moment. Then, to her relief, a girl directly across from her raised her hand.

"Emily?"

"Getting and spending money?"

"And why do you say that?"

"You spend it. What else could it be?"

"So please read us your version of what Wordsworth is trying to say."

"Earning and spending money weakens a person."

"Excellent. That makes a lot of sense. But it raises a question. Why did Wordsworth say 'getting' instead of 'earning'?" Laura looked around the circle expectantly. A hand went up.

"Steven?"

"I think Wordsworth wanted to use the word 'getting' because it doesn't sound as nice as earning. Earning money seems like a good thing. Getting money doesn't seem as nice."

"That's an interesting thought. Why do you find 'getting' to be less attractive than 'earning'?"

"Well, you can 'get' money in lots of ways besides earning it. Earning money sounds honest and fair. Getting it sounds a little bit, I don't know, grubby. Like stealing. Or tricking somebody out of their money."

"Does anyone agree or disagree with that? Yes, Kim?"

"I think Wordsworth was trying to say that it's all the same."

That earning and stealing and, like, the whole money thing has a nastiness about it.”

“Very good.” Laura said, smiling in encouragement, “What did you write for your interpretation of the quote?”



Down the hall, Sam was pacing back and forth, eyeing the class mischievously. He took a dollar bill from his pocket and put it on his desk.

“Let’s play a game,” he said, his eyes full of mischief. “The first person who gets this dollar bill can have it.”

The strangeness of the situation froze the students for a moment. Then a student in the second row bolted out of his seat and grabbed the dollar.

“Well done!” Sam exulted, coming over to the boy and shaking his hand. The boy smiled sheepishly. Sam returned to the desk. He took out a five-dollar bill from his pocket. He showed it to the class, then let it flutter to the desktop.

“Same game,” he said calmly.

The class exploded into motion. There was a din of chairs scraping, bodies hurtling forward. There was a brief tussle, then a shout of triumph. Sam again shook the hand of the student who had survived the struggle.

“Exciting, isn’t it?” Sam said, turning to the class. “Money on the table is a great motivator.” The students who had sprung forward returned to their seats. Some lingered by the desk for a moment in hopes of another round.

Sam waited until they were seated, then leaped onto his desk. He took a twenty-dollar bill from his pocket and dangled it over

the heads of the students, holding it gingerly between his thumb and forefinger. A good portion of the class surged forward, laughing and shouting, jostling for position, heads tilted upward, arms outstretched.

"Just kidding," Sam said, putting the bill back in his pocket. "I like teaching you economics, but twenty dollars is too expensive a lesson. Can you believe that some people actually think that economics is boring?" Sam marveled from atop the desk, towering over the class. "Now tell me. What is the lesson of this game?" he asked.



"Materialism corrupts us," Kim answered in response to Laura's request for her paraphrase of Wordsworth.

"That's very nice. And very efficient. A mere three words."

"It's OK." Kim answered. "But it doesn't have the majesty of 'getting and spending, we lay waste our powers.' I think that's why he left off the word 'money.'"

"Why's that?"

"Getting and spending *money*, we lay waste our powers,' Kim recited, wrinkling her nose. "Adding the word 'money' ruins the rhythm of the line. It doesn't sing. You know what I mean?"

Laura smiled. She wanted to hug Kim but she managed to restrain herself. She looked around the circle. "OK, let's look at the last part of the line. Do you think Wordsworth is saying more than just materialism *corrupts* us? What does it mean to 'lay waste our powers'? Sounds pretty devastating, doesn't it?"



"By the way," Sam was saying, "that 531 billion barrels of reserves and the 16.5 billion barrels of consumption were actually for 1970. If nothing else had changed, we should have run out of oil around thirty years later. But by the time the year 2000 actually rolled around somehow reserves had somehow climbed to a *trillion* barrels even though the world was using about 26 billion barrels annually. We suddenly had almost forty years worth of consumption left."

"How could that be?" a student asked.

"Self-interest. When the price of oil jumped up later in the '70s, consumers found ways to use oil more efficiently and producers found new reserves. So we're even farther away from running out of oil than we were in 1970. Never underestimate the power of self-interest. You see this tie?" Sam said, pointing to his neckwear. "The profile on this tie is Adam Smith, probably the most famous economist of all time. He understood the power of self-interest as well as anyone." The bell rang, announcing the end of class.



Relief washed over Laura. Her mother had been right: forty-five minutes was not very long. She gave the class their first reading assignment in *Great Expectations*.

"Ms. Silver?" a student asked.

"Yes."

"I thought we were going to be reading *Great Expectations* by Dickens. Why did we start the class with a quote from Wordsworth?"

“Good question,” Laura said, pleased that someone had noticed. “Start reading *Great Expectations* and you’ll find the answer.”



Word of Sam’s game of “money on the table” spread quickly through the school that afternoon. Laura wondered what a character like Sam Gordon would think of Wordsworth. In fact, she wondered if many economists had even *heard* of Wordsworth. On her way out of school, she stopped by Sam’s classroom and peered in.

He was gone. Laura wandered in and looked around. She loved the sweet space of an empty classroom. In college, when studying for an exam, she always preferred the solitude of an empty classroom to the tumult of the library. Here, the black-and-white portraits of dead economists that Sam had chosen for his classroom decor took the joy out of the room. They were a dreary-looking lot. Maybe the mere study of “getting and spending” could lay waste one’s powers.

As she turned to leave, a splash of color in the corner caught her eye. It was a poster for the movie *It’s a Wonderful Life*. Jimmy Stewart held Donna Reed in his arms forever. Seeing such romance next to all of these dead men in black-and-white was like watching someone flirt at a funeral.

Laura looked over at the desk at the front of the class where Sam had stood dropping dollar bills into the grasping hands of his students. How could a man reward greed, yet honor a movie dedicated to the principle of people before profits?