15 November 1995

Jane Jervis
President's Office
Campus

Dear Jane,

You'll see from the following that on 21 September I started to write you a letter in response to your statement of goals for the year. And then I got incredibly busy and was never able to complete it. I'm attaching the letter, unfinished, because it does address some items that you might want to consider. However, my teaching experiences during the past couple of months have generated a different concern, which I believe we've talked about (by e-mail, maybe): The issue of admissions and suitability of students for Evergreen, or for any college. The issue is complex, not something to be hashed out briefly, but I do want to revisit it to explain my concerns.

My first concern, which I think we talked about, is with simple immaturity and lack of suitability for college. I'm afraid that we're admitting too many students who appear, on paper, to have the right GPAs and other credentials but who aren't emotionally ready to do any kind of serious work. Other faculty members have said, on several occasions, that they see this as the most serious difficulty in teaching. If a student is mature enough and is seriously determined to do college work, we can help him with specific academic problems. The real problem is the one who is directionless, unmotivated, still going through adolescent rebellion against her parents (and, by extension, against Evergreen faculty and staff members who appear to be authority figures). The best students I have--the ones I love to work with--are several years out of high school, have worked or bummed around for a while, have decided what they want to do with their lives, and have come here to learn. They are a delight. The kids--not adults, kids--right out of high school are often a great problem. I think we need some serious discussion about this matter. We have dropped the old supplemental admission form, on which students were asked to write brief answers to several questions; I'd like to see us consider such a form again, on which students would at least be asked to address the question, "What makes you think you've outgrown all your adolescent hang-ups and are ready to do hard, serious college work with the energy and motivation of an adult?"

My second concern is allied to the first. At the faculty retreat, I chatted briefly with Lucia Harrison and the new MIT director, whose name I've obviously forgotten; they're also teaching a core program this year, and they asked me how I find the students. I only paused for a second before responding, "Resistant to education," and they responded by saying that they've had a similar experience. I won't speak for them--I've forgotten exactly what they said--but I'll briefly tell you what I've seen in our core program, The Good Life. I find a number of students, whose ages must range from about 17 to 20, who have come here with strongly held attitudes and beliefs that appear to be unshakable, sometimes combined with a know-it-all stance. The attitude comes out most strongly when we are discussing issues on which there can be a difference of opinion, but it is sometimes so strong that it extends to the most absurd resistance

to learning, as when I try to explain some elementary point of logic and reasoning and find students who obviously don't believe me. (I obviously keep wondering what the hell they've come to college for.) Other students, who do not share these characteristics, have commented on this; they've said they find many of their fellow students very closed-minded, holding their belief systems almost religiously. I also find some coupling between this attitude and a very common attitude among our students: a laissez-faire belief that all ideas are equally valid, that everyone is entitled to his/her beliefs, and "if it works for you, it's okay."

I don't know what one does about this close-minded stance. Probably nothing can be done in admissions; one doesn't ask a student, "Do you have closed-minded, know-it-all attitude?" But I think this may be a subject for discussion by the faculty. I would like to know how many other faculty members have come up against it. Stephanie Kozick, my psychologist colleague, believes this is one aspect of general immaturity and that as students are exposed to a variety of new ideas they will gradually open up; I'm not so optimistic, because I don't see any possible events that could create the crack in the shell.

I started this letter last week, and here it is the 21st. I'd better print this out for you, or something else will come up and you'll never see it. Happy Pilgrim!

Best wishes,

Burt Guttman

Here's the first letter I was going to send you.

Well, I was supposed to do a model seminar for new students this morning, but when I got to the meeting I found that the aides didn't have any assignment slips for me; and since there were already a lot of other faculty folks there, I said the heck with it, there are enough people to handle the seminars, and I left. This gives me a few minutes to write something in response to your list of goals and your review of accomplishments; I shouldn't really take the time, because we're in the middle of editing on a tight schedule and I hoarding my time, but I do have some random thoughts.

When I read your list of goals, I thought you might add, "practice walking on water." Then I read your annual report and realized that, as a group, we have accomplished a lot in the past year; and in the light of those accomplishments your goals seem reasonable, especially since so many are rather general support for work to be done by other people.

So, now, a few thoughts--though they're random, I'll try to keep from rambling.

You mention distributing the Social Contract. I would be interested in seeing the current version. Sometime during Joe Olander's tenure here, the Social Contract as printed in the Academic Advising Handbook changed. I don't know if I can find the two versions and compare them now, but the new version had lost some of the flavor of the old; it felt more repressive, more confrontational, more like the atmosphere of the College while Joe was here. I hope there's

still an official version that is the old version, and that it's the one being distributed. Now, after distributing this document, what else do you intend to do? Would you, for instance, consider having some informal sessions for discussion of the Social Contract and, more generally, for discussions of what working here entails? I'd like to think that the College's goals are shared by everyone, but I know from personal contact that a sense of belonging to a community and to an educational enterprise doesn't extend down to all the people doing the routine jobs, the dirty jobs. And I wonder if a lot of staff people would be happier, and if the College would run better, if there were a real opportunity for them to get to together informally and talk about their jobs and how they contribute to the College. Think about it. It might be a useful activity.

On a related matter, I thought one day about developing a sense of the sacred at Evergreen, where I mean sacred in a rather secular sense, if that's not too much of a contradiction. Let me set some background. On the whole, the atmosphere of the College has improved greatly in the last few years--unless I'm just too far out of it to know what's going on. But I don't find such an atmosphere of confrontation, antagonism, a need to protest, as existed when you came here. I wrote you a long letter at that time saying that I thought the College, especially the faculty, was divided by antagonisms between old and new people, between men and women, and between people of color and white folks. Now, you may have investigated those matters for yourself and decided that I was entirely wrong; but that was my perception at the time. And I don't feel it so much any more. Part of the reason was just losing Joe; part of the reason was having you as President, with the gentle, sensible atmosphere you seem to generate; part it may be that the faculty is gradually hashing out some policies and procedures that alleviate anxieties and the need for antagonism.

Anyway, when I think about the sacred I immediately think about the Dragon Stairwell. I remember how it is sometimes desecrated (word chosen purposely) with scrawls, with political corrections, and I think that we must give students some sense that no matter how much they may want to protest against the evils of the world--and there are many worth protesting against--there are some Evergreen institutions that must remain above that protest. Similarly, although I might be hard-pressed to identify more intangible items here that are worth the status of the sacred, there probably are many. I think generally about common agreements we have here about treating ideas with respect, about treating one another with respect in our roles as teachers and learners. Perhaps my concerns about the sacred should now be turned back toward the Social Contract. Perhaps there is something we must all understand under that heading that will create the sense of what must be trying to preserve here above all else.

And that's as far as I got back in September. I hope some of it may be useful to you.