

BEATING THE SYSTEM

In 1954, after the worst career that anyone could have had at Harvard, or any other university, I found myself applying for all kinds of jobs as "EXECUTIVE TRAINEE" (The title which was then used for most positions open to graduates). In many instances I managed to impress interviewers sufficiently to make it to the second stage - the psychological-aptitude-and-personality testing.

A week later the reply would come back. NEGATIVE.

Graduate school was out of the question. My Harvard career had "destroyed" whatever talents, or desires for further reading and learning, I had.

The trauma was such that, on the day I finished Harvard, I swore I would never again read another book. In short, Harvard had made me a literary dropout. But that's another story...

One day, however, after receiving one more NEGATIVE letter from prospective employers, I met with a local Portuguese-American policeman who, on the side, was also the local numbers collector for the local bookies. He had known me since I had come to this country, and I respected him. Since he was interested in my progress, he asked me if I had found a job yet, or whether I would be going on to graduate school. I told him that what I had found did not meet my expectations - stock clerking, factory and no-skill work, in short, jobs with a meager present and no future. I then told him about the tests.

"Shit," he said. "I bet your answers to those stupid tests were based on your Portuguese honesty rather than on American values. I discovered that in my Army days the worst thing you could do on those tests was to not give the answers that 'real Americans' would give... Look within yourself when you answer those questions and, when in doubt, ask: 'What would an American, right or wrong, do here?' As a policeman I have long confirmed that my idea is correct. And notice, here I am, as you know, collecting for the bookies and making some money at it, even though I know that the law says that's illegal. But the citizen, who is above the law, bets on the numbers, anyway. And who the Hell am I to contradict how the people are, or want? It's like making a cat swallow 'molho de pimenta' (hot pepper sauce)."

He then told me that no one, no matter how bright, could make a cat swallow hot pepper sauce by being honest with the animal, or better, by relying on his own values. Instead, the individual had to go by the cat's values.

As you know, cats hate to be dirty, and they prove it by the rite of

occasionally licking and cleaning themselves. The individual who wants to make a cat, therefore, swallow hot pepper sauce, and succeed at the task, should know what the cat would do for certain. Cats, for example, like to rub themselves against humans they trust. Placing the sauce, therefore, on their furs would be useless. On the other hand, cats are quite protective of their rectums. Why not, therefore, grab the cat and, after lifting its tail, wetting the animal's rear orifice with a good supply of the sauce?

"In 99 out of 100 cases," the officer went on, "the cat, once free from your grab, will turn around and lick the wetness off."

I tried the officer's advice - not by grabbing my cat, naturally (In fact, I never had a cat in this country), but by applying the policeman's idea to certain obstacles along my life's road. There were many times in those tests, for example, when my responses violated my own personal values.

But that's how "an American" would be expected to answer, so I had been told. After I got through that hurdle, I managed to work until July 20, 1993, when I retired. Most of the time I did a job that I truly enjoyed, where I used my language knowledge and, believe it or not, where I actually probably read more than most people with advanced degrees have ever read.

The cynical police officer who advised me, I heard, died several years ago. His story, however, lives on. Somewhat like a parable, I would say.

Manuel L. Ponte

St. Louis, Missouri.