

Among His Tribe
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My pledge brothers and I were sitting on the library floor of the Sigma Alpha Epsilon house, lambasted by our Pledge Educator, then reprovved by the chapter President. Now in week six of our pledge quarter, we were told we “Just weren’t getting it.” We weren’t acting like a team, we weren’t helping those who fell behind, we weren’t weeding out those who couldn’t hack it. We were about to start over. We were about to learn something we should have understood all along.

Under instruction, we stood in unison, stretched out our left arm and placed our hand on the pledge brother’s shoulder in front of us. We bent our right arm over our eyes. Our Pledge Ed led us across the street, and up the stairs of McMicken Hall. Arranged in a semicircle we finally raised our heads to see two sophomores with The Phoenix, SAE’s pledge manual. Without a greeting, they started to read.

Quote: “In these days when a Greek letter organization sprouts on every hill and thrives on every back stair, it is no distinction merely to be a fraternity man. The honor lies in belonging to a good fraternity and being a good fraternity man.”

“When a man enters a fraternity, he is confronted with three roads, down one of which he must travel. The choice is necessary and the route, once chosen (unless a miracle occurs), will be followed to the end.” End quote. So began Minerva’s Highway.

Written by John O. Moseley of the University of Oklahoma, Minerva’s Highway is a parable of the three types of fraternity men. Brother Zero paid his dues, made his grades, but gave no inspirational gift back to his chapter. Brother Nero used the chapter for his own personal gains, caring little about his chapter or responsibilities to community. Brother Hero strives for self-improvement, selfless labor, and personifies a True Gentleman. We walked silently in a long line to three spots on campus meeting Zero, Nero, then finishing with Brother Hero at the relief of James Gamble Nippert at Nippert stadium. Jimmy was the eldest son of Judge Alfred Kuno Nippert and brother of fellow Literarian Louis Nippert, each an SAE of Cincinnati’s Chapter; Ohio Epsilon.

We reassembled in the open-timbered lodge of our chapter house, also named for Jimmy Nippert. In a masterful mixed monologue of derisive acerbity and earnest admiration, big brothers in the chapter were revealed to each of us.

Under the watchful eyes of the portraits of great SAEs of our chapter we celebrated the next understanding of brotherhood, forming deep personal ties through bonded bourbon and Banquet Beers. It was a highly choreographed night of fear, elation, rejection, acceptance, introspection and exposition on the very edge of control. I loved it.

The history of Greek Letter Organizations in America typically follows one of two narratives; “America Through the Lens of College Life”, or “Hazing and Men Behaving Badly.” In a classic scene from Animal House, Eric Stratton, rush chair (damn glad to meet ya) defends a raucous party while under double secret probation: “if the whole fraternity system is guilty, then isn’t this an indictment of our educational institutions in general? I put it to you, Greg- isn’t this an indictment of our entire American society? Well, you can do whatever you want to us, but I for one am not going to stand here and listen to you badmouth the United States of America!”

Maybe old Otter wasn’t too far off the mark. Greek letter organizations are as old as the United States of America itself and inexorably linked to higher education and leadership. The first Greek Letter Organization, Phi Beta Kappa, was founded

on December 5, 1776. Prior to this, "Latin Letter Societies," existed secretly, pulling from the language of law, medicine and philosophy.

College life for young men in the late 18th and early 19th centuries was spartan; as strictly defined as the curricula, and assiduously monitored. Students were expected to be in class or in their dormitories, studying. Feelings of tension with university administration, followed by resentment, resulted in pranks, outbursts, and downright "rebellion." At the University of Alabama in 1854, 31 students were expelled as a result of damage done to campus buildings. On American campuses, young men sought social, athletic, and intellectual outlets that were not under the control of their university.

One such outlet was literary societies. Blessed with private libraries donated by prominent honorary members, literary societies existed to bring debate and application of education through debate; both internally and between literary societies.

Many fraternities in the 1800's spawned from these literary societies to develop further in social character. The first generations of SAE's at Alabama were

expected to give *topoi*, or original research on an assigned topic. They also formed SAE in 1856 to be a finishing school under their ideals; a chance to foster deep friendships independent of oversight, while endeavoring to refine their members. Manners, decorum and conversation skills were emphasized.

The first big shift in fraternity life came in the last twenty years of the 19th century. Fraternities began to organize and expand nationally. Established chapters began to connect regularly with their first alumni, who became successful and charitable mentors to fraternal undergraduates. Chapter houses became possible, then prevalent. Chapters devoted less time on *topoi* and discourse as the skills needed to manage a brick and mortar organization took priority. Today, chapter treasurers can be responsible for annual budgets of a half-million dollars or more.

The second big shift came in the years between 1920 and 1955. Young men who returned from military service brought regimented experience and a more serious edge to some of the hazing and local rituals involved with Greek life. The GI Bill swelled the registrar's office and the treasury's coffers. Enrollment was greater than the available housing, and universities needed Greek chapter houses to

board new freshmen. This cycle resulted in new university dorm construction, which begat larger incoming classes, which begat larger pledge classes in chapters across the country. A type of social arms race developed between local fraternity chapters to achieve status on their respective campuses.

We are at another seismic shift of fraternity life, which can either circle back or further diverge from original intentions of the founders. Once isolated to their chapter houses, fraternity members' events or egregious and unacceptable infractions became public, etched in digital stone. Sigma Alpha Epsilon became a deadly juggernaut out of control; the biggest fraternity was also the baddest.

Sexual assaults, hazing, drugs, racism, and 9 deaths in six years. Moseley's storied chapter at Oklahoma is closed forever due to public racism. Lloyd's of London priced our insurance premiums second only to toxic waste dumps, so certain were the frequency and cost of claims. Much too late, corrective actions and introspection were taken.

Since 2014, Sigma Alpha Epsilon has banned pledging; members have full rights and privilege in 96 hours of accepting a bid. Since 2018, SAE housing and events have banned hard liquor. Many other national fraternities are following suit.

Simultaneously, Universities and Greek Life offices are cracking down on bad behavior with nuclear options. Entire Greek systems are on the verge of permanent suspension on some campuses. Rules, regulations, paperwork and oversight have layered over the traditional social offering of Greek Life. The relationship between universities and fraternities has become ever more complex, and contentious.

In the book Tribe, on Homecoming and Belonging, Sebastian Junger explains the Self-Determination theory; Man needs three things in order to feel content: They need to feel competent at what they do, they need to feel authentic in their lives, and they need to feel connected to others. These are considered the “intrinsic” values vs. “extrinsic” values that fraternities are notorious for: money, status, and image. Young boys will always choose to join fraternities if they seek a tribe. The question will be what values they are receptive to, and what values the tribe holds highest.

College administrations can ban a lot, but they cannot ban a fraternities’ Ritual. Fraternities’ Rituals (capital R) are a direct tie to their founders, their moral compass and constitution. Like religions, these core values cross and bind all

generations. I only know SAE's Ritual, but I will bet you a Banquet Beer that any Greek alumnus here tonight could find similarity in our Rituals' fundamental tenets; loyalty, brotherhood, service to others above self, and dedication to best self. When the SAE badge first hit the campus of Alabama, other students talked about the mystique of Minerva- the goddess of wisdom- controlling a couchant lion at her feet.

Of my roles and projects as an alumnus volunteer, my most meaningful are teaching and practicing our Ritual. It reinforces the ties of fraternal bonds and reminds me of the oaths I took on who I aspired to be. It also gives deeper meaning to meeting SAEs. Any SAE from any chapter and any age; once I meet you and share the grip, there is a different trust and understanding.

The freshman of today is raised with technology and an increasing focus on self. He has been denied a classical education or exposure to philosophical ideals. He seemingly lacks rudimentary building blocks of resiliency, work ethic, and community. Joining a social fraternity may be the last chance the freshman has to grow personally and spiritually through ideals – if he chooses wisely.

I fostered the literary, philosophical, social, organizational, and intellectual benefits in Sigma Alpha Epsilon. I had A LOT of fun. I also met SAE alumni who gave experience, time, talent, and sometimes treasure, to our chapter. Greek letter fraternities, literary societies, and Latin Letter Societies all formed in this country to assemble, speak and act freely, and pursue a better life through association and communal values. They were a symbiotic benefit for a college student, not a club regulated by the administration.

There are 9 million living Greek alumni, and 750,000 Greek undergraduates. If just a third of those alumni determine to perpetuate the intrinsic values that made them better people; mentoring, participating and donating, Greek organizations will thrive. Chapters without alumni support and participation are more likely to succumb to baser passions and instincts. If Alumnus Zero and Nero sit quiescent, then universities will regulate, restrict, and finally confiscate the chapter houses. Additional university or national fraternity rules will not stop bad behavior or refocus the benefits of Greek Life on intrinsic values. Only the elders of each tribe can provide perspective and effective guidance.

I have been a loyal son of Minerva since September 14th, 2001 and an enthusiastic, active alumnus since June 10th, 2005. My membership has given me a lifetime of friendships and rewards. I've held local, regional, and national positions with SAE, and I expect to always give back so my sons and grandsons can join my tribe, if they so wish. My volunteer work gives me a sense of reward, developing new Brother Heroes and maintaining what was fostered by my predecessors. More Greeks who benefited from the American fraternity structure should aspire to be tribal elders. The crass, cruel and dangerous behavior that is called ritual (little R) must be replaced by focus on the beauty and power of Ritual (capital R). I believe the best characteristics of Greek letter organizations at any campus extend beyond the walls of an alma mater and remain with the individual in all aspects of his daily life. And I believe those characteristics will always be needed in America.

Thank you, Gentlemen.

Nicholas A. Trelka