

# A domineering father's letter to his son

*“I am appalled, even horrified, that you have adopted classics as a major,”  
Ed Turner wrote to his defiant son at Brown.*

**By Howard Muson**

In the annals of business families, there are a few classic examples of father-to-son letters that contain wise advice on preparing for careers in the family company. There are also letters that probably shouldn't have been written, that only incite the young to rebellion.

A new biography of Ted Turner contains a superb example of how not to do it. Porter Bibb's *It Ain't As Easy As It Looks* (Crown, \$25) recalls a letter written by Ed Turner to his son, Ted, in the late 1950s, when Ted was in college at Brown University. Ed Turner was a flamboyant entrepreneur who went into the billboard advertising business after World War II. He was an alcoholic given to severe mood swings and beat his young son for the slightest infraction—sometimes with a wire coat hanger. Bibb's interviews suggest Ed Turner dearly loved the boy and beat him to toughen him and provoke him to greatness.

Ted Turner grew up a defiant loner who spent much of his boyhood away from the family at boarding and military schools. Ed sent his son to an Ivy League college to gain the sophistication he felt Ted needed in a business career. At Brown, however, Ted was impressed by an instructor of classics named John Rowe Workman and informed his father that he intended to major in the field.

Ed Turner's scornful and rambling response is reprinted below. It was characteristic of Ted—and his love-hate relationship with his father—that he then showed up his father by having the letter published (anonymously) in the college newspaper.

During the 1960s, Ed Turner began buying up outdoor advertising companies in the South. Apparently feeling overextended, he shot himself to death at the age of 53. Porter Bibb's book provides a fascinating account of how the young Ted Turner firmly seized the helm of Turner Advertising and kept it afloat; he later added onto it an Atlanta TV station and began building his worldwide news and entertainment network.

**My dear son:**

I am appalled, even horrified, that you have adopted classics as a major. As a matter of fact, I almost puked on my way home today. I suppose that I am old-fashioned enough to believe that the purpose of an education is to enable one to develop a community of interest with his fellow men, to learn to know them, and to learn how to get along with

them. In order to do this, of course, he must learn what motivates them, and how to impel them to be pleased with his objectives and desires.

I am a practical man, and for the life of me I cannot possibly understand why you should wish to speak Greek. With whom will you communicate in Greek? I have read, in recent years, the deliberations of Plato and Aristotle, and was interested to learn that the old bastards had minds which worked very similarly to ours. I was amazed that they had so much time for deliberating and thinking, and was interested in the kind of civilization that would permit such useless deliberation. Then I got to thinking that it wasn't so amazing after all. They thought like we did, because my Hereford cows today are very similar to those 10 or 20 generations ago. I cannot understand why you should be vitally interested in informing yourself about the influence of the Classics or English literature. It is not necessary to know how to make a gun in order to know how to use it. It would seem to me that it would be enough to learn English literature without going into what influence this or that ancient mythology might have had upon it.

These [Roman and Greek] subjects might give you a community interest with an isolated few impractical dreamers and a select group of college professors. God forbid!

It would seem to me that what you wish to do is to establish a community of interest with as many people as you possibly can. With people who are moving, who are doing things and who have an interesting, not a decadent, outlook.

I suppose everybody has to be a snob of some sort, and I suppose you will feel that you are distinguishing yourself from the herd by becoming a classical snob. I can see you drifting into a bar, belting down a few, turning around to the guy on the stool next to you—a contemporary billboard baron from Podunk, Iowa—and saying, “Well, what do you think of Leonidas?” He will turn to you and say, “Leonidas who?” You will turn to him and say, “Why, Leonidas, the prominent Greek of the twelfth century.” He will, in turn, say to you, “Well, who the hell was he?” You will say, “Oh, you don't know anything about Leonidas?” and dismiss him. And not discuss anything else with him for the rest of the evening. He will feel that you are a stupid snob and a fop, and you will feel that he is a clodhopper from Podunk, Iowa. I suppose this will make you both happy and, as a result, you will wind up buying his billboard plant.

There is no question but this type of useless information will distinguish you, set you apart from the doers of the world. If I leave you enough money, you can retire to an ivory tower and contemplate for the rest of your days the influence that the hieroglyphics of prehistoric man had upon William Faulkner.

It isn't really important what I think. It's important what you wish to do with your life. I just wish I could see that the influence of those oddball professors and the ivory towers were developing you into the kind of man we can both be proud of. I am quite sure that we both will be pleased and delighted when I introduce you to some friend of mine and say, “This is my son. He speaks Greek.”

I had dinner during the Christmas holidays with an efficiency expert, an economic advisor to the nation of India, who owns some eighty thousand acres of valuable timber land down here. His son and his family were visiting him. He introduced me to his son, then apologetically said, "He is a theoretical mathematician. I don't even know what he is talking about. He lives in a different world." After a little while I got to talking to his son, and the only thing he would talk to me about was his work. I didn't know what he was talking about either, so I left early.

If you are going to stay on at Brown and be a professor of classics, the courses you have adopted will suit you for a lifetime association with Gale Noyes [Yale's noted professor of English literature]. Perhaps he will even teach you to make jelly. In my opinion, it won't do much to help you get along with real people in this world. I think you are rapidly becoming a jackass and the sooner you get out of that filthy atmosphere, the better it will suit me.

Oh, I know everybody says that a college education is a must. Well, I console myself by saying that everybody said the world was square, except Columbus. You go ahead and go with the world, and I'll go it alone.

I hope I am right. You are in the hands of the Philistines, and, dammit, I sent you there. I am sorry.

Devotedly, DAD