

GUEST COLUMNIST BRYAN GARSTEN

The big questions

Dear class of 2022, A strange thing happened on campus one Saturday last spring: Means and ends traded places.

Students usually think of their schoolwork as a means to achieve certain goals. They think that if they do well in their college classes they will learn facts and skills, earn an Ivy League diploma and perhaps make some connections with influential people too — all of which will help them find a career that they love and do some good in the world.

What happened on that Saturday last spring was that a few hundred Yale alumni returned to campus after they had already achieved those goals. They were well-established scientists, entrepreneurs, activists, lawyers, doctors, diplomats, politicians and journalists. Some were famous. Their success had brought them leisure time and extra cash. The striking thing is what they did with some of the time and money they had sought for so long:

They came back to class for a day.

They read assignments ahead of time — Plato, Shakespeare, Virginia Woolf, W. E. B. Du Bois — and then they sat around seminar tables and discussed fundamental questions that the readings raised about friendship, beauty, justice and truth.

When we asked them why they spent a Saturday back in college, they all said pretty much the same thing: They missed this kind of experience and wished they could have a second chance at it. The readings and discussions that had seemed to them means to other goals while they were in college turned out to be goods in themselves, and they kicked themselves for not having appreciated those goods when they were eighteen.

At the end of the day of seminars, many of the alumni asked when they could come back and do it again. They were

disappointed when we told them that Yale was mainly for its current students — for you.

My advice, as you start Yale, is to remember that your intellectual life here is not just a means to further ends. Of course you should equip yourself for success and learn how to fight for justice. But don't forget that understanding the world and your place in it is a worthwhile goal too.

YOUR MOST IMPORTANT AND SERIOUS TASK DURING THE NEXT FOUR YEARS IS TO INVEST IN YOUR OWN MIND

You wouldn't be headed to Yale if you weren't curious. Learning how to follow that curiosity can be — and should be — an end in itself. Who knows if you'll have a Saturday free for this in 40 years. But you have four years in front of you now.

Your most important and serious task during the next four years is to invest in your own mind. Furnish it with an understanding of other times and places by studying history; discipline it with sharp logical or mathematical analysis; expand it by experiencing new sensibilities in literature and asking about the meaning of life in philosophy.

And don't be fooled by people who tell you that reading old books is a waste of time. Of course you want to be up-to-date on what's new, but don't you also want to be able to judge which new things are worthwhile?

The older books don't provide answers for you, but they

do help you stand apart from the oppressive force of today's fads and conventions and do some thinking for yourself.

Try to overcome your prejudices — including your prejudice against people who happen to have lived and died long before you. People in the past were unjust to one another in many awful ways, but so are we. Mixed in with all of their injustices are their best insights, just waiting to be picked out by us and improved. At the very least, the best writing from the past reminds us of fundamental questions we might otherwise lose sight of.

The most important of these questions is, how should we live? Everyone around you — advertisers, employers, politicians — will try to answer that question for you. But you're not a tool for their use, and you shouldn't let them enslave you with their answers.

Professors won't answer the question of how to live either. (Don't let us, if we try.) We might be able to help clarify your thinking, though, and we can invite you into the thousands of years of written conversation about the big questions, so that you don't feel so alone in confronting them.

Finally, a warning: We faculty lose sight of the big questions too, as we explore our particular expertise. And Yale doesn't focus much on the meaning of life during first-year orientation. You'll have to seek out the pockets of the college where thinking big is encouraged.

I'll put in a plug for Directed Studies and the Humanities Major, where we try to do this. There are plenty of other places where you can explore these questions too, but you may have to do some work to find them.

Do that work. It's why we're here.

BRYAN GARSTEN is a professor of political science and humanities at Yale. Contact him at bryan.garsten@yale.edu.