College Fun and the Pursuit of Happiness

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Party on!
Wayne’s World

I don’t believe in the Republican party or the Democratic party—I just believe in parties.
Samantha, Sex and the City

Most of the time I don’t have much fun. The rest of the time I don’t have any fun at all.
Woody Allen

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As Joe College sits in his Environmental History class, he’s thinking about the 1908 Conservation Conference hosted by Theodore Roosevelt, but he’s also thinking about what he’ll do when class is over. He’s debating whether to shoot hoops or to play video games with the guys, and pondering how to celebrate Hump Day tonight. In her Biology lab, Jo College is concentrating on the anatomy of a frog, but she’s multitasking too, making mental lists of the supplies she’ll need for the football festivities on Saturday. Both of them are waiting for the weekend. Even at work, we’re often thinking of play.¹

To some extent, this is perfectly appropriate, since the Greek root of “school” is a word that means “leisure.” The Greeks understood that it took time to understand the world, and they knew that slaves and women and the working classes didn’t have time for liberal education, which was education for free men. The Greeks used their leisure for schooling, but American college students, including the Greeks, use their leisure differently. It’s hard to imagine Socrates playing Grand Theft Auto, or Plato and Aristotle playing beer pong.

When the Pew Research Center asked eighteen to twenty-five-year-olds to describe their generation, they used labels like “lazy,” “crazy,” and “fun.” Fifty percent of teens told Teenage Research Unlimited (TRU) that their generation is “about fun,” and sixty-nine percent claimed that they “always try to have as much fun as possible.” And these preferences definitely don’t stop when students arrive at college. According to the American Time Use Survey of the United States Bureau of Labor Statistics, full-time American college students spend more time on leisure and sports than on classes and homework. If actions are a measure of values, then college students value fun more than learning.²

Anthropologists studying contemporary college students note that fun is, in fact, why many students go to college. In his 1989 study of college life, Michael Moffatt described student perceptions of the purpose of college: “Beyond formal education, college as the students saw it was also about coming of age. It was where you went to break away from home, to learn responsibility and maturity, to do some growing up. College was about being on your own, about autonomy, about freedom from the authority of adults, however benign their intentions. And last, but hardly least, college was about fun.” Even though today’s students spend immense sums for
the opportunity to think critically and learn about the world, they also spend thousands of dollars in the pursuit of fun. Why? Because it’s a common-sense component of the moral ecology of college life.3

So if we want to understand the moral ecology of college—including the implications and impacts of common sense—we need to study fun, including the nature of parties, the wildness of wild parties, and the assumptions that govern college fun. We need to consider the relationship of fun and fulfillment, and their connection to the pursuit of happiness. And we need to consider how college fun might affect social happiness as we engage in the ecological revolutions of the 21st century.

**The Nature of Parties**

College students have fun in almost as many ways as there are college students. There are intercollegiate sports and intramurals, the fun of hanging out and the fun of hooking up. There’s the quiet fun of conversations, or walks hand-in-hand, or meals together. There’s the fun of video games and board games and card games. There’s fun in movies and making music and creating personal playlists. Dancing and clubbing are fun, and so are most of the clubs on campus. With a group of friends or sports fans, watching TV can be classified as fun. Road trips are fun, and Spring Break, and foreign travel. And there’s even some fun in academics, although we don’t talk about that as much as our other kinds of joy. But when Jo and Joe College think of college fun, they probably think first of parties, the quintessence of fun on campus.

A party is a social gathering for pleasure and amusement, and the college party is one of the oldest campus traditions, practiced and perfected for nearly the whole history of higher education. A wild party is a variation on the party theme, a cultural phenomenon composed of beer and booze and music and dancing and games and sex. Also, because it’s where students most often encounter the wild on campus, the rituals of a party can help us think about the meanings of wildness for college culture.

Despite the name, wild parties don’t occur in the wilderness, although occasionally they do happen outside. They usually occur in the domestic spaces of fraternities or sororities, “satellite houses” or dorm rooms. Whatever the location of the funhouse, we expect “wild” behavior, but nothing like a genuine wilderness experience.

There's no such thing as a wild party without alcohol—it's almost debatable if there can be any college party without it. And that’s been true for a long time: Thomas Jefferson complained about drinking in the 1820s at the University of Virginia, a college he founded. Even though drinking is illegal for most undergraduate students, relatively few students care. In fact, in a 2006 survey by the American College Health Association, almost half of college guys reported taking more than five drinks at their last party, while women averaged more than three. The ACHA estimated, on average, that blood alcohol levels at the end of the party are just under the legal limits for driving in most states. More than a third of students had downed five or more drinks in a single sitting during the last two weeks, which is the standard definition of binge drinking. Although many students have been drinking well before college, everyone’s expected to join the
fun once they get to campus. Even adults assume it is part of “the college experience.” And thus drinking and drunkenness frame this time-honored tradition of fun in college life.

At a party, students often play drinking games. The most popular game is probably beer pong, a contest in which pairs of students compete by tossing or bouncing ping-pong balls into cups of beer in order to “force” the other team to chug their beer. But games are hardly necessary to make drinking a competition. Guys have long converted peer pressure to beer pressure, trying to match each other drink for drink. And now girls are competing too. In recent years, college women have increased their rates of drinking, binge drinking, acute intoxication, hospitalization, and unplanned sexual activities (including sexual assault). As one woman noted, “To be able to drink like a guy is kind of a badge of honor. To me, it’s a feminism thing.”

There's no classical music at a wild party and no "easy listening." Party music is meant to rock the soul, and, more importantly, the body. It might be rock or techno or hip-hop, but whatever the form, it will have a strong, strident—and thunderingly loud—back beat. This music makes conversation difficult, but nobody really goes to talk. We might chat about sports teams, entertainment, or our new possessions, but the rules of conversation generally discourage discussions of work, schoolwork, career or vocation. And even in a setting in which people set out to violate taboos, you generally can't break the taboo against talking about politics or religion or spirituality. Parties are a free space for students, but the freedom seems to be channeled pretty carefully. Otherwise, it wouldn’t be fun.

Eventually, the conversation gives way to dancing. After a week of sitting in classes, it feels good to get the blood moving again. Dancing is a way to put inebriation to work, letting loose, loving music, and displaying the body in motion. Sometimes, it's a kind of choreographed foreplay in which men and women strut for the attention of the opposite sex. If the mating dance works, some participants may proceed to making out and hooking up. On couches, in corners, and up against the wall, couples kiss and caress each other. Occasionally, these pairings are an expression of a deep and lasting relationship. Just as often, however, these couplings are casual—intimate relations without the intimacy. They're a way of having the surface of love without the substance of it. In 2006, fifteen percent of men and twelve percent of women reported having unprotected sex as a result of drinking.

At a really wild party, something should be broken. In a materialist culture, students know that one way of being wildly countercultural is to maim the materials that make meanings for us. In the exuberance of youth, or inebriation, or idiocy, lamps are bashed, upholstery is torn, carpets are stained with booze and barf. Ceiling tiles get punctured, walls are punched, windows are sometimes smashed. Violence is never expected, but it’s not a violation of the norms at a wild party. It’s just the beast in us emerging, and it seems like fun at the time.

Although there's not much serious conversation at parties, they seem to serve the college community as conversation pieces. Especially in the days after, a party is a gossip topic, a way of finding out how you acted, and how other people responded. Did I really do that? Oh God! I don’t believe it! Did you see what Nicole was wearing? Didn't that look trashy? What was Eric thinking when he grabbed her like that? Wasn't Bill blasted last night? He could barely see his own eyes. What was Jason thinking when he kicked that window out? Who would have thought
that Ken and Barbie would hook up like that? These stories help us recall (or discover) what actually happened, but they’re also a way of making memories of college fun, one of the primary purposes of higher education.

The components of a wild party—alcohol, inebriation, music, games, conversation, dancing, destruction, and maybe a post-party hookup—are fun for the individuals involved. But they’re not just individual. They’re cultural, and they do cultural work. They reinforce the values and assumptions of college culture and they raise a lot of questions about why we do what we do.

The Cultural Work of Parties

In general, students teach each other how to act at wild parties because most professors are clueless about party protocol. Increasingly, first-year students show up on campus with some party experience, but unless they live in a college town, they’re still not entirely sure what college fun looks like. So they venture to fraternities and sororities for experiential education. They learn the etiquette of a kegger from the experts—how to hone their skills at beer pong, how to do a classic keg stand, how to pick up a guy or a girl. In short, they learn how to fit in, whether or not they eventually choose to. They also imbibe the lessons of American culture about the divisions between work and play, boredom and spontaneity, domesticated and wild.6

Besides their peers, students also have cultural models for their edification. The classic movie “Animal House” and its imitators—“PCU,” “Revenge of the Nerds,” “Van Wilder,” “Old School,” “Slackers,” “Road Trip,” “Back to School”—offer audio-visual instruction and inspiration. Beer ads teach students what’s expected in most drinking situations, so they’re a useful guide as well. MTV’s “Spring Break” offers annual examples of inebriation, sexualization, and fun morality as well. Despite the variety of instruction, however, the message is pretty simple: work is dumb, boredom sucks, alcohol is awesome, and spontaneity is the same thing as genuine creativity. If we look closer, though, college fun is a lot more complex than common sense.

Alcohol

The cultural work of a party begins with alcohol, the ocean in which partygoers swim. Alcohol is nature’s way (and college culture’s way) of altering body chemistry and consciousness. Like other foods, alcohol enters the mouth, and glides through the esophagus to a person’s stomach. Because it’s a liquid, it proceeds quickly down the intestinal tract where, as Koren Zailckas says in Smashed, “it oozes through the walls of the intestines into the bloodstream, circulating and bleeding into body cells, making them drunk.”7

Today, college drinking is big business, and national advertisers, local advertisers, bars and clubs, all work hard to make it even bigger. Most college campuses are surrounded by bars, liquor stores, convenience stores, and restaurants that present students with the conventional cultural scripts for college carousing. In 2002, for example, students at Florida State (usually in the nation’s top ten party schools) could find booze at 185 establishments within two miles. Alcohol fuels college fun and the local economy.8
Coupled with the normal mythos of college drinking, this marketing is quite successful. When Student Monitor asks college students what’s “in” on their campus, beer tops the list with about seventy-five percent of students. In 2006, beer was briefly supplanted in the top spot by the iPod, but the brew still maintained a seventy-one percent rating (tied with Facebook), and was followed closely by “drinking other alcohol.” At college, students experience the life of the mind, but they cherish and celebrate the mind-altering life because it’s part of the nature of fun.

The cultural work of alcohol is to subvert the rational mind, creating space for instinct and urges and desire. Students think it makes them more natural, as it releases the inhibitions of the rational brain. But in fact, it makes them more unnatural, since the brain is a basic part of the human organism. Partygoers usually drink to lose inhibitions, as if inhibitions were not a part of their humanity. In the act of escape, therefore, they pose critical cultural questions: Why do college students and other Americans put up with a world that’s so alienating that it drives them to drink? And why do we accept an alcoholic escape instead of insisting on a cultural transformation so that everyday life actually increased our happiness and fulfilled our humanity? These are big questions, but they’re no fun, so we don’t consider them at the party.

Work and Play

This alcoholic acquiescence of college students comes, in part, from American assumptions about work and play. Fun is part of the rhythm of work and rewards at college; it’s almost as natural to Joe College as the rhythm of day and night. We understand classwork and homework as work, and we interpret work as most other Americans do—the alienating stuff that we do to pay for the pleasurable parts of our life. Whatever else work is, we don’t expect it to be fun. In American culture, we say "I have to go to work," not "I get to go to work." And we pray the great American interdenominational prayer, "Thank God it's Friday." But we generally don’t say "Thank God it's Monday." At a party, we work hard to escape the social construction of work.

It’s a peculiar construction of reality that defines reading books and taking tests and writing essays as hard work. To other people on planet earth who labor very long hours just to feed themselves, Jo College doesn’t seem to be working very hard at all as she muddles through two or three hours of classes, a few hours of reading, and a couple of extracurricular activities. It’s also peculiar because students pay for the privilege of doing this work, instead of being paid for it. But peculiar or not, students think it’s difficult, so they pledge to “work hard and play harder.” But again, why? What in the week is so unpleasant that we must escape it with alcohol-fueled fun that we may not remember anyway?

One possible answer is that work time is controlled by someone else's specifications—mostly professors, but also coaches, music directors, and work supervisors. In general, the people who govern the workweek are trying to discipline the mind or the body or both, which is what they are paid to do. But in a world of American individualism, the mildest whiff of authority elicits a reaction. In response, students often try to spend free time being undisciplined, creating their own expectations as a contrast or counterpoint to the routines of work whether or not it’s good work, or good for them. And so a party’s discipline aims for the opposite of workplace regulation. A party mandates spontaneity, sociability, laughter, and behavior (including sexuality) that’s unconstrained.
Another reason for the work-play dichotomy is hard-wired into our social construction of time, with workweeks alternating with weekends. American kids learn the lessons of the weekend early, as early as their first Saturday morning cartoons, and by the time they get to high school, it’s fully ingrained. “On weekends,” notes Peter Zollo of Teenage Research Unlimited, “teens get a reprieve—albeit a temporary one—from the rigors of school, work, and, often, family. For many, it’s what keeps them going during the school week.” This rhythm seems natural, both because it mirrors the rhythms of American adult life and because it has been marketed to us so effectively by national and local advertisers, who practice “Peter Pandering” quite adeptly—pandering to the perpetual child in us, and suggesting that it’s somehow a tragedy to grow up or mature. And so a lot of college fun takes place on the weekend: a cultural invention for rest, relaxation, commerce, and consumption.12

In a way, college itself is seen as the weekend of life— an amusing interval before the disciplined world of working life. College is a time for fun because American adulthood decidedly isn’t. Therefore, students plan to have as much fun as possible now, before they encounter the “real world.” The same sort of life-cycle calculation influences some student responses to social and environmental problems. “If the world truly is dangerous and the future uncertain, that’s all the more reason to have fun now!” There’s an environmental catastrophe coming, but not so fast that it should screw up our plans for the weekend.13

**Boredom**

Like the dialectic of work and play, the interplay of boredom and fun also fuels the party syndrome on campus. The common sense of college boredom is that it’s caused by dull professors, deadly classes and tedious texts. Except in unusual circumstances, research and writing are tiresome too. And sometimes, of course, there’s just “nothing to do.” Boredom is the primary social disease of college life, and a party seems a natural cure.14

Boredom is experienced individually, but it’s constructed culturally. Twenty-one percent of Americans confess that they are regularly bored, and researchers expect that the real number is probably higher. A 1999 Yankelovich poll detected a "boredom boom" in America, with more than seventy percent of us looking for more novelty in our lives. Pollsters found that sixty-nine percent agreed that “even though I have so much to do, I’m always looking for something new and exciting to do.”15

To a great extent, this boredom is a product of advertisers, because they need boredom to sell novelty and excitement. If you pay attention to commercials and commercial media, for example, you quickly learn that boredom is one of the seven deadly sins of American social life. Life is inherently boring, we’re taught, unless we make it otherwise—and the easiest way is to buy something. We can buy *experiences* that relieve boredom like movies, music, travel, parties, and drinking at the bar. Or we can buy *things* that magically transform us and our lives, like iPods, cell phones, perfume, cosmetics, cars, and beer. “New and improved” cars and computers and iPods are popular not just because they're better, but because they're literally novelties. Many Americans--and probably most college students--are neophiliacs, people in love with “the new.”16
Luckily for marketers and producers, boredom is also a side effect of this novelty—the more stimulated we become, the more stimulation we need to be satisfied. Instead of appreciating what we already have, we look for something new and different. "As a society," says Mary Catherine Bateson in her thoughtful book *Peripheral Visions: Learning along the Way*, "we have become so addicted to entertainment that we have buried the capacity for awed experience of the ordinary. Perhaps the sense of the sacred is more threatened by learned patterns of boredom than it is by blasphemies." Instead of finding the extra-ordinary in the ordinary, we look for the extraordinary in our escapes. Bored or alienated, we escape to the landscapes of fun. And the wild party is the default option for boredom-beating on campus.\(^{17}\)

**Spontaneity**

We go to wild parties for a feeling of spontaneity and novelty and contingency, for a contrast to the routines of everyday life. For many students, there’s not much joy in the day-to-day drift between classes and the cafeteria, the dorms and the gym, the library and libations. We don’t get excited watching television or playing video games. Conversations can be fun, but gossip and small talk only go so far toward human fulfillment. So a party is like an escape from the prison of a boring life, a “good time” for students who are “doing time.”

We like to think that anything can spontaneously happen at a wild party but, in fact, the action is fairly predictable. When people strip and run naked outside, it’s different, of course, but it’s exactly the sort of different behavior you expect at a wild party. In fact, even as an escape from routine, the wild party is one of the routines of our lives. Such parties, both on campus and on breaks, evince a deep human desire to be wild, but they only show us how to be wild in the most conventional ways. We violate normal (and daytime) norms of rationality, propriety and control. But even for this abnormal behavior, there are expectations, social rules, and sanctions. And one of the most important expectations is that wildness is only temporary. In fact, one of the unstated assumptions of a wild party is that all the participants will be tame tomorrow. If a party is a prison break from everyday life, we all know that the inmates will voluntarily return to their cells on Monday. This interval of “wild” fun has nothing to do with a person’s character; instead it’s a momentary switch from one persona to another.

While the wildness of the party transgresses the conventional rules of proper social behavior, it stays entirely within the rules of commercial behavior. As consumer historians have shown, one of the signal advances of the last century is the commercialization of fun—the creation and commodification of experiences (and audiences) that mark a culture of distraction and pleasure. From toys to television, dance halls to movie theaters, amusement parks to rock concerts, entrepreneurs have shaped the social construction of fun, substituting fun—which is saleable—for happiness, which isn’t. So students at a college party spend time together, but they also spend money getting together. Their partying is good for beer distributors and clothes manufacturers and music makers and condom companies. Adding to the gross domestic product, it’s rebellious in just the sort of way that makes a lot of money, which is to say, barely rebellious at all. Economically speaking, it pays to have fun.\(^{18}\)
Students “naturally” want to be wild, have fun, get drunk, avoid boredom, and be spontaneous, but these activities actually reveal a fairly stark view of life: we hate the routines of everyday life so much that we need to escape them with booze and parties and other distractions. What does this say about our lives? What does this say about the relationship of fun and happiness?

Wildness and the Preservation of the World

Ecologically speaking, the “wild” of a wild party doesn’t do much for nature, but what does it do for our human nature? How does our definition of fun, shaped by commercial interests and cultural conceptions of work and play, affect our human happiness? One person we might ask is Henry David Thoreau. Even though Harvard students were conventionally unconventional in Thoreau’s day—the entire sophomore class was expelled for rioting in 1834—Henry graduated with a very different conception of the wild than Joe and Jo College. In his classic essay "Walking," Thoreau claimed that "in wildness is the preservation of the world." He didn’t have a wild party in mind, but he did offer criticism of American life that can help us think twice both about college parties and about more fulfilling forms of rebellion against day-to-day routines.

For Thoreau, the wild wasn't simply the antithesis of society. Instead it flowed from the nature of the universe. "Wild" didn't describe how he acted at parties, but how he lived his life. In Henry’s mind, to be wild was a matter of conformity--only not to social pressures, but to the nature of the universe, to human nature, and to his own peculiar nature. Joe College sees freedom as an expression of his ontological individualism; Thoreau saw freedom as correspondence with what nature teaches us about its rules--the wisdom we need to inhabit the planet respectfully and responsibly. “Wildness is the preservation of the world” because, according to Thoreau, wildness is the nature of the world.

Looking to animals, Thoreau felt a deep respect because they instinctively lived in harmony with nature, unlike humans who submit to jobs and routines that alienate them. Indeed, he hoped that people could find the same harmony he sensed in animals, but concluded that “in their reaction to Nature men appear to me for the most part, notwithstanding their arts, lower than the animals.” On campus, we speak of "party animals," who aren't like most animals. These individuals exhibit what we conventionally call "animal" traits, but interestingly these traits are ones that most animals don't actually have. The “party animal” is drunk and crass and stupid (and sometimes entertaining) in ways that even the wildest of animals can’t match.

Because of his love for the wild universe, Thoreau mourned the fact that we allow ourselves to be transformed into domesticated beasts. He suggested, in contrast to popular thought, that a person was first “an inhabitant, or a part and parcel of Nature, rather than a member of society.” This freed him to think unconventionally, because he believed that wildness was a characteristic of his mind as much as it was a description of place or behavior. In fact, in many ways, Henry was always a wild party because he didn’t conform to social expectations. Nature was his fraternity.

Thoreau’s wildness of thought led him to a sense of the wild as a catalyst to sensibility, because a person in touch with the wild--in nature or in herself--could see more clearly than through the
lenses of society. Henry went to the woods for inspiration and for perspective while we go to parties for inebriation. We drink not just to lose inhibitions, but to lose consciousness of the bigger issues that confront us. Students seem to drink not just for pleasure, but to dull the pain of living in a society that offers so much stuff and so little substantial hope. Even though wild parties are all about fun, it sometimes seems like they’re rooted in despair, places where lives of quiet desperation gets loud. This despair often leads students to “get drunk out of their minds” to achieve the blessed mindlessness of intoxication. As a consequence, collegiate wildness often leads to bewilderment and regret. Thirty-four percent of students note “doing something they later regretted” as a result of drinking and partying.19

Jo College is drinking not just because she’s thirsty for beer, but because she’s thirsty for meaning. American society doesn’t do meaning very well. So we often drink to dull the pain. For Thoreau, the wild was not just a model of individual behavior, but a source of social criticism. He embraced the tradition of the Biblical prophets, who went to the wilderness for a perspective on society that society itself couldn’t provide. And he used the perspective of the wild to criticize the shortcomings of the civilized world. A refined man himself, a Harvard-educated intellectual, he understood the attractions of a settled and civilized life. But he also understood the necessity of unsettling the complacency that confined people’s bodies and their souls. So he used his wicked wit to skewer the social institutions that de-meaned and de-humanized the people of Concord and the wider world, and to call people--including us--to repent, or at least reform, even though he himself avoided reform movements.

By contrast, at college, a wild party is seldom a source of social criticism. Instead, it’s a powerful institution of social conformity. Even when we think we’re taking a break from the routines of American life, we’re being broken to those routines. A wild party reinforces American assumptions that fun and entertainment are the main pleasures of life, and fair compensation for a week of alienating work. A party reinforces the primary values of a consumptive culture. It strengthens conventional gender roles, and casual and commercial definitions of sexual purpose. The nonconformity of a party conforms perfectly to the expectations of American culture because it poses no threat to the established order. In many ways, a party is an implicit protest of dehumanization. An effective protest, therefore, might be expected to result in re-humanization. But most wild parties simply substitute one dehumanization for another, and end often with a hangover, the residual reward for an ephemeral evening of fun.

In the context of campus culture, then, a wild party teaches us how Joe and Jo College understand and value wildness and fun. Sadly, wild parties happen because Joe and Jo College are so tame about their expectations. Having settled for a life lived in conformity to rules that often stifle the human spirit, a life of what Thoreau called “quiet desperation,” students (and other Americans) implicitly agree to be satisfied with a weekend of drinking, dancing, and (sometimes) debauchery. Instead of challenging institutions that demean us, we demean ourselves in a different way. Instead of making meaning, we make out. But it is fun, isn’t it?

**American Fundamentalism**

In college, perhaps for the first time in their lives, college students get a chance to really practice the fundamentalism of American culture. This fundamentalism—the idea that the purpose of life
is to have fun—is more fundamental to 21st century American culture than all religious fundamentalisms combined, and we practice it more religiously. Students have almost unlimited opportunities for fun, and handling those gratifications is one of the essential challenges of daily life management. Implicitly or explicitly, students define fun, determine its purposes, and fit it into the other purposes of our lives. Like other Americans, they work to be able to afford the fun of free time and consumer spending. At school, students work for the compensation of grades, and the income that good grades eventually generate. Whether in school or beyond, we wait impatiently for the weekend, using our designing minds to plan parties and other amusements, typically ignoring the common sense of college fun and fun morality—the mental part of fundamentalism.

The problem with college fundamentalism is that the perpetual craving for diversion diverts students—and later American adults—from an environmental imagination that could help us craft a society that’s substantially more fulfilling. Waiting for the weekend, anticipating the Big Game, planning Saturday’s party, ordering a late-night pizza, we engage in fun as we disengage from the intellectual play that helps us imagine a different world or a sustainable society. A loud response to quiet desperation, the quest for fun often crowds out the kind of quests and rituals that used to make coming of age meaningful. We may be, as Neil Postman argues, “amusing ourselves to death”—or, even worse, amusing ourselves to extinctions.

If our primary educational systems—TV, commercial culture, and peer pressure—can convince us that one of the primary purposes of life is to have fun, then corporate culture doesn’t have to worry about a social and ecological revolution that could disturb its business model. As Thomas Pynchon says in Gravity’s Rainbow, “If they can get you asking the wrong questions, they don't have to worry about answers.” If students focus their extracurricular lives on the question “What can we do for fun?” instead of “What can we do for fulfillment?” we’ll enjoy our pleasures until environmental breakdown eventually precludes them.

Fun, for the most part, is episodic. We speak of a fun time, but not a fun life. We say we had fun at the concert, but not that all music is fun. Fulfillment, on the other hand, doesn't have to be episodic, nor is it necessarily fun. Fulfillment describes the satisfaction that comes from living a good life—not "the good life" of consumer culture, but a life characterized by a right relation to the world. Fulfillment comes from going deep instead of skimming the surface of life. It comes from service, not from selfishness. Fulfillment satisfies the soul as well as the senses. Good relationships are fulfilling, because they challenge us to be good, which is not always fun. Raising children is fulfilling, but it's not always fun. Learning to write artfully is fulfilling, but it isn't usually fun. And good work is fulfilling, even though it can be challenging. So the funny thing about fun morality is how much it keeps us distracted from other possibilities of deeper pleasure.

Fun doesn’t just affect what we do; it defines who we are. When we absorb the fun morality of college culture, we’re fun-damentally different people than we were before. We see life differently (and more superficially). We focus on parties and games that, on reflection, aren’t all that important to our lives (or the life of the planet). An ethic of fun complicates a deeper ethics. But it doesn’t have to be this way.
The wisest students realize that, even though a lot of fun is simply superficial, there can be deeper delights—and that college fun might even have implications that could help us change the world. As one of my students, Maren Gelle, points out in an exploratory essay called “Facets of Fun,” college fun is a way of building trust and social capital. Parties lubricate interactions between college students, but the interactions don’t necessarily end at the party. The passing pleasures of the party can sometimes lead to extensive pleasures. Deep friendships sometimes develop out of substantial superficiality. Students who don’t talk about serious issues at a party might feel freer to bring them up afterward with one of their party friends. Students who enjoy playing together at a party might also enjoy working together on other issues at other times. Even though the content of a party militates against serious issues, the processes of a party can create social capital that can be used in other contexts. The people who play together may also work well together. Fun could be connected to work and to happiness. Another student, Anne LaRoche, notes that parties are fun, but they’re also sites of self-exploration, peer support, and friendship development—all experiences associated not just with fun, but with happiness as well.

**Fundamentalism and the Pursuit of Happiness**

Unfortunately, fun is not a common consideration in the college curriculum. There is, however, a budding science of happiness, which suggests that fun doesn’t necessarily generate human fulfillment. The New Economics Foundation, for example, has created a Happy Planet Index to illustrate correlations between environmental impacts and human satisfaction. Asking how much energy and materials produce a unit of happiness, the NEF’s very crude measure rates the United States 150th in the world, primarily because we use so much energy and stuff in the pursuit of our happiness.

So what does make us happy? How can we reduce the ecological footprint of our pleasures? And how can we do that on college campuses? In the last twenty-five years, social scientists have begun to investigate the sources of happiness, and their work may help designing minds to create social (and environmental) systems that combine fun and fulfillment with the ongoing regeneration of the earth. Practitioners of “positive psychology” like Martin Seligman, David Lykken, Edward Diener, and Mihalyi Csikszentmihalyi have studied the components of human fulfillment and offered guidance that makes sense for most people. One of their ideas is to go with the flow—but not in the common-sense conformist way.

According to Csikszentmihalyi, for example, “flow” describes experiences when a person—in this case a college student—is so deeply engaged in a pleasurable task that they lose track of time. It’s an experience where everything comes together, where the person gets “in the zone,” where talent and skills are perfectly matched to challenges and goals. Flow can happen in sports, in those moments when we lose consciousness of what we’re doing and just do it. It can happen in games, when—for a while—our skills are a precise match for the challenges before us. It can happen in reading, when a book seizes our consciousness and we can’t put it down. It can happen in writing, when all of our research suddenly flows onto the page in a synthesis that we hadn’t quite expected. It can happen in conversations, usually late at night, when friends are attuned perfectly to each other. Flow even happens occasionally in class, when a discussion is so engaging that an hour seems to pass in just minutes.
For most people, says Csikszentmihalyi, flow includes: “1) intense concentration on the task; 2) a deep sense of involvement and merging of action and awareness; 3) a sense of control over one’s actions; 4) enjoyment or interest in the activity; and 5) a distorted sense of time.” The conditions of flow, whatever the activity, include “1) engagement of activity for its own sake; 2) perceived challenges of the task are relatively high and in balance with one’s skills; 3) clear proximal goals that are regarded as important; 4) immediate feedback indicating one’s success at meeting these goals; and 5) highly focused, rather than scattered, attention.” Flow can be fun, but it’s closer to fulfillment.25

And, according to these psychologists, flow is a key to happiness. Happiness does not come from stuff, or from the environmental degradation that can come with stuff. As psychologist Richard Ryan says, “Aspiring for a lot of material goods is actually unhappiness-producing. People who value material goods and wealth also are people who are treading more heavily on the earth—and not getting happier.” Instead, happiness comes from deep engagement in strong social networks and commitments larger than the self and longer than now.26

This suggests that happiness has a collective component, which is interesting because that’s why Thomas Jefferson included “the pursuit of happiness” in the Declaration of Independence, instead of “the pursuit of fun.” Informed by a long tradition (dating back to Aristotle) associating virtue and happiness, Jefferson found his proximate inspiration in John Locke, who contended that “solid happiness” (or real happiness) was more than hedonistic or sensual pleasure. As Jefferson said in a letter of 1819, happiness was the aim of life, virtue was the foundation of happiness, and utility was the test of virtue. And this utility was more than individual advantage: real happiness came from civic virtues like courage, moderation and justice, and it led to what other founders called “social happiness” or the common good. College parties are social, and the partygoers seem to be happy, but that isn’t the social happiness Jefferson had in mind.

Even though Jefferson was a citizen of the Enlightenment and Thoreau was a Romantic, Henry shared this established sense of happiness, and it’s possible to understand Walden itself as an experiment in human happiness. In Thoreau’s Living Ethics, for example, Philip Cafaro suggests that Thoreau was practicing a “virtue ethics,” cultivating the virtues that maximize human flourishing and happiness. Instead of being “not too bad”—a way we characteristically describe ourselves, Thoreau wanted to be the best he could be. For Thoreau, the good life included “health, freedom, pleasure, friendship, a rich experience, knowledge (of self, nature and God), reverence, self-culture, and personal achievement”—exactly the kinds of things that social scientists still find conducive to human happiness. For him, as Cafaro says, “The question is not which sort of life furnishes the most pleasure, but which is the best life.” And he contended (with the example of his own life) that “using all or mental and physical faculties will lead to pleasurable lives; more pleasurable, in fact, than lives devoted directly to the pursuit of pleasure.” His embrace of simplicity wasn’t a form of sacrifice; in fact, his frugality freed him to cultivate his character, his relationships, his recreation (which was re-creation), and his happiness. Because he didn’t work a 40-hour week, he was free for deeper joys than most of his Concord neighbors. And he didn’t need to party on the weekends.27
That might be because he was a grouch, but it also might be because he pursued meaning and not just pleasure. Martin Seligmann, a contemporary psychologist, suggests that there are three kinds happy lives. A pleasant life is characterized mainly by positive emotions, and by skills that allow us to experience those emotions. It’s pleasurable; it’s individual; and it’s relatively superficial. The second happy life is the good life, which is a life of rich experience (often flow experiences) in which our skills are adequate for the challenges we face, and we become immersed in the pleasure of using our skills. In this happy life, we know what our gifts are, and we use them as much as possible. The third happy life is a life of meaning, which comes from service to something larger than the self and longer than now. It might be religious or political. It could be familial or a social cause. But it’s not individualistic, and it’s not immediate. This happiness comes from knowing not just that you live the good life, but that your life is good for something (or someone) else as well.

As this suggests, people often find more happiness when they’re not pursuing it. As it happens, pursuing pleasure adds very little to life satisfaction. That’s the problem with college parties, and college conceptions of fun. But the pursuit of flow and the pursuit of meaning do affect our fulfillment—and they enhance our happiness over time. Fun provides a spike of pleasure in our lives, but fulfillment increases the baseline.

So fun is fun, but it could be more than that. American culture, and college culture, however, often demean the discourse of happiness because it seems too serious. We have happy meals and happy hours, but these “happy” phenomena don’t generally connect to the deeper currents of happiness. It’s harder to sell happiness than fun, so commercial culture calls us relentlessly to fun. The problem with fun, then, isn’t its pleasure or gratification. It’s that we can come to be fun-damentally different people when we focus mainly on fun, and when we forget the quest for more substantial sources of happiness. Accustomed to an epistemology of entertainment, we expect amusement in all aspects of our lives. We associate virtue with prudery, and complain that virtuous people don’t have fun. Indeed, standing Aristotle on his head, we seem to think that virtue gets in the way of happiness.

Still, if you think twice about it, college fun provides lessons for life that the college curriculum often doesn’t. It shows that it’s possible to find pleasure in low-impact activities. It reminds us that interacting with real people can be really fun, calling into question the ontological individualism of American culture. It also suggests the importance of pleasure in human affairs. If we’re going to start an ecological revolution, it better be fun—and fulfilling.

On the weekends, college students pursue happiness by pursuing fun. In many cases, their pursuit is pretty much postmaterialist—a fun that depends more on social circumstances than on excessive consumption of the earth’s resources. So at its best, college fun offers a way of thinking about a postmaterialist culture, a culture of permanence in which people find themselves fulfilled not by filling themselves with stuff but by taking pleasure in each other, and by practicing the possibilities of good work together.

Such college fun-damentalism could be a catalyst for a new American environmentalism. For the most part, sadly, most of today’s environmentalists don’t seem like they’re having fun. Many environmentalists seem attracted to doom and gloom, and to suffering and sacrifice as the
primary way of avoiding doomsday. California Governor Arnold Schwarzenegger suggests that, in his experience, “Environmentalists were no fun, they were like prohibitionists at a fraternity party.” Forgetting that people like fun, that fun can be substantial, and that extensive pleasures can be extended pleasures—pleasures enjoyed for time immemorial—environmentalists have missed out on an important motivational force for Americans.28

College students could be a catalyst for such a happiness revolution, and it could be fun. As marketers know, Joe and Jo College are early adopters in consumer culture. We could also be early adopters in a less consumptive (and more fulfilling) culture. We could cultivate virtues and values that make life good for us and other organisms. We could be the first wave of people putting an eco-logic into practice in our daily lives. And celebrating this ecological revolution on Saturday nights (and other times as well) could be fun.

There’s no environmental reason not to party, and lots of reasons to party hearty as we increasingly adapt our habits to our habitat. We could still enjoy alcohol for social lubrication, but we might need to wildly violate the taboos against substantive conversations so that we could really get to know people in all their complexity, which actually enhances our happiness. Instead of drinking the cheapest beers on the planet, we could brew our own beer or focus on local brews, thus reducing the carbon footprint of our inebriation. Instead of the same-old-same-old at all our parties, we might cultivate diverse party styles more imaginative than the conventional themes of drink-and-dance, grin-and-grope, pimps-and-hos. Sometimes, we might even celebrate in silence, walking in a park or nature preserve by moonlight.

But eventually, any useful fun will need to confront the demons we expect to escape from: mindless work, repetitive entertainment, and minimal expectations for human fulfillment. We’ll need to change the nature of work so that it offers human satisfactions as well as a paycheck. We’ll need to change our minds about boredom, and about the constant stream of entertainment that infiltrates our minds. We’ll definitely pay more attention to the fun and fulfillment in other parts of our lives, taking more pleasure from other experiences and making them as “cool” as the binge behavior at our standard celebrations. And we’ll use our designing minds to create lives that create real happiness wherever we are.

If we were (like Thoreau) really wild about our dreams, and if we invested our energy in plans that are truly visionary—like good work and good land and good communities on the good earth, then our parties might celebrate not just the end of the workweek but the beginning of the good work we’re pursuing to create a culture of permanence. That would be happiness worth pursuing—and it could be fun too.
Notes

1 As Peter Zollo suggests, “Teens are adept at shutting out classroom instruction. When a teacher is lecturing, chances are most students aren’t fully listening—instead they’re thinking about next period, the game after school, the weekend’s festivities, or sex (you heard it here first!).” Zollo, *Getting Wiser to Teens*, p. 212.


3 Moffatt, *Coming of Age in New Jersey*, pp. 28-29.


8 Zailckas, *Smashed*, p. 113.

9 Mike Snider, “iPods Knock Over Beer Mugs,” *USA Today* (7 June 2006) at www.usatoday.com/tech/news/2006-06-07-ipod-tops-beer_x.htm. Alcohol is widespread on campus, but it’s not as widespread as Joe and Jo College think it is. In 2006, the American College Health Association asked college students how many of them never used alcohol, and they asked students to estimate the number on non-drinkers. More than 20 percent of students reported that they don’t ever drink, but students estimated that number at about 4 percent. In the same way, while roughly 65 percent of students drank in the last month, students estimated that 85 percent did. And while only 0.4 percent of students drink daily, their peers estimate that almost 37 percent are daily drinkers. There’s plenty of drinking in college, but there’s plenty of imagination too. And perceptions of drinking fuel peer pressure even more than peer behavior does. American College Health Association, *National College Health Assessment, Reference Group Executive Summary, Fall 2006* (Baltimore: American College Health Association, 2007), p. 7.

10 Few people have told students (and even fewer have shown students) that scholarship is intellectual play, and a delight to be doing. So students interpret schoolwork as drudgery.

11 Even before college, American teens feel stressed. When asked their biggest complaints about their daily life, 31% of teens said “stress,” 29 percent said “not having enough time in the day,” and 25 percent said “not enough sleep.” A fifth of students cited school as a complaint, while almost a third suffered from “not enough money.” Zollo, *Getting Wiser to Teens*, p. 295. Zollo also notes that teens “generally love their busy lifestyle . . . (it sure beats being bored).”

12 Zollo, *Getting Wiser to Teens*, p. 272. As usual, Zollo presents the cultural patterns of the weekend as a marketing opportunity, useful “for developing promotions that both motivate them and reach them where they play.” The movie *Merchants of Cool* also shows brilliantly how advertisers and marketers appeal to the fundamentalism of teens. For a history of the weekend, see Witold Rybczynski, *Waiting for the Weekend* (Penguin, 1992).


14 Boredom first emerged as a concept in the 18th century, when some people acquired enough leisure to be bored. It also coincided with individualism and the assumption that individuals had a right to happiness. It grew quickly with the rise of consumer culture, in which advertisers cultivate dissatisfaction. And it followed the rise of reflexive consciousness in a therapeutic society, as people learned how to focus on their own “inner experience.” As a result, according to Adam Phillips “we become more sensitive to our emptinesses, and more obsessed by what we lack.” To some extent, too, the boredom of Jo and Joe College comes from their marginalization of meta-narratives, those cultural and institutional stories (often religious) that gave meaning and purpose to life. As people in the developed world focused more on their own stories than on the stories of their traditions and communities, the “Te Deum” of religion was replaced by tedium. Without the frame of a purpose-driven life, life sometimes seems to be just one


16 Part of the collateral learning of college is, in fact, how to cope with boredom. See, for example, www.collegeboredom.com, the “home of bored college students,” and www.collegehumor.com.


24 For an introduction to positive psychology and the science of hedonics (happiness), see Martin E. P. Seligman and Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi, “Positive Psychology: An Introduction,” American Psychologist (January 2000): 5-14.


