Steve Solnick

The Electric Kool-Aid Picnic

I've always thought that "orientation" was an unusually lame word. My dictionary defines "orientation" as "a period of adjustment to a particular situation."

This view was Freshman Orientation at MIT for a second. I sure didn't emerge from it as adjusted to the MIT situation. I'm thinking in particular about this afternoon's Freshman Picnic, that first of dreams of free lunches where the only price you pay for the fried chicken is having to listen to a number of ostensively important people nestled among a very distinguished set of public speakers for five minutes apiece.

I've always thought that a technological mecca like MIT could come up with an experience as bit more tailored to the unique madness which makes up four years at school. I'd like to propose to next year's R/O Committee that they consider a multimedia, soundstage extravaganza to adjust the freshmen, and let them print the Picnic speeches in Tech Talk.

Imagine what it would be like if you arrived in the Great Court at 4:30 to the following scene:

As you arrive in the Great Court, you munch on your chicken just like old times (the element of surprise is key to an effective presentation). Then, just when the speakers are due to be introduced, the sky darkens, and the Court begins to fill with water (I never said this would be easy)!

Projectors hidden among the bushes around the court spring to life, and a loudspeaker atop the Hancock Tower begins to blare.

"You should look at as many of the sites of the Picnic as you can, live up to the standards expected of you, and address the anxious crowd."

"Welcome aboard."

The veteran rowers up front snicker unexplainedly.

"You are traveling third class for now, but have no fear, it will get better. And you will have a wonderful view for a week while we are on our way to the battle. It's hard work, but the knowledge that you are supporting the greatest navy in the world should fill you with the pride to weather the storm."

"There, doesn't that seem devilishly more efficient than ten minutes of President Paul Graly?"

"In the court then dancers, and the sun emerges. Particleboard partitions, coming from the ground through the walls of Muck, can be heard walking through the trees. You are soon convinced, through the gaggle of the group, that you are standing in the inner office of an adoption agency. A slight blonde adoption counselor with a too much makeup is asking you about your application to adopt a seven-year-old child."

"You should look at as many of the children as you have time for," he tells you. "They're all special, and different and not every child would get along with every parent."

"On top of that, not every parent would be happy with every child. Either one can win an adoption, although sometimes the children want to be adopted so badly it's hard to turn them down. It's a job to be sure that the children will be happy with their new parents and that the parents make a rational and calm choice about which child they want."

"Oh, by the way, I'd like your decision in 36 hours."

As you try to regain your composure, the partitions are lowered and the Murak shuts off. And we have saved the IFC Chairman the trouble of addressing the uninvited throng.

Meanwhile, a large fissure opens up near the Brass Banjo in the rear of the Court and a wave sweeps the gentry across the steps of Building 10. The sky lights up in a topwestern sundown and a coyote howls from the window of a Chemistry lab.

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Just as you begin to believe that you are at the entrance to a vast cave in the New Mexican desert, a veteran spelunker steps up to brief you on the adventure on which you are about to embark. He is a tall, shaggy figure with a golden tan and the sort of magnetic charm which comes from having beaten nature at its own game.

"You want to know how to get through, huh?" You nod, open-mouthed.

"Well, there's a long stretch that's marked and it's pretty safe if you stick to the trail. It's tough going at times, but you'll probably end up not too far from where you started."

"It's also a great waste."

"The real wonders in this cave are off the marked path and you'll have to explore on your own to find them. You might fall into a ditch, and you might get lost and we'll never hear from you again, but if you've got the courage and the energy to brave it, you'll really be able to make the most of the adventure."

"If you do chance it, though, be careful. Sometimes you won't realize you've left the trail till it's too late. And if you decide to chance it, you might emerge an awful long way from where you started."

Suddenly, the coyote shuts up, the guide is swallowed up by the closing mouth of the cavern, and the sky brightens again. Three hundred fraternity men run from the bushes, and Rush Week returns to its traditional agenda.

But which speaker did the final game replace? It wasn't the Director of Admissions, telling you where you come from. Or the Undergraduate Association President telling you where you are going. Or the R/O Coordinator telling you how to get there. Or even the Dean for Student Affairs telling you where to go if you lose your way. No, as a matter of fact, the speaker didn't replace any speaker at all — at least, I haven't received any indication that my wisdom upon the incoming class. He was merely rambled about facts, let's see, he, er, you can only learn by experience. After all, getting there is half the fun.

So fear ye not, traditionalists. The Picnic will still have its share of talking heads next year. And I'll be there too, dreaming of New Mexico.