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Dear Colleague:

It was only in the nineteenth century that members of the European upper class began to tower over the poor in height. A well-nourished young man from Eton, trained in pugilistic art and armed with a stout walking stick, was not likely to enter a poor neighborhood in fear, because its inhabitants would have seemed to him runts who would be routed in any one-to-one combat. Victorian reformers planning a charity drive could therefore count on sympathy when they showed pictures of urchins with begging bowls and men bent over from the effect of rickets. A great achievement in the twentieth century is that even people near the bottom of the social ladder have enough to eat. Height differential between rich and poor has largely disappeared. A Princeton man cannot hope to have the upperhand over an inner-city assailant even in a one-to-one fist fight. Indeed, the well-off in America now have a new image of the badly-off--that its members are obese (female) and muscular (male). Posters of such figures would only arouse anger and fear rather than compassion. (See "Health and Wealth," Daedalus, Fall 1994).

Obesity used to be a symbol of wealth and social status. Now that even the poor can be obese, it no longer has prestige--indeed, quite the contrary. Ralph Lauren polo shirts and BMWs used to be a symbol of wealth and social status. Now that even teenaged drug-traffickers can afford them, they have lost much of their former sheen. So what remains? And what will remain as a status symbol well into the next millennium? Answer: an education that requires the prolonged and rigorous training of the mind. To have social standing, one must be--or at least appear to be--a nerd. Indeed, the future is already here: a recent study sponsored by Madison Avenue shows that a Harvard Nobel-laureate in chemistry and a famous writer can sell hardware more effectively than can either a rock star or a professional athlete.

In the sixteenth century, English aristocrats finally realized that they could no longer count on brawn (their warrior ethos) for power and prestige. Their method of adapting to the times and to the future was to send their sons to school--to Harrow and Eton, Oxford and Cambridge, which up to that time were attended primarily by poor scholars. The aristocrats knew that the subjects taught there (Latin, Greek, theology, etc.) were both alien to their own tradition and pretty useless for practical affairs. Wisely, they also knew that these subjects did offer one thing--difficulty. Confronting and overcoming that intellectual difficulty would prepare the mind and indeed character to live in a world that was increasingly complex, a product of deliberative thought sustained over the centuries. Is there a lesson here for us?

Best wishes,

