

# THE DEATH OF THE MALE SINGLES DORM

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ELLIOTT THINKSHEETS

309 L. Eliz. Dr., Craigville, MA 02636

Phone 617.775.8008

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If you find offensive even the very title of this Thinksheet, I shall be proud of you for enduring to the end thereof. Something unexpected, & good, might just happen to you....I've just gotten home from my 70th-birthday week-end in NYC, where I'd these contrasting experiences: (1) an overnight in a dormless seminary (so I could work both days), and (2) two overnights among friends, who threw a surprise party for me, bringing together friends unseen for many years. During my devotions this morning, that weekend came together with this 22nd-birthday entry, 1940 diary: "c.6 hours theology talk with Francis & Fritz" (after teaching my adult class of some 70, more than  $\frac{1}{2}$  of them illiterates, in a Louisville KY church).\* Said Francis a few days ago when I called to his memory the fact that we'd spent so much time in that male singles dorm talking "theology" (ie, life *sub specie aeternitatis*, under the aspect of eternity, ie viewed theocentrically), "Those conversations meant as much to me as my courses--if not more." For those of us who did no dating during the schoolyear, that dorm was a Protestant monastery (except that we monks were talking all the time we weren't studying or at worship--daily chapel + many group prayer-meetings weekly)....In a contiguous dormitory, some of our fellowstudents were doing a lot of talking, too, but to theological illiterates, viz, their wives. No disparagement of their wives, who weren't permitted to take courses in the all-male seminary (though they could in the adjacent "Women's Missionary Training School," which turned out mostly DCEs, directors of Christian education). But even if those wives were not theologically illiterate in the absolute sense, they had two disadvantages, as theological-conversational partners, in comparison with the residents of the male singles dorm: (1) They'd had no professional training in theology; and (2) They were not having, day by day, the in-course & student-associative experiences their husbands were having....Things were even worse (from the standpoint of theological conversation), in the dorm even farther removed from us than was that married students dorm. In that far (out) dorm, still other of our fellowstudents were dissipating their talk-time on wives + children (the latter, near-absolute theological illiterates, even though Luther says nobody can prove they don't believe in God). ....So there you have the four possible housing-situations for theological students: (1) On your own, the seminary providing no housing (as NYTS, which is completely nonresidential); (2) Only you (ie, no wives & children)--the standard pattern across the Christian centuries; (3) Only you & your wife; & (4) Your whole family. From the angle of potential for spiritual-intellectual formation by theological conversation, we must rate these thus: (1), worst; (2), best; (3) next to best; (4) next to worst....I should mention my two other experiences of males singles dorms: being headmaster of such a college dorm, when teaching religion & philosophy; & being headmaster of such a seminary dorm, when teaching New Testament....Another factor making (2) best: you have more time for talk with professors--after class sessions, on campus, & in their offices. Now for the pensive reflections:

1. Everybody's a distinct breed who comes from a distinct life-context. I am of the male-singles-dorm breed, which means I have trouble understanding people whose souls were otherwise shaped--& they, me. See on me, & I'll see on you (if your soul does not have the male-singles-dorm shape), this invisible sign: "Fragile! Handle with care. This package has an odd shape." (We're all vulnerable, & even also all wounded.)

2. From the viewpoint of style (2), the commonest in the history of our religion, student theological conversation during professor-time is a form of pollution. The responsible professor would say something like "Not on MY time you don't!" Then he (sic) would stay after class as long as the students wanted to talk with him &, in his presence, each other. Teaching at NYTS--style (1)--I had to incorporate student conversation into the class sessions, for that's the only talk-time students in a nonresidential seminary have. It's a sad trade-off. It's a radically different world, worse as well as better. Let not the gains be proud against the losses.

\*Entry next day, 5Feb40: "Much talk....Excellent for spiritual & intellectual growth."