HONOR COUNCIL TRIAL ABSTRACT -- PLAGIARISM

Mark, a senior History major, was taking a course in American Industrial Development. For his third and final paper for the course, Mark chose to discuss the growth of American industrialism between 1865-1880. The paper was due Tuesday, and Mark had finished his outline by Sunday, when he received a phone call from his older brother Jeff, who lived in St. Louis. The two often communicated, so the phone call did not surprise Mark, although the course the conversation took did. Mark mentioned to his brother that he was writing a paper on American industrial development after the Civil War, and his brother commented that he had just finished a night course on American History after 1865 and that he could give Mark some assistance. Since his brother had received a considerably inferior education, since Jeff was presumed to be "the stupid one in the family", and since "intellectual" topics were never discussed by the siblings, Mark was quite surprised. Yet, he was happy to receive help from his brother. There ensued a two hour conversation in which Mark and Jeff discussed Mark's paper topic and outline and on which Mark took notes, paraphrasing many of Jeff's comments. Jeff also sent his notes from the course to Mark. They arrived by express mail on Monday, but Mark had already finished the paper. He reviewed the notes, made no alterations in his paper, and handed it in on Tuesday.

Mark's history professor was very impressed with the paper, especially with Mark's analysis of the Reconstruction era. The professor, in fact, was so impressed that he suspected that something was amiss, and his subsequent investigation confirmed his initial misgivings. The paper was a "running paraphrase" of a well-known article from a famous volume containing a series of articles on U.S. economic development. Particular phrases and passages from the text had been incorporated into the paper in slightly altered form, without any documentation. The paper contained oblique and esoteric references with which even a senior history major would have been unfamiliar, but which were mentioned within the text of the article. Finally, the professor could perceive a parallel progression of ideas and themes within both the paper and the article.

Mark's professor confronted Mark with this evidence, and with the volume itself, which Mark had never seen. Mark admitted having the conversation with his brother, from whom the central theme of the paper (the interpretation) was derived. Upon reflection, Mark realized that his brother had to have been reading directly from the text in question during the phone conversation. Mark called his brother, who confirmed his possession of the volume and its importance in the course he'd just finished. Thus, Mark, realizing that he had committed plagiarism by not documenting his conversation with his brother, and by not investigating the sources of his brother's information (neither Jeff's notes nor the first conversation had alluded to the book), agreed to bring the matter before Honor Council. Professor and student also agreed on a tentative resolution -- failure of the course -- contingent upon approval by the Honor
Council jury.

After a look at the Honor Code definition of plagiarism, the jury, in agreement with Mark and his Professor, agreed that a violation had indeed occurred, and moved on to the circumstances portion of the trial, most of which was spent attempting to unravel this bizarre chain of events. The major questions posed by the jury included: why didn't Mark footnote the phone conversation; in the midst of the conversation, did Mark ever consider that Jeff was reading directly from a text; how could Mark represent his conversation with his brother as an equal, 50/50 exchange when every major point in his paper came from the article, and thus, must have been suggested by his brother? The major question, in other words, was: did Mark realize whether he was committing plagiarism when he handed in his paper? Most jurors believed Mark when he said that he had not thought he had plagiarized, that he had regarded his phone conversation with his brother as an equal exchange, and that his violation was due more to carelessness and stupidity than to a premeditated desire to cheat. Other jurors, however, believed it improbable and unacceptable that a senior History major, a student with ample experience in the field of research writing, could misrepresent information received completely from undocumented outside sources as his own and as the product of an equal exchange of information and knowledge.

Ultimately, suggestions for resolutions included: an acceptance of Mark's resolution; a delay of Mark's receipt of his diploma of six months; a resolution that he provide some community service in the form of warning other students of the intricacies and technicalities of plagiarism through supervised work with the History and English departments. Those who supported a more severe resolution focused on the Honor Council's responsibility in upholding the judicial standards and the academic integrity of the community and on the improbability that Mark could remain completely unaware that he was plagiarizing. Those who supported Mark's resolution argued that failure in the course would have deleterious effects on Mark's future, given his desire to pursue a career in historical research, and that withholding his diploma would have greater effects than were merited by carelessness and stupidity. The crux of the impasse ultimately rested on the belief of some jurors, after a careful rigorous study of the paper and the article, that Mark could have reached such a close approximation to the text only by copying the text himself. Thus, these jurors required tangible evidence that any conversation had indeed occurred. Such tangible evidence was secured by the acquisition of the postal receipt from Haverford Central Receiving that proved that Jeff had indeed sent his notes to Mark on the appropriate day, an action that within the context of Mark's story could have only followed the alleged phone conversation. Thus, the jury reached unanimous consensus on the following resolution: Mark would fail the History course, and would also be required to submit a letter that would be printed in the Honor Council memorandum and that would be used to illuminate the issue of plagiarism for incoming freshmen.