**Transcript of John Greene’s “An Open Letter to Students Returning to School”**

**Classical Oration Structure**

Good morning, it's Tuesday!

Today I'd like to deliver an open letter to students returning to school.

Dear Students returning to school, not to speed your re-entry into formal education with a pop quiz, or anything, but in what year do you think primary education became mandatory for all American children?

1918. Germany had primary compulsory education from the late 18th century in Japan thanks to the reforms by 1900 90% of Japanese kids were in school. In England it happened around 1880, but regardless of where you live, primary education became a requirement sometime after 1775. That probably seems like a long time ago to you, but if you look at, like, human history since the agricultural revolution, the entire period of time that has featured compulsory education anywhere in the world looks like this. You'll also note that this 250 year period has been a pretty good run for humans featuring, you know, steam engines, the internet, antibiotics, skyscrapers a stunning increase in life expectancy, home pizza delivery, water purification plants, and landing a freaking mini cooper on mars.

Needless to say this is not a coincidence. Take for example Adam Steltzner, the lead engineer on the Curiosity Rover's Decent and Landing Team. He went to a publicly funded high school before getting both his bachelors degree and his doctorate from publicly subsidized universities. So let me ask you a question students about to return to school: How fracking psyched are you for the end of summer? How psyched are you to have the opportunity to learn about the universe and its inhabitants for several hours a day at no cost to you? The answer of course is that if you're anything like I was you're not psyched at all, I mean, A.) you might be a bit of a social outcast, I know I was, I never really learned how to shave and that's fine now but back then when I had the Sony my first mustache it was just a disaster.

And B.) you may often feel like your studies are mind numbing instead of mind stimulating. Like, who wants to read The Taming of the Shrew, you basically have to translate it from Shakespeare into English, which is ridiculous because there's already an excellent filmic translation available in the form of 10 Things I Hate About You.

So, if you're anything like me, you're going to spend a lot of time whining that 1.) none of this will ever be useful in your real life and 2.) your teachers are stupid, and 3.) math is really hard, and you'll never understand it, ditto physics, history is boring, French is just an endless series of je ne sais pas, literature is an impossible hunt for symbols, and physical education is an oxymoron.

Well here's the thing, when you watch the Curiosity rover land it is far more moving and exciting if you understand the physics, and the math, and the history behind that moment. French is useful because the French do speak English but they pretend not to, and it's not only literature that's symbolic, all communication among people is symbolic, as is consciousness itself, and physical education is not an oxymoron because your body is not born knowing how to do this .

But yes, your teachers may be stupid. So are you, so am I, so are everyone. Except Neil DeGrasse Tyson. The whole pleasure in being a human is in being stupid but learning to be less stupid together.

But more important than all of that you need to remember that school is not about you. School doesn't exist for your benefit or for the benefit of your parents. Schools exist for the benefit of me. The reason I pay taxes for schools even though I don't have a kid in school is that I am better off in a well-educated world. Public education isn't a charity project; I pay for your schools because I want you to grow up and make my life better. I want you to make me beautiful books that will bring me pleasure and consolation. I want you to make me cooler cars for me to drive, and drugs so that I can live a longer, healthier life. I'm paying for you education in the hopes that you will invent a microwave pizza with actually crispy crust and that you'll spread the availability of the internet so I can get more YouTube views in Zambia.

Your education isn't just about you, your nation is making an investment in you because they believe that you are worth it. So the next that you're like half asleep fantasizing about being a kid chosen for a special mission or wizard school, or whatever, please remember something: you are special, and you've chosen for a special mission that was denied to 99.9% of all humans ever. We need you, we believe in you, and we're counting on you.

Best wishes,

John Green