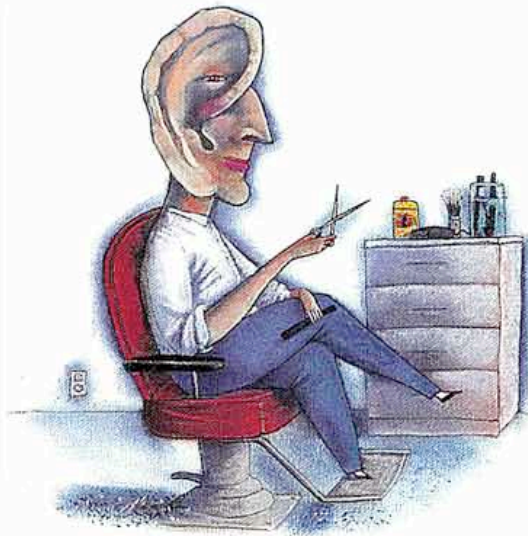


# Lou the Barber



Clipping away on brainy heads in Harvard Square gives one a unique perspective on some of the notable IQs of our time.

By Margo Howard

**D**ELILAH... MR. KENNETH... CRISTOPHE—these are just a few of those made famous by their hair-cutting skills. Let us now add to the list Lou the Barber, from Brattle Street. Hairdresser to the stars, if you will, but a thinking man's stars.

Notables like Robert Reich, Michael Dukakis, and John Kenneth Galbraith periodically meander into the Custom Barber Shop, all cuts \$9, to sit in the first chair, Lou Feneris's chair. (The name is Greek, he explains, or maybe Turkish.)

Lou states that men definitely confide in their barbers the same way women do with their hairdressers. "I hear everything. *Everything*," he says. "Even gay men telling me about their lovers and their love affairs. I've gotten a serious education in Harvard Square."

Though Lou, who is 32 years old, admits he sometimes feels like a therapist with scissors, he says his days are mostly

gossip and good times. "Bob Reich was in my chair the other day," he reports. "He's been my customer for about 11 years. He's a great guy."

"Does Reich like Washington?" I inquire.

"I'll let you ask him that, you know? He misses Harvard Square. He's a Harvard Square person, and I think he misses academia. It's tough down there. He's working 18, 19 hours a day, where here he had it pretty easy—well, maybe not pretty easy, but he'd go teach his class, every once in a while give a seminar, and he had it easy. He said to me in May that he's really looking forward to coming back to Harvard Square, and hopefully it will be soon—within the next couple of years."

Lou calls Reich "Bob," and Dukakis "Mike" or "Governor," but he addresses Ken Galbraith as "Professor." "He's a terrific guy," he says of Galbraith. "And funny. One day, Professor Galbraith came in a half hour after Reich left, so I said to him, 'I heard you were at the same party' (Continued on page 144)

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with Bob Reich last night.' He says, 'Well, I must have overlooked him.' Just like that, you know? Without even thinking he makes the joke."

I ask Lou if Dukakis is different in his chair than he is in public. "Yes. He is much—he's a very nice person."

"You don't think he came across well in public?" I ask.

"Well, I sort of blame myself. It was August, right after the Republican convention, and he came in for a haircut. The week I cut his hair he fell 10 points in the polls." And then he laughs at his own joke, as well as at his connection to a then potential president.

Lou absolutely loves what he does. "I'm the type of person who gets involved with my customers. I get emotional. There was a gentleman who was spending three months at the Business School, a very successful man in his fifties. And he lost his son last year in a car accident. And jeez, you know, we both ended up crying as he was telling me about it."

**L**OU MAKES HOSPITAL VISITS TO SICK clients, he gets postcards from the traveling ones, and acts as a message center. Friends, parents, and associates of regular customers know they can always get word to someone through Lou.

"Some people tell me I get too involved with my customers, but I want to be like that because I enjoy it. It's part of my business and part of my life. I was brought up that way."

Lou thinks it unfortunate that many barbers don't care about the people in their chairs. "That kills the trade," he says. "If you notice, every day there's a barbershop closing down. It's a pity to see the way some people act toward their clients—like they're doing them a favor."

Although barbering is a tradition in his family, Lou had not planned to follow in those footsteps. In fact, he began studying electrical engineering and worked at testing personal computer boards. When he was laid off in the early eighties, his dad and uncle—both barbers—suggested he join their ranks. "Why don't you try this?" they told me. "If you like it, you can go to school for seven months and go from there. You'll always have a job and you'll live a comfortable life—if you work 70 hours a week." And that's how Lou first came to the Square at the age of 21.

Although there aren't any particular trends in hairstyles for Harvard Square men, Lou will be shaving the heads of the Harvard football team this fall. "The new captain shaves his head," he explains. "He thinks it will psych them up."

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Lou has no trouble singling out the most memorable haircut of his career. There is not a moment's hesitation. "It was on a woman who came in only once. And she says to me, 'Shave my head.' I said, 'Shave your head?' She had long hair down to her shoulders, you know?"

"So I get the long clippers—I cut it off first with the long clippers—then I start going with the fine clippers. That takes it real close. Well, I take off one piece of her hair and I see a tattoo. I take the rest off and I see another tattoo. Her *whole head* was tattooed. It was a city!"

"Did you say a city?" I ask. "Like a map?"

"No, just a city," he says. "Like the Boston skyline. And there were little fish going in and out of the windows. We all—I mean, it was just so hard to keep from laughing. But it was excellent artwork."

*It's Lou's considered opinion that Dan Quayle bleached his sideburns to achieve cosmetic maturity.*

**I**N TALKING WITH LOU YOU GET THE BENEFIT of an expert's practiced eye when it comes to the question, Does he or doesn't he? While almost anybody could see that Ronald Reagan was "prematurely orange," in Gerald Ford's wonderful phrase, it was less well known that George Bush was monkeying with Mother Nature, too. Lou says he watched with interest as President Bush's hair appeared alternately whiter and darker. Furthermore, it's his considered opinion that Dan Quayle was bleaching his sideburns white to achieve at least cosmetic maturity.

Does Lou ever contemplate changing careers? "I'd really have to be rich not to do this. I think I will do this for the rest of my life. It's just that... I'm attached."

The ultimate compliment for someone in Lou's line of work is to have clients say they will follow you anywhere. Well, Lou's clients will get the chance, because on August 16 Lou will open his own barbershop, at 712 Commonwealth Avenue. He is moving to the area of BU, no less. Even though he says that "Harvard Square has got to be the best place in the world to work," he has long wanted his own business, and he will still have a large student clientele.

When Lou makes the move, it will no doubt be a bittersweet leave-taking for this fixture of Brattle Street. It will also probably be a bad hair day for some of the men in Harvard Square. □