

PROF. BARON PERLMAN'S FALL '03 CONVOCATION PRESENTATION

I want to welcome everyone to this "convocation" (this getting together) this fall. I am pleased to see students, faculty, and administrators gathering for a celebration of the University Honors Program.

I have been asked to make some brief remarks and will follow my instructions with spirit and diligence. My remarks are primarily directed to the students here, but I hope they resonate with everyone. So if you will bear with me for a few minutes I would like to talk about education and learning, more specifically undergraduate education, and even more specifically an Honors Undergraduate Education at UW Oshkosh. There is a classic Doonsbury cartoon of a University President giving a spring graduation address in which he points out all of the advantages and opportunities the graduates have experienced in their education - with one student turning to another and stating "I never knew that." So hopefully you will know some of what the Honors Program offers and have taken advantage of that knowing. Today I emphasize being more active in your education, and the value and rewards of connections and relationships.

The University Honors Program is for our most serious students. Do not let that scare you. As part of undergraduate education, and more specifically a liberal arts one, the goal is a well-rounded individual. So you can be serious about education and still have fun. I certainly did when I attended Lawrence University years ago, an education similar to the Honors education we offer here.

As our most serious students you have earned the right to be in the Honors Program. It is an opportunity worthy of your attention--an opportunity to be seized. And this is what I will discuss. I want to focus on two such opportunities: (1) the asking of questions, and (2) relationships and a sense of belonging and community.

The Asking of Questions as a Worthy Risk

The Honors Program is about students who can think and solve problems, who can integrate information from a variety of disciplines and their life experiences, and who can ask good questions and take risks. You will forget many of the facts you learn during your education. I think the research shows up to 70% of the facts you learn will be forgotten within 2 years of graduating (although I cannot find the source nor cite the authors of this research, so the data may be apocryphal). Nonetheless, the Honors Program allows you to use the content of your courses to grow intellectually and personally. Let me explain.

Honors courses are small, 25 students at a maximum. Their small size allows faculty to reach out to students in the classroom and use out-of-classroom assignments in ways almost impossible in larger courses. The student's responsibility, as I see it, is to learn to take risks, the goal being to become truly educated. And one way to take risks, and I urge you all to follow through in the next week or two in one of your Honors courses, is the asking of questions. Faculty love questions. I know I live for

them. It is the good question that forces me to stop, to think, to see my discipline and material in a new light, and to get excited once again about what I teach. A good question is often more valuable than any answer can be.

There are many types of questions, not merely the penetrating intellectual one, and all are valuable; all will help you mature and polish your professional, intellectual, and social skills, and all are to be used.

Let me say from the outset that it is appropriate that students ask questions. Faculty teach students, not subject matter per se. You are our reason for being in higher education. If any faculty ever takes exception to your asking of questions you need to know those facial expressions or statements belong to the faculty member: you are being appropriate. Interchange is what we are all about. Ask away. Obviously, I am urging students to be less passive, and at the same time giving you permission, or at least the idea, that questioning needs a more central place in your education, especially in courses small enough in enrollment that they should be expected by your teachers.

The Simple Process Question

The simplest form of question is one that is incredibly valuable to students and teachers alike, but is seldom asked. This question is one such as, "Can you say that again, I did not quite understand?" or "Is that a new point or are we still on point # 2?" or "Can you give an example to clarify?"

What is to be gained? Students, I know, often assume that they are the only one who do not understand, that asking such a question will make them look "stupid" in front of their peers, and have terrible fantasies of how the faculty will react. But what a great type of question. The student is becoming an active participant in his or her education, demonstrating that he or she is attending and awake (!), and practicing and polishing professional interpersonal skills in at least two ways. If you are at all shy, anxious (social anxiety is the most common form of anxiety disorder), or other-oriented, such questions help you grow and mature, take charge a bit more if you will. And secondly, you learn how to phrase a question. For example, you want the teacher on your side, not defensive. So you ask, "I don't know if it is me this morning but I did not understand that point," putting the responsibility on you (teachers love students who take responsibility for their behavior). Or you say, "I'm trying to apply what you are saying to my own life and experiences, do you have an example of what you were just talking about?" The outcome is that you get used to talking in public and you actively work to make your education higher quality and more relevant.

The Intellectual Question

A second form of question springs from the world of ideas. It can be one such as "In my sociology course the instructor told us this, and now you are telling us that. How do you reconcile the two, don't they conflict?" Or "The text provides 5 different explanations for someone being depressed. Which do you think has the most power

and which do you like the least?" Of course the instructor may ask you for your opinion first, fair game in academe, but what the heck. You need to learn about yourself and you need to learn about others' views of the world.

The asking of intellectual questions need not be difficult and need not be esoteric. You simply need to be interested in your life, and the world around you. Let me give you an example of a great question, one I had never pondered, simply conceived. In teaching abnormal psychology I emphasize what are called the Personality Disorders. These are a form of pathology with long-standing patterns of thought, behavior, feelings, and worldviews that become rigid, and reduce the resiliency and appropriateness of how someone lives. The antisocial personality, which students are well versed with through the Silence of the Lambs, other movies, television and the like would be one example. But most antisocial personality disorders are not serial killers or evil, they thrive in industry, the military and politics. Another form of personality disorder is the narcissist: "My command is your wish." Self centered, selfish, and shallow. The professional athlete comes to mind.

A student in class raised her hand and asked: "Can someone be a successful politician in our country and not be a personality disorder?" Wow, there went the rest of that class period, all of my ideas and notes paled in comparison to the doors that question opened. I still chew on that question several years later. I think the answer is "no." With rare exception successful politicians are personality disorders. They are pathological. Of course what that means for the nation, our politics and so forth is deep, dark, and delightful for me as a clinical psychologist to consider.

The Personal Question of a Faculty Member or Fellow Student

Anyone who has studied science, or the arts or humanities knows that it is difficult, if not impossible, to separate the person from the idea. A third type of question you should consider asking involves the person. A famous study in psychology is Milgram's research on "Blind Obedience" and the social dimensions so easily put in place that allow people to knowingly harm others simply because they are asked by an authority figure to do so. The larger question is how being asked to hurt someone for the sake of research differs from being asked to do so by a member of the state, such as the President of our country. The answer is that there is no difference at all. I lecture passionately on Milgram's research. I served in Viet Nam, there are over 58,000 names of those who died etched on the memorial in Washington, DC, and there was no attack on US ships in the Gulf of Tonkin. The reason presented to the United States' Congress for increased engagement was a lie. You need to ask me about that! You need to ask your women faculty or faculty of color about how their gender and experiences influence or bring insight to what is being discussed in class. You need to ask you faculty how who they are and what they have experienced in life contributes to their understanding of "X", "Y" or "Z." You need to ask those questions of your fellow students in class as well during discussions.

And once you ask, equally or more importantly, you need to listen to their answers, and follow up with more questions that allow you to clarify and truly understand.

How Do You Know You Are Taking a Risk in Asking Questions

If you begin to grow intellectually you will begin to feel a loss of innocence or naiveté about certainty, and feel an inner press to take risks. Stephen Brookfield in his book, *Becoming a Critically Reflective Teacher* calls this the Road Runner phenomenon and it is a wonderful metaphor for students attempting to learn how to value and go about their education. In the classic Road Runner cartoons the Road Runner is chased by Wile E. Coyote, who never catches his nemesis. Typically the Coyote, despite his best entrepreneurial and creative efforts, and the best efforts of the Product Research Division of the ACME Company, ends up running, walking, or shooting himself out of a cannon and over a cliff. And he hangs there in mid air but does not fall. No, he does not fall until he realizes he is in mid-air--and only then--he plummets to earth. That moment of knowing one is in mid-air is the moment you have begun your growth as an Honors student. The moment you begin to realize that what you assumed to be true about yourself and your education may not be totally true, that there are alternate ways, that you are unsure about how teachers and your peers perceive your best efforts, that your best efforts may need to be changed, that you can experiment with being a student... these and a host of other moments mark your end of innocence and your beginning intellectual and personal development.

What I am arguing is that the time passes quickly and that you have to seize the moment, risky as that may be. How quickly does time pass? The Buddhists have the metaphor that all of a man's lifetime is four breaths. I think they are correct. I am on the end of my third breath; I do not know where the time has gone; I have one breath left. So when you find yourself going "Did I really ask or say that?" or "Did I really do that?" in reference to something you asked or contributed in class, then you are growing intellectually and personally. But you have to jump off the cliff first, and know you did it. And you need to begin soon: time is short.

A Sense of Community and Relationships

Asking questions is one way to create and take part in connections with others. Life is really all about people. We have needs to belong and to feel accepted. The Honors Program offers such important opportunities but only if, again, you take the risk. For example, for those of you here who are first semester students, and live on campus, I recommend that you not go home for 6 or 7 weeks! Why? Well, because you need to learn you can separate from home and that old group of friends. You need to learn that a bit of homesickness won't kill you. You need to learn that there are a lot of things to do on campus if you only explore them. You need to learn that by hitting the books over the weekend when friends head home you will do better academically. You need to grow up and not be afraid of doing so! Connecting with UW Oshkosh and the Honors Program, and the people you meet here brings rewards.

Your Honors courses as I have noted are small, and you will see many of the same students again and again. Why not introduce yourself? Why not connect here? I know that the Honors Program now has a lounge where students can hang out. So go hang out. I cannot overstate the importance of a sense of community of knowing those

around you, being comfortable with them, feeling a sense of support and common purpose all provide meaning to your education and your time at UWO.

The process and issue of relationships also extends to your faculty. Many faculty are extremely busy, I know I am. But if I put you in my schedule book you are important to me. Just as in the asking of questions, any faculty who rebuffs your efforts to spend a bit of time with him or her is behaving reprehensively. UW Oshkosh and especially the Honors Program rivals the smallest of liberal arts colleges if you will take the time and risk to connect with faculty. Anyway, I spend too much time in my office. Get me out of there. Many faculty work in academe to be around young people, to see you grow and mature, and to give you an education and sense of connection that they hope their own children receive when they themselves attend college. Stop by faculty offices, say hello, and develop relationships. Take the risk.

What is your metaphor of faculty? If you think seriously about how you conceive of a faculty member, you would want to spend more time outside of class with him or her. Perhaps we are experts? Experts can be interesting to talk to. Or are we gurus helping students to learn and grow? Why not spend time with Yoda to learn more about the world and yourself? Or do you see faculty as tour guides? Students taking educational journeys can be very active educational tourists. Or do you see faculty as player-coaches, bartender or directors of a play. A good metaphor is faculty as gardeners. We plant seeds (ideas), cultivate and enrich the soil, and tend to our plants (students). Come talk to us about what you need to thrive in an educational garden.

We need to get together and to get to know each other. We can do that in class involving coursework but in other venues as well. For example, I know that the Honors Program strives to provide forums, which allow for the interchange of ideas. The University Honors Student Association is a student group that plans intellectual and cultural activities. I urge you to become involved. Many utopias and communes valued the arts as the Honors Program does - the arts, another way to get together, another set of ideas to discuss and make sense of. Part of the sense of community can be built around the community's orchestra, artistic endeavors, poetry, theatrical productions and the like--all of which you will find at UW Oshkosh.

Conclusion

I need to emphasize that I in no way have exhausted the value and opportunities inherent in the Honors Program. The asking of questions and a sense of relationship are but two of many worlds awaiting you. Had I more time I would talk about service learning and making a positive difference in the world, stretching oneself intellectually with a senior Honors Thesis, or leaning about new cultures in the United States and beyond, and the value of leaving campus.

By being here you have demonstrated that you know that time and energy spent on your education is an obligation well met. You have already reached the conclusion that talking about one's education is important. Even so simple a procedure as asking faculty to repeat something in a lecture is grounded in listening to one's inner voice

and commitment to becoming educated, and is an approach to being a student that reflects thoughtfulness and humility. Attending to one's education can be frustrating but it is enormously rewarding, and results in good feelings.

I hope that something I said and that occurs today encourages you to think about your education in a new light, and to discuss these ideas with others. I hope that you will ask me questions and connect with me either as a student in my Honors Introductory Psychology course or simply as one member of the academic community reaching out to another. The opportunity to share and learn from peers and faculty, and the sense of community that results, will sustain us in the complicated art and craft we call teaching and becoming educated.