

SUSAN MCFADDEN'S FALL '04 CONVOCATION PRESENTATION

Spaces, Times, and Relationships: What You Will Remember from Your Years at UW Oshkosh

I am delighted to be here at the second annual Honors convocation and I am very grateful to Dr. Roberta Maguire for initiating these convocations and for inviting me to speak.

To those of you who are new to UW Oshkosh this semester, I say welcome to an exciting learning community where I am confident you'll be challenged and surprised by what you learn. Some of you are returning this year, having attended the first annual Honors convocation where you heard Dr. Perlman talk about asking good questions. I hope you asked many good questions last year and are prepared to ask even more this year.

This afternoon, I would like to invite you on an imaginary trip in McFadden's time machine. My area of research and scholarship focuses on aging and older people and therefore I'm always traveling forward and backward in time. For example, when I speak with an 80-year-old, I think about all that person has experienced in that span of living; when I talk with my 20-something students, I often ask them to think ahead into the future when they will be middle aged and then older adults.

In my classes on aging, my students and I talk about what the world will look like in the year 2030. The reason we select that year is because for about the last quarter century, it has been the demographers' touchstone: the year when people in the leading edge of the baby boom cohort are in their 80s and when those born in the latter years of the baby boom reach their mid-60s and retirement age. As you know, this demographic revolution will produce profound social challenges for all of us--regardless of age.

So, how old will you be in 2030? If you are 18 now, you will be 44 in 2030! Imagine that! I'm not here today to talk about all the responsibilities you'll bear and the challenges you'll face in making a good and just world for all people. Rather, I want you to travel in my time machine and consider what you will remember about UW Oshkosh in the year 2030.

I'd like to suggest that if you adopt a particular emotional orientation and a particular cognitive habit, then you will remember spaces, times, and relationships.

I hope there are no professors in this room thinking, "but won't they also remember what I teach them?" Of course, I hope you remember what you learn in your classes, but I want to argue that the best way for you to remember the formal aspect of your college education--that is the content of your courses--is for you to see how that content is connected with spaces, times, and relationships.

Before I give you some examples of those spaces, times, and relationships, I want to say a bit more about that emotional orientation and cognitive habit I just mentioned.

The emotion is INTEREST and the cognitive habit is CURIOSITY. I hope you can see how they are interconnected.

It may surprise you to think about interest as an emotion, and yet many psychologists who study emotion include it in a list that includes more familiar ones like joy, sadness, anger, and fear. Think about it for a moment; interest is a feeling. Even before you think about something that interests you, you are drawn toward it by that emotion. It's an "approach emotion." You want to find out more.

Once your feeling of interest orients you toward a person, place, object, or idea, then the cognitive habit of curiosity comes in to play. I call curiosity a habit, and yet psychologists believe that in children and even many species of animals, curiosity is a basic form of motivation. But, have you ever met a person who has not cultivated the habit of curiosity? They never ask questions about things. They never want to delve further into finding out more about something, often because sadly, very little seems to interest them.

See how these two are connected? Though all children are curious (or else they'd never learn very much about the world), I believe some forms of education, some religious systems, and some family organizations discourage curiosity because of the fear that it might lead to ideas and information that threaten particular world views. I dearly hope that none of you today has had your curiosity squelched and your feelings of interest undermined by the great cultural cop-out: whatever....

So, assuming that you are intimately acquainted with the joy of being interested in and curious about many things, let's think about how the spaces, times, and relationships of UW Oshkosh today are going to be important to you in 2030.

Let's begin with spaces. What spaces do you think you'll recall and why? I hope you'll remember a number of different spaces associated with your major. I know our psychology majors remember Clow 48, the psychology lab, because that's where they spend a huge amount of time, particularly in one required course. Art and music majors will remember the studios and practice rooms in the A/C building; science majors will remember the labs of Halsey. What spaces are important to students who major in history, English, and economics? I don't know, but I do know that Dr. Maguire has made a space for all Honors students in the basement of Polk and I hope that for some of you, that's an important space.

When these spaces associated with your learning come to have meaning, you will be better able to remember what you learned in them. For example, in the year 2030, when you English majors are trying to remember what you learned in Biology 105, try to imagine the lecture hall and lab where you took the course. Psychologists have studied something called "context dependent memory." That means that in the year 2030, you will remember more biology if you take a biology quiz in a Halsey lecture hall than if you take it in your living room. I haven't got any empirical evidence for this--and it would be a great research project for a psych major--but I think that just by imagining the Halsey lecture hall, you'd remember more biology!

Beyond the spaces you'll invest with meaning because of your major or your participation in the Honors Program, I hope you'll remember other locations on campus in the year 2030. For example, get to know the art galleries; go to concerts in the music hall; check out the rocks displayed in Harrington; find a "power spot" in the library where you can spend hours engrossed in your studies. I've been on this campus since 1985 and only this summer realized there are cubicles on the 3rd floor of the library where you can actually get a key to lock up your books and papers so it becomes your personal cubicle. When I was in graduate school, I had a similar spot in the library, only it was actually more a cage! Cage or not, I remember it fondly.

Get off campus and explore the spaces in the region. Check out the Paine Art Museum and its gorgeous gardens; don't graduate from UW Oshkosh without visiting the amazing clock at the Oshkosh [Public] Museum; take walks by the river and get to know the shore of Lake Winnebago. Venture further and visit High Cliff State Park where the cliffs are a part of the Niagra escarpment reaching all the way into New York State and Canada. Go to Milwaukee and get to know the art museum there and the funky shops on Brady Street. For a really weird experience, that won't cost a cent, go to M. Schettl Sales on Highway S west of Oshkosh. I just discovered it this summer and can understand why it's listed on a website of roadsideamerica.com, a guide to offbeat attractions.

You get the idea. Let's move on to time. Have you ever heard of someone having the "time of her life"? What does that mean? Usually when people say that they mean that they are enjoying life; they feel zest for living; they're interested and curious about their surroundings and what they're doing there.

In the year 2030, will you remember that at UW Oshkosh in the early 21st century, you had the "time of your life"?

You have been given a great gift of time--several years to take on the role of student and to range widely in your exploration of ideas. I don't think we honor this role enough in our society. We devalue it by always asking, "so... what are you going to DO with this degree?" as if the role of student has little significance.

Allow me to introduce you to another idea that comes from psychological research on memory. It's called the "reminiscence bump." What this means is that research on middle aged and older adults' memories for events in their lives has shown a huge "bump" in terms of the amount recalled between the ages of 10 and 30. Right now, those of you who are younger than 30 are filing away memories that will be vividly with you the rest of your life. You remember personal things best from ages 10 to 20 and you remember impressions of the world, song lyrics, political events, etc., from the time between age 20 and 30.

As you look back on the year 2004 from the year 2030, what are you going to remember?

We've talked about space and we've talked about time so let's turn now to relationships. What relationships will you remember from 2004 at UW Oshkosh? I hope you will make many friends here, friends for life. One reason that people often do pick up friends for life in the college years is because of sharing those spaces and times [and] because of sharing your interests and the things that activate your curiosity.

By forming a sense of community with other persons, you can nurture relationships. The Honors Program is here to help you do that. You have the marvelous opportunity to make friends with other students in the program who you'll interact with in classes covering different topics. That student who sat next to you in the first year seminar might show up in your Honors English class, and again in your senior capstone course. Perhaps you'll attend events together sponsored by the University Honors Student Association. The Honors Program here at UW Oshkosh does an outstanding job of providing students with diverse opportunities to form relationships. It gives you spaces and times in which to share your interest and curiosity.

In terms of the relationships you'll remember in 2030, obviously, I hope you'll remember your professors! I don't entertain any illusions that you'll remember all your professors, but I hope you remember some and moreover, I hope you'll stay in touch with them. I still connect with one of my professors from my undergraduate years, and I graduated in 1970. I cherish this. On the other hand, I have some students who have stayed in touch with me and this is one of the greatest rewards of being a professor--watching a student grow and mature and move into the adult world. Cultivate these relationships; they're not going to happen automatically.

If you were here last year at the honors convocation, you heard Dr. Perlman invite you to come to his office and talk with him. You don't need to be a psych major; he's happy to talk with any student who demonstrates interest in and curiosity about the world. There are many, many teachers here at UW Oshkosh who feel the same way.

Assuming I'm not "poking up daisies" as my mother would say, in the year 2030, I hope I will hear from at least one of you. I'll be 82 and some of you will be 44. Let's get together and talk about the state of the world, the discoveries in sciences we can't even imagine today, the Broadway play that's just been

produced, the novel that everyone's reading. Let's talk about health care policy for all those aged baby boomers, political developments in Africa, and new ways of educating children.

I began my liberal arts education 38 years ago, and its spaces, times, and relationships nurtured my interest and curiosity. I hope yours will do the same. Just think how dull we'll be at age 44 or 82 without interest and curiosity that ranges over the many disciplines at the heart of a liberal education.

See you in 26 years!