

*Uncomfortable Choices: Making the Honors Program—and
Your Head—a Happy Place to Live*

**UHP 2009 Convocation Keynote Address
September 22, 2009**

**Laurence Carlin
Department of Philosophy
UW Oshkosh**

I want to begin by thanking Dr. Maguire for inviting me to speak here today. I am not sure why she invited *me*, but clearly she does not have access to the grades I earned in my speech communication classes years ago – so I am lucky on that score.

Before we get down to business, I want to begin with a request. I am a bit nervous about my keynote address, so I want to ask that we treat it like a State of the Union address, where you applaud after nearly everything I say. That would help me out a bit.

All joking aside, I am delighted to be here today and I extend an especially hearty welcome to the Honors students. Indeed, at the risk of sounding a bit immodest, I want to welcome the Honors students (both old and new) to an excellent academic program. In addition to the talented and fascinating people who comprise the honors faculty, there is also the extraordinary staff of the UHP: Dr. Maguire, Ms. Julie Russo, and Mr. Adam BellCorelli do an amazing job with all aspects of the

Honors Program, and thanks in large part to their work, I am proud to be affiliated with the University Honors Program.

I hope to convince you, the honors students, that you too should be proud of, and excited about the Honors Program, and even more excited and proud than you may already be. The wonderful work of the faculty and staff at the UHP is ultimately directed at one goal: to enrich the lives of honors students by presenting them with a world of opportunity. And make no mistake about it: you have wonderful opportunities ahead of you. But to make the most of those opportunities, you will need to make good choices. And this brings me to the topic of my talk today: uncomfortable choices.

Students at UW Oshkosh have many choices to make, and most of them are made within a comfort zone. Think about the choices you made today: what to eat, what to wear, which direction to head on your way to classes, whether to risk listening to a philosophy professor who might very well bore you to tears, etc. Usually, these are trivial and inconsequential decisions, and we are comfortable making them because they involve little or no risk, no uncertainty.

Of course, during their college career, students will make more momentous choices: they will choose classes, friends, a major, extracurricular activities, how to spend their free time, and many others.

These choices involve more of a gamble. They are often made *out* of one's comfort zone, since the stakes are a bit higher, and we are not certain what the consequences of such decisions will be.

Honors students at UW Oshkosh have all of these opportunities plus many more; this, of course, is the overarching benefit of being an Honors student. Think about these further choices and opportunities you will have: over the next few years, for example, you will hear about non-honors students being shut out of a class they wanted to take; that will never happen to you, since you can register early. This opens up more room for choice. There are other opportunities with respect to Honors course work: when you take Culture Connection, you can choose to review a play, an art exhibit, a concert, or something else again. You have the choice about the extent to which you will engage the interdisciplinary seminars, unique offerings designed just for you, and eventually you can decide whether to write an Honors Thesis. On the co-curricular side of things, you can decide whether to take advantage of the wonderful opportunities available: a spring trip to Chicago, a group pizza lunch with a professor, and many others.

I bring these opportunities to your attention not to try and sell the Honors Program; obviously, you have already been sold. Rather, I bring this range of choices to your attention in order to highlight the range of

uncomfortable choices you could make, and I want to urge you today to consider making a number of *uncomfortable* choices in the next few years. *Uncomfortable* decisions are not bad decisions (at least, not in the sense in which I am using these terms). *Uncomfortable* choices are those made out of our comfort zone. They are not exactly risky choices since I doubt there is a possibility of extreme danger in the outcome. Rather, they are the sort of choices we make when we have little or no idea what the outcome will be, and this is why we are not fully comfortable making them. But this is a good thing: it means that when we make uncomfortable choices, we are bound to experience something new, perhaps surprising, and we are bound to expand our knowledge, to learn.

I want to argue that *uncomfortable* choices more often than not lead to happiness: they make life in the Honors Program happy, and they make your head a happy place to live. Let me explain.

First, one promising way of becoming more at ease about making uncomfortable choices is to rid yourself of some misconceptions surrounding the Honors Program. (And the point I wish to make here applies especially to those new to the Honors Program.) Over the last two years, I have spoken to high school students who were considering enrolling in the Honors Program here at UWO (i.e. honors “recruits,” as

it were). At first (and as usual), I had no idea what I was going to say to them. But I did develop a strategy: I was teaching an honors seminar at the time, and so I asked my honors students what I should say to the honors recruits. Specifically, I asked my current honors students what concerns they had about joining the Honors Program before they did so. In other words, what might make a student hesitant about joining the Honors Program?

When my students began telling me all the things that had concerned them, I was partly delighted, partly discouraged. I was partly delighted not only because I knew now exactly what I was going to say to the high school students, but also because there was unanimous agreement in the classroom that those concerns they once had were much ado about nothing. I was partly discouraged for the obvious reason that their answers revealed to me that there are misconceptions out there about what the Honors Program is about and how it functions. Here are two of those misconceptions.

1. *“If I join the Honors Program, I will have hours and hours of more work, and I don’t know if I want to subject myself to that.”*

This is simply false. It is true that honors classes are unique. But their uniqueness stems from the fact that they are small classes with greater opportunity for discussion, greater opportunity for student-professor

interaction, and hence greater depth of inquiry. The emphasis here is simply not on assigning a massive workload. Whatever the quantity of work assigned, I guarantee you there is a non-honors course with just as much, if not more, quantity of work assigned.

2. *"I will be surrounded by a bunch of over competitive people with whom it is difficult to relate."*

This too, my students told me, is simply false. The truth of the matter is that the Honors program, in virtue of its emphasis on small class sizes, and close interaction among students and faculty, does just the opposite: it promotes friendship and camaraderie. Students have the sense of a unique and worthwhile experience that they all have in common, and this makes it extremely easy to relate to each other.

In short, if it were true that Honors classes require hours and hours of work that eliminates your opportunity for extracurricular engagements, if it were true that they promoted over competitiveness, if it were true that honors classes lead to higher levels of stress, the Honors program would be a *punishment* for having a high grade point average. People: the Honors program is not a punishment; it is a *reward*, and it comes in the form of a wide range of opportunity, not in the form of higher stress and misery in the classroom.

If I am correct that the Honors Program is a reward that promotes friendship, camaraderie, and a depth of inquiry that can often give one something of an intellectual high (as opposed to higher stress), what should your attitude be henceforth? I suggest that your attitude should be one risk-tolerance. In other words, make uncomfortable decisions, and you will find happiness. I close with some examples and some suggestions about making uncomfortable decisions.

1. *Choosing Courses*: It is okay for you to take courses that you think interest you and in which you believe you could do well. But make a few uncomfortable decisions: take a course on a subject you know nothing about. I did, and it changed my life. Like many new students, when I went to College, I viewed it as a way to prepare for a career. I began to take business classes, as I believed I was going to be an accountant. And like many new students, I didn't understand why I had to take these general education courses. After all, I knew what I wanted to do—or so I thought!

Then, I made an uncomfortable decision. I took a course called, "History of Ancient Philosophy." I had no idea what to expect, as I had no knowledge of philosophy whatsoever. It was only a week or so into the semester that we read Plato's *Apology*, the classic work in which Plato's mentor, Socrates, is sentenced to death primarily for exercising

free speech. Much to my surprise, the work moved me in an indescribable way. I majored in philosophy, went to graduate school, and now I could not be further from the accounting world. Actually, this risk paid off even bigger than I could have imagined: one must take the GRE in order to go to graduate school. I was on my way to the GRE when I ran into the only other person who was late for the GRE that day. It was a girl whom I had known freshman year, but had not seen in years. Thanks to that fateful encounter, that girl and I have been married for 12 years and have three very cool children. Now, I can't guarantee *that* will happen to you, but the point is none of this would have happened if I had not decided to take a course about which I knew nothing. None of this would have happened if I had not embraced the opportunity to make an uncomfortable choice.

In fact, consider taking a course on a subject you believe does *not* interest you. When I went to college, I "knew" that I didn't like geology. Of course, I *knew* no such thing, and after being forced to take a geology class, I ended up loving it and I took several more. Granted, I didn't *choose* this one. But the point is that I discovered that the more of the unknown that I became exposed to, the more interested I became in what else was out there. And I became happier because of it. This would not have happened if I had not been put out of my comfort zone. In short,

do not be afraid of the new, the foreign, the unknown, or the challenging.

2. *Choosing to Study Abroad.* Nothing puts you into the realm of the uncomfortable, the foreign, and the unknown like studying abroad. You now have the opportunity to study in a foreign country, an opportunity that will most likely go away after you are finished your formal education. I encourage you to make this uncomfortable choice. The OIE education here at UWO runs programs to England, Greece, Italy, Tanzania, India, Peru and many other locations. Studying abroad provides one a perspective on the world that simply cannot be had in any other way. It heightens your understanding of other cultures and forces you to see your own place in the world in a whole different light. Students from my study abroad program will tell you: studying the natural philosophy of Isaac Newton in a classroom in the basement of Polk library is interesting. But it is nothing like studying Isaac Newton outside of the Great Gates of Trinity College, University of Cambridge, near Newton's old quarters, and next to Newton's apple tree and surrounded by architecture that extends back as far as the 13th century. Suddenly, the world is a more interesting place, and consequently your head is a happier place to live.

3. *Choosing Co-Curricular Activities:* As a student at UW Oshkosh, you have the opportunity to choose to engage in a number of organized activities outside your coursework, and as an Honors student, you have all those opportunities and then some. The topic here is obviously related to the question of how you should spend your free time. I encourage you here too to make uncomfortable choices, ones with uncertain outcomes.

For example, this year you will see advertisements for the Pizza with Professors series, sponsored by the Honors Student Association. We all love pizza. But some of you might not take the opportunity to have a group pizza lunch with a professor, even if it is free pizza. This is a mistake. Sitting down and having pizza with a professor could just as easily turn into one of those happy new experiences of the sort that can also come from choosing a course in a subject about which you know nothing. If it makes you feel any more at ease, let me assure you that outside their academic interests, your professors have many of the same interests you do. I know faculty members who are passionate about everything from Broadway musicals to rock concerts to Jim Carey movies to triathlons to professional wrestling, and everything in between. These interests aren't incompatible with academic pursuits; they complement those pursuits. And the whole package of such

interests is conducive to a happy life. Go have pizza with your professors, and get to know them. You might just be inspired. I think you will find examples of people who fill their lives with passions no matter what those passions are. As for one thing about me, I still think that big-hair eighties rock (of the likes of Aerosmith and Bon Jovi) is some of the best stuff out there, and I combine it with a passion for a study of the metaphysical systems developed in response to the Scientific Revolution. You don't have to be interested in everything. I'm certainly not. But progress comes just as much from learning what you do not want to pursue, as it does from learning what does interest you. And so the more you pursue potential interests, no matter what they are, the more progress you will make, and the happier you will be. But again, you can't know what those interests are unless you are willing to make some uncomfortable choices.

Pizza with Professors is but one opportunity for you. There are many others that could lead to happiness. Try volunteering: next week the Student Honors program will run a blood drive. This year, they will also run a bake sale to raise funds for a local community cause, and they will provide many other worthy opportunities to give back to the community. Engaging these activities, especially when you don't know what or who will be involved, gets you out of your comfort zone, and

can quite often lead to a fulfilling, totally new and happy experience. Go see an art exhibit, a play, a guest speaker in Reeve Union, and go explore the Fox Valley. Get out of your comfort zone, and you will have some fun. The Honors website is a great resource for learning what is out there.

I suppose part of the point I am making is that uncomfortable choices are of the sort that can lead to what is often called a “defining moment,” a moment that inspires you, a moment that shapes the course of your life, that moment when you discover what you love to do. Of course, not every uncomfortable choice will lead to such a moment, and it is true that we can never know when such moments will occur. But clearly, they are not likely to occur when you are playing Xbox, or watching TV. And they are not likely to occur when you are multi-tasking by texting in class, or listening to your iPod while reading a novel. I encourage you to avoid doing such things, for I fear they weaken our powers of concentration. Instead, immerse your powers of concentration on some uncomfortable choice, and you just might experience that defining moment that fills you with happiness.

So, that is my advice: make uncomfortable choices, and you will likely discover happiness. One way of summarizing my point is to

consider Carlin's list of top three of things nobody ever says after graduating from College:

1. *"I really wish that I had not taken such a broad array of courses in College. I want to be more narrow minded."*
2. *"I really wish that I had not studied abroad and experienced Europe. That was really a waste of time."*
3. *"I wish I had not taken advantage of all those co-curricular opportunities. I wish I had not experienced so many different people and places. I should have watched more TV."*

No one ever says these things when it is over. On the other hand (sadly), the world is full of people who regret not taking advantage of the opportunities you now have. I challenge you today to avoid being one of those regretful people.

I wish you a fun and enriching academic year. Thank you!