

Distinction Making Critters: Focus on Knowing People

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Class of 2023, I know you have thought about who you are. Across the past four years I got to know many of you as individuals, but now I want to think about who you are as a group. So, who is on team Sheetz? Who is on team WaWa? I assume those of you who didn't vote . . . maybe because you don't like your food and petroleum purchasing to be so intimately connected . . . are especially enlightened and you're with me on the Waffle House team.¹

We love to make distinctions; and given our WaWa versus Sheetz versus Waffle House poll, we can make distinctions based on almost anything. Perhaps it stems from my Southern upbringing, but I am partial to sayings. In teaching history, one I like to mention frequently is that humans are distinction-making critters. That's my big point today, but for those of you who like a roadmap, we have a few related items to consider, too. I'm aiming to tell you things I didn't know or had backwards when I was your age. I'm hoping to give some of you a shortcut to living more wisely than I sometimes did.²

This speech is about PDM. PDM—it's Juniata so this must have an acronym—or Presumptuous Distinction Making is dividing people into groups, or even marking the difference between two individuals based on some kind of perceived, especially superficial difference. We can learn more about through some examples.

A common way to make distinctions between us is to base them on where a person is from. To a Yinzer, I mean a denizen of western PA, Baltimoreans are a bit sus, and yet Juniata wouldn't be the same place it is without our sorely missed Dr. Vince Buonaccorsi or Dr. Matt Powell. As for the Yinzers, we have quite a few, but without Dr. John Bukowski we would process into the auditorium for this event in silence.³

Everyone knows that hating on some states is widely allowed. Anywhere on this side of the Delaware River you can give Jersey all kinds of side eye, but I've taught so many amazing Juniatiens

from the Garden State, and New Jersey gave us powerhouse faculty like Dr. Lynn Cockett and Dr. Phil Dunwoody. The Southern states, especially their more rural zones, are fair game for distinction making too, but Alabama has given Juniata a lot of talent, committed, erudite and passionate talent in Psychology, Philosophy and History. You never can tell from where faculty talent will emerge. We even have three outstanding faculty who grew up in Huntingdon. To paraphrase the linguistics scholar and revenge expert, Inigo Montoya, you kept using that word “townie,” but I’m not sure it means what you think it means.⁴ Heck, some faculty come from places too rural to be called a town. I can think of at least one botanist who stumbled down here from a New York apple orchard, and, if you believe the rumors, another professor crawled out of a swamp in South Carolina. Perhaps geographic distinctions aren’t so telling after all?

This convocation ceremony is mainly about marking distinction, though. We mark the seniors distinctly in their robes. The faculty are distinct in their academic regalia, and even among the faculty we have a range of colors from the subtle or the stately to the garish and extravagant. But this convocation denotes academic accomplishment while tonight’s Alfies (Juniata College’s Athletic Department Awards ceremony) are about marking athletic distinction. I think we do right when we cheer on and call out excellence.

However, I remind my students about the human propensity to make distinctions, both to warn them and to point out that they help us understand the past. For every recognition of academic or athletic accomplishment, there are many more examples of negative, even evil, distinction making. For what are racism, sexism, ableism, and classism, if not efforts to imagine ourselves or the groups with which we identify as worthier or better than others? That’s PDM at its most harmful. We know that those -isms are terrible, but more subtle distinction-making occurs too, and it can be pretty insidious for being rarely noticed.⁵

Here’s an example that illustrates the way these things work. When you go to professional conventions or conferences, and many of you will, you get a lanyard and name tag that lists your professional affiliation. As you mingle, or let’s say build social capital, you read someone’s name on their tag and your first impressions are tied to their affiliation. I remember being at a history conference some years back, and a friend introduced me to a very prestigious historian with an Ivy League pedigree who had an endowed chair at a famous university along with a Pulitzer Prize on his resume. He took one look at my name tag and, smart though he may have been, his PDM betrayed him. He didn’t know my scholarship, and *Juanita* [sic] College as an affiliation didn’t move him, either. He judged me based only on a name tag, and he found me uninteresting and unworthy of his time. I admit to being a little wounded.

I tell you this story because at some point you will have this experience. You will meet hundreds or even thousands of people after this day and they will ask where you went to college and you will say Juniata College. Some will, with their faces, their words or by redirecting their attention, betray themselves. They may be snobs. They may or may not know that they are snobs; after all, they probably haven't been asked to "think about who they are."⁶ But they are also distinction-making critters, and they will be making the mistake that so many commit. They will assume they know vastly more than they do. They will take for granted that because they don't know of Juniata, that because it isn't large in numbers or because they don't know much about it, that it can't be important. Among the distinction-making errors people make is confusing size with quality and fame with importance or value.

Those experiences might be a little humbling for you. If they are, embrace them. Humility is a cardinal virtue for Juniatians. But don't fall into that mental trap of PDM yourself. Instead, remember that talent is everywhere. The world doesn't suffer from a talent shortage. It suffers from an opportunity shortage or inequality. I mean talent is abundant in this hall, and it is present in cells in the prisons across the river. Let me relay how I finally got it through my thick skull that talent is everywhere.

When I lived in Atlanta I worked in a family-owned print shop. My boss was about my age and he had taken over this business from his father. My boss's brother worked in construction and, I was informed, did some time in the state penitentiary for armed robbery. One day my boss left for lunch and said his brother might drop by. I wanted to meet his brother, right until he actually walked in. He stood six foot six, had made a lot of gains with weights in prison, never smiled, favored sleeveless shirts and had little prison tattoos on his arms. He is one of the most physically intimidating people I've ever met. Over some months I got to know him, though, and I learned that he is an interesting and talented person. One day I got up the courage to ask how they applied tattoos in prison. I remember his response; he fixed me with his eyes in a hard stare, and then he told me, "Tuten, the first thing you have got to know is there is all kinds of talent locked up."

That statement changed my perspective. It had comforted me to think that talented people didn't go to prison; talented people went to college. I started letting go of that part of my ignorance and distinction-making. I'm still working on it, and I'd love for you to join me on that journey.

Try not to be closed to those who hit you with PDM. Those that make snap judgments about you for learning at a school that isn't well-known to them won't know about Juniata's history. They won't know that Juniata College produced a Nobel Prize-winning physicist, healers of all stripes, award winning teachers, the lead designer of the Hemi engine, major league baseball players, an NFL coach, Emmy winners or the CEO of the American Medical Association, James Madara (think on that—for all the great

qualities of every college and university in America — the head of the AMA, the doctor of doctors, is a Juniata alum!).⁷

Speaking of Dr. Madara, he gave one of my favorite commencement speeches of all time (right up there with Juniata graduate and Nobel winner Bill Phillips). In fact, in Dr. Madara's speech, he told the story of how he met Bill Phillips . . . and used PDM on him. He made a distinction between himself and his friends and Bill Phillips, whom he found to be not as smart or as cool as his own crew. I could do worse than to quote Dr. Madara here: "When you develop social capital, you will discover one of the principal joys in life: the people around you are amazing." That speech diagnosed me as someone recovering from PDM and challenged me to live a better life than that.⁸

Your median age is twenty-two. That makes you eighty years younger than my grandmother, Mary. That's right, she lived to be 102. To those with presumptuous distinction-making she's unimportant. She grew up in the piedmont of South Carolina in a small farming family, and her father left them when she was a child. She completed the required eight grades of education and then had to drop out and go to work. She labored in textile mills and factories in blue collar positions. She speaks with a strong southern accent. She talks country. Those are all strikes against you among distinction makers. Until her eyesight failed her, she loved playing the word game Scrabble. With her eighth-grade education from those Depression-era South Carolina public schools, she crushed me in Scrabble when I was in high school. And in college. By the time I earned a Ph.D, she would still beat me, her college-educated daughters, and her grand-daughter-in-law. We could have wall-papered her living room with our diplomas, but it meant nothing. To those using PDM her limited formal education was supposed to define her, and her accent signaled her intelligence. Scrabble, though, is a harsh meritocracy.

I'll give you one more fact about her that might help round out the picture of how PDM fails. Our family gathered to celebrate her retirement from a Union Carbide plant at age sixty-five, and that night she asked her daughters to start teaching her to play piano. She owned one; it was the one on which her daughters learned to play, and play well. Now, she wanted her turn. I've never gotten over that. In my mind back then, I thought retirement meant that you stopped doing things. She knew that retirement meant she had time to learn new things and she had the intrinsic motivation to spend hours doing it. So, yes, I'm telling you to have a growth mindset like my Granny.

We needn't live with permanent cases of PDM. We can retrain ourselves. That's what Cognitive Behavioral Therapy does. It helps individuals reframe their thoughts and alter their behavior so that they can live better lives. If this were a beauty pageant (it's a thought experiment so don't get hung up on an image of me in a beauty pageant) and I got that classic pageant question: what's one thing you would do

to make the world a better place? I would build vast global armies . . . of trained psychologists and social workers skilled in techniques such as Cognitive Behavioral Therapy. There would be free appointments anywhere in the world open to anyone. When we would see the errors in how we think about ourselves or how we think about others. We would gain the power, especially with help, to reroute our thoughts into better places. We could then set aside presumptuous distinction-making.

I ask you to remember that at twenty-two, you may, like my grandmother, have another eighty years ahead. With a growth mindset, armed with a well-trained mind, and focusing on knowing people rather than making distinctions between them and yourself, you can become the best kind of critters.

NOTES

1. Sheetz is a gas station chain based in Altoona, Pennsylvania with 670 stores. It has three stores in the Huntingdon, PA area, including one in easy walking distance from the Juniata College campus. WaWa, based in the Philadelphia suburb of WaWa, Pennsylvania is a 900 store chain of gas and fast food outlets based upon the same model. For more than a generation, Central and Western Pennsylvanians who tend to be Sheetz aficionados have vigorously debated eastern Pennsylvanians, folks from New Jersey and people from Delaware who are usually WaWa partisans. For more see <https://www.sheetz.com/> and <https://www.wawa.com/>. The Waffle House, based in Norcross, Georgia, does not retail petroleum, and it has an even larger impact than Sheetz or WaWa, with over 1900 diners concentrated in the South but extending into Pennsylvania and Ohio. Waffle House has a remarkable cultural impact, as noted by visits from Stephen Colbert and Anthony Bourdain, songs by many including the Jonas Brothers, and a photography book, *Waffle House Vistas*. Ashlie D. Stevens pulled it all together in “The Artistic Allure of Waffle House, America’s Most Surprising Culinary Muse,” *Salon* May 2, 2023 <https://www.salon.com/2023/05/02/the-artistic-allure-of-waffle-house-americas-most-surprising-culinary-muse/> .
2. I’m also fond of the observance that every nation has its road kill, but that’s a bit gruesome. Other sayings I tried to coin can be found at James Tuten, “Two Laws of Committee Work,” *Inside Higher Ed*, November 9, 2017 <https://www.insidehighered.com/advice/2017/11/09/two-adage-worthy-behaviors-committees-higher-education>.
3. Dr. John Bukowski, in addition to being a professor of mathematics, is the college’s organist.
4. In the 1987 adventure film *The Princess Bride*, main character Inigo Montoya’s said, “You keep using that word. I do not think it means what you think it means” in response to Vizzini’s utterance of “Inconceivable!” See “Princess Bride, You keep using that word. I do not think it means what you think it means,” July 26, 2015. Video clip, 14 seconds. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dTRKCXC0JFg>.
5. Distinction is not only something that happens to us, but something we actively seek, often without fully realizing it. The search for distinction may motivate our choices or work, abode,

clothing, and most parts of our lives. If you prefer a deeper dive into the subject see Pierre Bourdieu, *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1984).

6. Juniata College's tag line is "Think about who you are."
7. The Juniata College alumni named or referred to here are: William D. Phillips '70, a specialist in laser cooling of atoms who shared in the 1997 Nobel Prize for Physics with two colleagues; Thomas Hoover '53, also a physics graduate of Juniata College, who spent his career in the engine design department of the Chrysler corporation, where he led the team that brought forward the 1964 HEMI 426; Michael Trim '76, a producer, director and cinematographer in Hollywood who has worked on shows including *Parks and Rec*, *30 Rock*, *Orange is the New Black* and *Weeds*, for which he won an Emmy; and Charles R. "Chuck" Knox '54, who served as head coach of the NFL teams Los Angeles Rams, Buffalo Bills and Seattle Seahawks.
8. Dr. Madara's speech so impressed me that I assign it in a class each year. Teaching it over time and pondering it helped inspire my references to "distinction making critters" in my history classes. James L. Madara, "Build Social Capital," *Juniata Voices* 22 (2012): 145-148. The indie folk band Fleet Foxes captured the unlearning of distinction-making in favor of thinking in terms of the positive sum perspective of social capital construction when they wrote: "I was raised up believing I was somehow unique/Like a snowflake distinct among snowflakes, unique in each way you can see/ And now after some thinking, I'd say I'd rather be/ A functioning cog in some great machinery serving something beyond me." Fleet Foxes, "Helplessness Blues," <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=npZeVT4Puy4> , accessed January 19, 2024.