

# *What You Deserve and What You Get*

**David C. Hsiung**

**T**hank you President Kepple, and especially thank you, Class of 2002. You selected me to be your Commencement speaker, which I consider a great honor, but I suspect that you are also motivated by ... revenge. For four years my colleagues and I have given you assignments—papers, tests, speeches, experiments, performances—and now you’ve had a chance to strike back. You’ve given ME an assignment—“Write and deliver the Commencement Address.” We’ve also always made a big deal about turning your stuff in on time. “No late work will be accepted.” You’ve given me a deadline: 2:00 on Sunday. No late work will be accepted! I asked President Kepple for an extension, but he said, “Uh-uh.”

True to your example—at least some of you—I put off working on this assignment until last night. Since I left this to the last minute, it’s a little short. In fact, it’s haiku. (How many syllables do I get?) Here are my words of wisdom to you:

Boldly pursue dreams  
And reach far, but don’t forget:  
Give bucks to your school.

That’s it. That’s what I’m turning in. Thank you very much.  
[Sit down]

---

*Commencement Address, May 12, 2002*

You want more? Something better? Well, I thought of a limerick:

There once was a chemist named Reingold,  
Whose classes turned students gray and old.  
You've made it, today,  
But after CA,  
You know how it feels to be steamrolled.

You deserve better than this, and that's what I'd really like to talk about today. Consider the title of this Commencement Address: what you deserve, and what you get. You can combine these in four ways: you get what you deserve, you don't get what you don't deserve, you get what you don't deserve, and you don't get what you do deserve. Did you follow all that? I don't really want to talk about two of these combinations. "You don't get what you don't deserve"—your parents have been telling you that all along, so you don't need to hear it from me. And "you get what you deserve"—need I mention that you Seniors challenged the faculty and staff to a softball game this week and YOU LOST. (What was the final score? 18-2) Sometimes you get what you deserve, all right.

I think the other two combinations are more interesting. First, let me look at "You get what you don't deserve." And what you get sometimes can be pretty bad. I've received notices from Kris Clarkson's office telling me of everything from broken bones to broken homes. From fires to firings. Car trouble, sick children, and yes, your first "C." "You get what you don't deserve" ... I first thought, "mass e-mail." When I saw there was going to be a Senior Pledge, I thought it would be [raise right hand], "I hereby pledge to send no mass e-mail without authorization." Actually, the pledge could be, "I hereby promise to attend a meeting of the Chess Club, so THEY stop sending mass e-mails!" "You get what you don't deserve"; sometimes that involves personal tragedies. Some of you have lost relatives. Kris Clarkson told me the record is that in four years, one student lost NINE grandparents. Often the day before hunting season opened. "I'm sorry, Dean Clarkson, but I need to go to the funeral." "Then why are you wearing blaze orange cammies and a hat that says 'Buck Fever'?" Of course, this is not a joking matter—we are all thinking about those who aren't with us here today. My brother and my mom are here, but I sure wish my dad

could have been here too.

Do you deserve the hardship and the pain? I don't think so. But why did you get such a rotten deal, such bad luck? I can't answer that, and my colleagues and I can't answer that even if we had you here for another four years. People have been wrestling with this question for a long time. About 2,700 years ago, Homer, in *The Iliad*, gives one interpretation when he has Achilles speak:

So the immortals spun our lives that we, we wretched men live on to bear such torments—the gods live free of sorrows. There are two great jars that stand on the floor of Zeus's halls and hold his gifts, our miseries one, the other blessings. When Zeus who loves the lightning mixes gifts for a man, now he meets with misfortune, now good times in turn. When Zeus dispenses gifts from the jar of sorrows only, he makes a man an outcast—brutal, ravenous hunger drives him down the face of the shining earth, stalking far and wide, cursed by gods and men.<sup>1</sup>

Sometimes Zeus gives you bad and good times, and sometimes he gives you just misery. Why? It's not for us humans to ask. What can you do about it? You can rage at the gods, or whimper, or you can simply do what you can. Take care of the things you have control over, and don't worry about the things you don't have control over. "Do what you can"—and it turns out, that can be quite a lot. Many of you had real academic problems your first semester or two (or three or four). It just wasn't happening in Education, or Spanish, or Biology. But you did something: you changed your study habits, you got different roommates, you found a POE that really interested you. You pulled yourself up off the floor (also known as "academic probation") and ... here you are. And I'm proud of you. Ryann, I'm talking to you. Don't worry about the things you don't have control over; Zeus is going to reach into that jar and toss that ball of misery at you. Instead, focus on the things you can do; whack Zeus's ball back at him, just like those stickball players on the Cloister porch.

Sometimes Zeus reaches into that jar and rolls you a blessing, and you may think you don't deserve that either. Holly, way in the back row there, I bet you don't think you deserved to win the

Justina Marsteller Langdon Prize, given to (and let me quote), “that senior woman who best exemplifies the spirit of helpfulness to others, gentleness of character, and loyal devotion to the College.” Your peers voted you the award, but knowing you, I bet you’re still thinking, “How could I have won this?” I’m in the same boat. Two years ago, the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching and the Council for Advancement and Support of Education named me Professor of the Year for Pennsylvania. How crazy is that? Obviously, they did not read some of my student evaluations. For example, one wrote:

“I think this was the worst experience of my academic career at Juniata. This seminar was the most disorganized seminar in the world. Dave confused me more, and I think this happened every time I talked to him.”

How can I be the best in all of Pennsylvania when a student can write this about me? How can I be the best in all of Pennsylvania when I don’t think I’m even the best in the department? A couple of years ago, a different student learned that in parts of India, when one meets a person of great wisdom, one should seek that person’s blessing. This student wrote that she wanted nothing more than to end her Juniata career by being, in her words, “blessed by a man of great wisdom,” and of course she was speaking of Klaus Kipphan.

If I have had success, it’s because I have had lots of help. This place is filled with amazing teachers, and you know this better than I. Although I can’t name everyone, please allow me to name just a few. There are my immediate colleagues in the History Department: Klaus, José Nieto, David Sowell, Belle and Jim Tuten, and John Stanley. They teach me something every day. Peter Goldstein always reminds me that you, the students, should come first. Jim Borgardt showed me how one can explain complex things—like quantum mechanics!—with crystal clarity. Henry Thurston-Griswold, always toting his guitar or boom box, gave me the courage to play my recorder in my American Revolution class (whether that enhanced the classroom experience, I don’t know). Kathleen Parvin, Judy Katz, and Carol Peters helped me teach writing in CWS, showing me that passion is the key. Paula Martin’s amazing organizational abilities put me to shame. I have benefited from these folks and

many, many others, yet I'm the one who gets singled out for recognition. We who have received recognition—we may not have deserved what we have gotten, but with these “blessings,” as Homer called them, come obligations and responsibilities. And this goes for all of you who have achieved so much—you didn't get here alone. According to that modern-day philosopher Charles Barkley—yes, that Charles Barkley, “Sir Charles,” the “Round Mound of Rebound”—he says, “When you get to the top, don't forget to send the elevator back down.”<sup>2</sup> Nick, you won the Accounting Plaque. John [behind me], you have the American Institute of Chemists Award. Brandy, you hold the Carolyn Stambaugh Memorial Award and the John E. Blood Memorial Award. I know you deserve these honors and you should enjoy the view “at the top,” but just remember to send the elevator back down. And many of you have done just that. You have, for example, staffed a flourishing peer tutoring program and have organized an award-winning chapter of Habitat for Humanity. You're bringing that elevator back up, with some company.

I know some of you are thinking, “Hey, why didn't I win an award? I did great in class, so why didn't I win the Wald Humanities Prize? I earned good grades, so why didn't I get selected to the Honor Society? Why don't I get to wear all of those cords and ribbons around my neck?” Sometimes you don't get what you deserve. Many are qualified, but only one can win. Those great teachers I mentioned before? Peter Goldstein, Jim Borgardt, Henry Thurston-Griswold, Kathleen Parvin, Judy Katz, Carol Peters, Paula Martin? None of them have won a distinguished teaching award from Juniata. Have they gotten what they deserve? No, absolutely not. I certainly don't want to take anything away from those who have won teaching awards recently—Jill Keeney, Emil Nagengast, Belle Tuten, Grace Fala, Janet Lewis, Pat Weaver—for I have learned from all of them as well. But I want to highlight teaching of a different sort. Peter, Kathleen, Henry, and the others ... those who haven't won—I don't see them wallowing in bitterness. They keep forging on, accomplishing wonderful things in the classroom that bring them honor of a different, and more important, sort.

The French essayist Montaigne, writing in 1588, tells us that some people lament, “I have done nothing today.” His response: “What, have you not lived? This is not only the fundamental but

the most illustrious of your occupations.” He says that some might gnash their teeth and moan, “If I had been placed in a position to manage great affairs, I would have shown what I could do.” Montaigne replies,

“Have you been able to think out and manage your own life? You have done the greatest task of all. . . . To compose our character is our duty, not to compose books, and to win, not battles and provinces, but order and tranquility in our conduct. Our great and glorious masterpiece is to live appropriately.”<sup>3</sup>

Sometimes you don’t get what you deserve, whether it’s an award, or acceptance into that top graduate program, or that dream job. Well, don’t despair. If you focus on the things you can control, if you, as Montaigne says, “think out and manage your own life,” and if you live up to your standards, then it doesn’t really matter what Zeus has thrown at you.

Women and men of the Class of 2002: Sometimes you get what you don’t deserve, and sometimes you don’t get what you do deserve. I hope your time at Juniata has taught you to act as best you can, and to complete your “great and glorious masterpiece” by living appropriately. And sometimes, you do get what you deserve. Three folks up here—the honorary degree recipients—and all of you, are going to get your well-earned degrees as soon as I shut up and sit down. It’s been a delight knowing you these past four years. For giving me the chance to tell you that, thanks for this last assignment.



#### NOTES

<sup>1</sup> Homer, *The Iliad*, translated by Robert Fagles (New York: Penguin, 1990), p. 605 (Book 24, lines 613-622).

<sup>2</sup> Jack McCallum, “Citizen Barkley,” *Sports Illustrated*, vol. 96, no. 11 (11 March 2002), p. 38. Barkley was quoting the jazz pianist Ramsey Lewis.

<sup>3</sup> “Of experience,” in *The Complete Works of Michel de Montaigne*, translated by Donald M. Frame (Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, 1958), pp. 850-51.