

De/Reconstructing Your World
at Juniata College
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Muy buenas tardes. (Good afternoon.) Para mí, es un gran honor y un privilegio (For me, it is a great honor and a privilege) poder compartir unas ideas en esta ocasión con la clase de 2007, (to be able to share a few ideas on this occasion with the class of 2007,) ya que esta ceremonia representa (since this ceremony represents) la inauguración oficial de su carrera universitaria. (the official beginning of your college career.) Aunque sea un evento algo solemne y formal, (Although it may be a somewhat solemn and formal event,) quisiera empezar mi charla con un chiste poco sofisticado. (I would like to begin my talk with a not so sophisticated joke.) Si saben la respuesta, (If you know the answer,) háganme el favor de gritarla en voz alta. (please shout it out for me.)

¿Qué dijo el mar al náufrago? (What did the sea say to the cast-away?)

Nada. (Swim / Nothing.)

Now, I make no claims about the humor quotient of this corny play on words, but no one laughs at jokes that have to be explained to them. The dual meaning of the word “nada” in Spanish can be translated into English, but it loses something in the translation.

Convocation Address, August 25, 2003, by the recipient of the Beachley Award for Distinguished Teaching

There really is no substitute for knowing the language, and having to depend on a translation means that linguistic and cultural nuances will always be lost. If you are monolingual and are dealing in a global context with others who are multilingual, you will feel like an outsider and will be at a competitive disadvantage. What's more, you confirm the rest of the world's characterization of the United States as a *cemetery de lenguas*, a language cemetery, and you reinforce the stereotype that a person who only speaks one language is by definition an American.

Although I wish there were more, a fair number of you will study world languages and cultures during your four years at Juniata, and the language and cultural proficiency that you acquire will open new worlds and present new career and life choices for you. In fact, I'm going to take advantage of this soapbox and captive audience to shamelessly plug for a few moments the benefits of study abroad. I can think of no better way for you to enrich your world view than immersing yourself for a semester or a year in another culture. Adapting to another culture's customs and practices will expand your sense of the possible, and you will deepen your understanding of who you are through your encounter with the Other. As an added bonus, you get to explore breathtakingly beautiful sites, contemplate priceless cultural treasures, establish lifelong friendships, and spread your wings as an independent adult. And guess what? It will never be easier to do than it is now during your college career.

In fairness to my colleagues in other disciplines, however, it is important to recognize that all the academic programs here at the College open the door to other worlds. Each field possesses its own conceptual frameworks, distinct methods of inquiry, a specialized language or discourse, and each will enable you to develop skills and a knowledge base that will help you to lead fulfilling lives.

Some of you may be familiar with the metaphor of the ivory tower for colleges and universities, an image which is sometimes used to question the relevance of higher education and to criticize its lack of engagement with the so-called real world. I can assure you that your committed and capable faculty here at Juniata is eager to facilitate your entry into a rich and complex network of academic disciplines, all of which are connected in myriad ways with other fields and with various aspects of our lives outside the classroom.

Many of you have come to Juniata to study the natural world in disciplines such as biology, chemistry, environmental science, geology, and physics. You will learn techniques and develop research skills to investigate topics such as the mysteries of the human genome, but you will also be challenged to confront such ethical issues as an individual's right to privacy and to health insurance coverage despite possessing a genetic defect. And our many students in the health professions will doubtless discover that being a superior clinician requires much more than just diagnostic skills and knowledge of diseases.

Others of you will choose to explore the human condition and the elaborate social systems that have evolved at different times and places in fields such as anthropology, history, economics, politics, sociology, psychology, peace and conflict studies, and education. None of these disciplines can stand on its own. All must engage in constructive dialogue with other academic discourses in order to achieve anything approaching deep meaning and relevance. Imagine, if you will, a politician who understands nothing about basic economic principles and who is totally ignorant of history. For many of you, George W. Bush probably comes to mind. I know, cheap shot. In any case, I'm sure we all agree that we need politicians who are well-versed in economics, history, and many other fields, and who are capable of communicating effectively their vision and programs to the American people. Grammatically correct and complete sentences would also be nice.

In the meantime, the enlightened few among you—just kidding, all you natural and social scientists out there!—the enlightened few will devote yourselves to the study of the wondrous creations of the human mind and spirit: languages, literatures, art, music, philosophy, and religion. Although some artists and scholars have argued that works of art are autonomous aesthetic objects which should be judged only according to their own unique internal laws, I subscribe to the notion that our appreciation and understanding of art works is enriched by relating them to their historical context. In the words of one cultural critic, always contextualize. In addition, art, philosophy, and religion have a powerful influence in shaping our world view and what we see as our roles and responsibilities in society. As Plato warned us several millennia ago in *The Republic*, poets wield the power to manipulate our thoughts, feelings, and beliefs, so it's

important to examine the social implications of films like *Matrix Reloaded*, showing this weekend on Oller lawn, and the political agenda embedded in novels like Barbara Kingsolver's *The Poisonwood Bible*, this summer's recommended reading selection.

I'm willing to bet that the vast majority of you are approaching your college career with a fair degree of trepidation. Everyone wants to be successful, but there are so many unknowns: What do my professors expect from me? Will I be able to make the grade? What are the FISHN requirements, how do I satisfy them, and will I need to have my own fishin' rod? Well, I'm only going to tackle the first of these questions, faculty expectations, and you should take my remarks with a grain of salt, since I make no claim to speak for all my colleagues. Still, I'd be surprised if most of them didn't subscribe to the main ideas that I'm going to share with you.

First, I'd like to know how many of you were attracted to Juniata by our very successful recruitment postcard series: THINK, EVOLVE, ACT. Let's have a show of hands. These three verbs, with a bit of elaboration, capture quite nicely my expectations and hopes for students.

There are numerous processes related to thinking. I don't pretend to be a cognitive psychologist, but I would propose that thinking requires you to engage a topic, to deconstruct it, and then based on what you learn from your analysis of previous assumptions and beliefs and from new inputs, to reconstruct ideological frames that weave the truths that you have generated into some kind of coherent and meaningful whole.

We all view the world through ideological frames or schemas that enable us to filter and make sense of the seemingly infinite stimuli that bombard us. If we didn't, we would experience sensory overload and would be unable to function. If you'd like a marvelous literary illustration of this, read Jorge Luis Borges' fiction titled "Funes the Memorious," an ironic tale in which the title character receives the blessing and the curse of total recall when he suffers an accident that causes his physical paralysis. Despite the fact that he remembers everything that he experiences, he is unable to process this vast ocean of memories, is unable to think, and he fittingly dies of pulmonary, and one can conclude, psychic congestion.

A key part of the learning process is to periodically question one's preconceptions and assumptions to see whether they still hold

water in the light of the new information that we constantly receive. This is of course no easy matter, since the schema that are already in place condition our selection and interpretation of new information. For this reason, it is critical to engage in dialogue with others and to listen with an open mind, especially to people whose ideas and beliefs differ, sometimes radically, from our own.

The underlying assumption of the Think component of this educational expectations triad is that thinking will lead us to progress, to grow, to change in response to what we have learned. And since the alternatives, stagnation and death, are both thoroughly unappealing, let's at least provisionally accept the notion that we will evolve as a result of the thinking in which we engage.

Juniata College affirms as an institution in the first paragraph of its Mission Statement that the aim of a liberal arts education is, and I quote: "to awaken students to the empowering richness of the mind and to enable them to lead fulfilling and useful lives." In other words, education should empower students to act on what they learn, the third piece of our triad. This expectation is driven home in the final summary sentence of the Mission Statement, and again, I quote: "The qualities of mind and character nurtured within the Juniata community permit our students to realize their full potential as contributors to society, informed citizens, and caring and responsible adults." Contributors ... informed actors ... agents of positive change.

Now, let's take a quick look at how this can work in practice with an example from the field of politics. How many of you believe that democracy is the best political system designed by humankind? Again, I'd like a show of hands to be sure that you haven't dozed off. Now, how many of you would agree with the statement that in the last half century, the United States has been a positive force for the spread of democracy throughout the world? Finally, how many of you are aware of the historical significance that the date 9/11 holds for the people of Chile?

If we had a lot more time, say a semester, we could talk about the political and military intervention of the United States in Guatemala, Nicaragua, Iran, the Congo, the Dominican Republic, Indonesia, Cambodia, and a host of other countries since the early 1950s, which has led to repressive dictatorships, the slaughter of literally millions of innocent civilians, and the closing of political

space for democracy. Instead, let's focus on Chile as it prepares to commemorate in a few weeks the 30th anniversary of its 9/11 tragedy, a military coup masterminded by U.S. government and corporate interests on September 11, 1973, which led to the death of democratically elected president Salvador Allende and the installation of a repressive military regime. Chile offers us a clear case in which our government was guilty of state-sponsored terrorism in order to block by nearly any means possible legally enacted reforms which threatened our economic and political interests. In something of an understatement, Secretary of State Colin Powell recently referred to our role in the military coup as "not a part of our country's history that we are proud of."¹ If you'd like to learn more, make your way over to Beeghly Library and consult the most recent issue of the *NACLA Report on the Americas*, whose special topic is "Chile: Thirty Years Later."

Let's assume that you accept my version of the U.S.'s devastating role in undermining Chilean democracy. Incidentally, my analysis is supported by CIA and National Security Council documents which were declassified in 1999 and 2000. The U.S. government's behavior in Chile violates the ideological schema held by most citizens that our country is the benevolent champion of democracy in the world. Most of us would like to reject the communist claim trumpeted during the Cold War that the United States is driven by an imperialist agenda. Still, there is a lot of evidence to suggest that in both our domestic and foreign policy, democratic principles and values are being corrupted in the name of national security and the war on terror.

So if your thinking about the state of U.S. democracy evolves, how can you act on your newfound convictions? First, you can inform yourself further about the topic. One local means for doing so is a campus email distribution list, *Alternative News & Information*. In its second year of existence this past academic year, over 140 members of the campus community exchanged articles, news, and personal opinions on topics ranging from the invasion of Iraq to environmental issues and the effects of globalization. These submissions offer perspectives that are often ignored or censored by the corporate controlled mass media. And in less than a month, Mary Robinson, the former president of Ireland and the former United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights, will be giv-

ing a lecture on campus. You can be sure that at the very least, an important subtext of her talk will be democracy and the United States' role in world affairs.

After you've educated yourself a bit more, and without succumbing to the proverbial paralysis of analysis, you're ready to organize and act on your beliefs. There are numerous student organizations at Juniata, such as the Model UN & World Affairs Association, the Peace and Conflict Studies Student Organization, The Other Side, and the Green Party, which will empower you to act to promote democracy, whether it be through electronic activism sponsored by MoveOn.org or by attending mass demonstrations to protest the lack of democracy and citizen participation in our government.

Think ... Evolve ... Act ... Words for us all to live by as we embark on the lifelong process of educating and reeducating ourselves to be world citizens. A metaphor that resonates for me as a lover of literature is that we are all authors who are composing our own life stories. My hope is that your undergraduate experience at Juniata will be an exciting, enjoyable and transformative chapter in your book of life. I wish for you four fruitful years of deconstruction and reconstruction, building a world for yourself which embraces truth, beauty, diversity, love of learning, and a commitment to work for a more just and humane global community.



NOTE

¹NACLA, *Report on the Americas*, 37.4[July/August 2003]: 25