

You Can Handle the Truth

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Opening Convocation, August 23, 2012

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My Opening Convocation address employed an unconventional, improvisational, dramaturgical delivery. I did not read a prepared text. I longed for a more emotionally infused experience that could model how truth can be spoken from the heart as much as the head. My eight single-spaced pages of talking points were used for preparation, but when it was time to talk to the new students, I used these pages only as a visual prop. In order to enter a spirit of truthfulness, I chose to begin my talk with a three-minute, un-rehearsed vocalization of the thoughts and feelings I was having in the moment.

Daniel Welliver

May 2013

Oh ... my ... God!

Truth is, I have known I'd eventually be here...at this moment. I've known since May! Am I ready for this?

Crap. And I feel like crap. I am, like, totally spent. This? At the end of the first day of classes? I gave all of my energy to those students in class today! I have no more adrenaline to tap into, even though there are, what, 700 people in front of me right now?

Truth is, I could have pared this speech down to something that I could actually deliver. What?! Eight plus pages! ... single-spaced! – for a ten-minute speech? Are you kidding me?!

I should have visited Donna or Grace or someone over in Communications. Elise! I spent three weeks in The Gambia with the winner of the Bailey Oratorical Contest, and I never asked her for pointers!

Okay. I've done this before. I can get through this. This should be nothin'.

Why am I so bothered by this? Overwhelmed? Probably because, right about now, those guys behind me on stage ... oh, and all those faculty people over there who said they were pulling for me ... and were sure I would do a great job ... they're thinkin' right about now ... "OK, Welliver. Cut with the cutesy stuff. What are you doing? You're two minutes into your speech and you haven't started talking yet."

OK. Calm down. You gotta start this thing if this is all going to end.

But I don't even like this speech! It's like, too preachy or wordy or something. It's like? Listen to me! It's like? Like? I hate when students talk that way, like, you know, like....

OK just go. Come on.

The title of my talk today is “You can handle the truth.”

Hollywood actor Jack Nicholson, in the 1992 motion picture drama called *A Few Good Men*, delivered one of those lines that has worked its way into our routine social discourse. Many of you know it, so help me out here: “The truth? You can’t handle the truth!”

So here is a little truth that I am having a hard time handling: It’s been thirty-seven years now. Thirty-seven years ago, in the fall of 1975, I was sitting in your seat. That statement is literally true for one person in this room, because I was a freshman at Juniata College in the Fall of 1975 and I’m pretty sure I attended the fall convocation as a freshman, right here in this auditorium.

Now to say that I was sitting in your seat is also figuratively true for hundreds of you, because hundreds of you are freshmen at Juniata, just as I was in 1975. And the truth is, I believe, that although much has changed at Juniata College, in higher education, and in our world since 1975, much more remains the same. The figurative seat that I sat in as a freshman back in 1975 is pretty much the same figurative seat that many of you are sitting in.

Now, the thing about truth is that it is often unspoken because it is unpleasant to share. When we speak it, we can come across like a Debbie Downer or, in my case, a Danny Downer. Do you know the reference to Debbie Downer? She is that fictitious comedy character who is always interjecting depressing truths into conversations that bring everybody down. And I think that the reason we laugh at skits that feature Debbie Downer is that we realize that such a person will not be accepted by social peers. It’s a humor that is born from our fear of social ostracism if we bring up unpleasant truths.

So here is an example of a Danny Downer truth about Juniata College. Here’s where the people on stage and some of those faculty over there get a bit edgy. What’s Danny Downer going to say about Juniata College in front of all of these new, tuition-paying members of our community?

Well, we’ll start with the elephant in the room. Do you know the phrase “the elephant in the room?” The elephant is the truth that is right in front of everyone, getting in everyone’s way, yet everyone walks around it and pretends it is not there.

Okay. If we are going to take a look at this elephant, I’m going to need your help here. If you are a student, stand. Now, if you are a freshman student, have a seat. (Only a handful of students remain standing). Okay, you upperclassmen can have a seat.

So our Danny Downer, elephant in the room truth is that, although this is a convocation — and, by the way, convocation is a word with Latin roots meaning “calling together”— if this is a calling together of our community, why are there so many freshmen and so few upperclassmen here? Like you, as a freshman back in 1975, I came to the fall convocation because I thought I had to— that it was required or I just felt I had to do what other freshmen were doing. The social stakes seemed so high. My

anxiety about wanting to fit in to this new community was overriding anything else that I might choose to do.

So the truth is, Class of 2016, you were all led to believe that this event was an important one to attend, while, clearly, it is not a priority for more than a handful of the upperclassmen. So the community we characterize and celebrate at this “calling together” ceremony is not one integrated, unified, like-minded Juniata College community. For many in our community, this ceremony no longer holds adequate meaning to be a priority when choosing how to spend one’s time at the end of the first day of classes.

So, Class of 2016. Were you manipulated into coming here today? (One voice: Yes!)

You are all so compliant!

Is Juniata truly intent on building you into a person who questions the assumptions and truths presented to you in life? Or are we trying to teach you, starting with your very first day here, to fit into a Juniata mold ... to be compliant, and to go along with the others around you?

Four years from now, when you receive your Juniata College diplomas, be sure to turn them over to see what is written there in invisible ink. It says something like this: “For four years, this person was subjected to an intense workload, tons of stress, and a myriad of rules and expectations. She didn’t get caught breaking any major rules and she did not quit. She has learned to be very compliant in a demanding, complex institutional environment. Go ahead and hire her. No risk here.” So, although the glossy brochures at Juniata say that we want you to be critical thinkers, evidently we expect you to think critically within the box.

The fact that upperclassmen are poorly represented here today could mean that they have experienced a degree of liberation from the social forces that would bring them here today. That may be a part of the truth. But I suspect that another part of the truth is that the same kinds of social forces that brought you here today have kept them away. Many upperclassmen likely feel that their peers expect them to be doing other things today. They may feel that to choose to attend the convocation with all of those freshmen somehow belittles their status as upperclassmen.

Of course, there are many other variables in play here. What is new and exciting for you is known and predictable for them. You have not had the time here at Juniata that they have had to deepen friendships and to be familiar with all of the options for how you might spend your time. So for now, you’re sticking to the schedule, while they are out getting reacquainted with friends they have missed all summer.

As a sociologist, I have learned about the functions of ceremony for social groups. Ceremony uses ritual and symbols to reshape identity for inclusion into a social group. In some ways, the functions of ceremony are to strip us of former identities so that we can be introduced to new roles we will enact in

new settings. Now this is not all bad, especially when one of the new roles that you are being prepared for is “truth handler!”

Well, the idea I will be trying to convey is that you are now living in a community of people who purport or espouse to value and seek truth, to see it, to handle it, to hold it, and to use it to make a better world. Take advantage of that!

Is there a student in this room who did not, as a freshman, sign a pledge to try to embody the Principles of a Liberal Arts Lifestyle at Juniata? One of those principles reads: “Questions the assumptions and truths presented in life, as embodied in Juniata’s maxim ‘*Veritas Liberat*.’”

In fact, this college maxim, *Veritas liberat*, Latin for “Truth sets free,” makes a kind of implicit promise to you, a promise to help you to handle the truth and to be liberated by the truth. Truth liberates you from the cage of your own experience and from the fencing you have constructed to protect your ideas and beliefs. You can also expect truth to upset you— to set you off.

Last year I was in the office of my colleague and mentor, Professor Bob Reilly. Another colleague, Dr. Cy deVries, was with us and we were talking about the learning objectives each of us has for the Introduction to Sociology course. Each one of us has routinely taught the course and, while some of the learning goals we each had for students were very similar, some were different.

Bob shared that one objective he had for his students was for them to demonstrate that they were able to take on the perspective and understanding of a person with a social location very different from their own—that is a person with a very different status set—different religion, ethnicity, social class, gender, national origin, etc. I remember Bob saying, “If my students aren’t struggling with someone else’s truth—I mean really sweating it out—I feel that I have failed them as a teacher.” I remember quipping, “The truth will set you off!”

James A. Garfield, the twentieth president of the United States, wrote, “The truth will set you free, but first it will make you miserable.” Perhaps we should change our motto at Juniata from *Veritas Liberat*, “Truth sets free,” to *Veritas Provocat*, “Truth provokes.”

This implicit promise of *Veritas Liberat* is not a simple contractual exchange. You give us four of the most vibrant years of your life, a ton of money, and perform a lot of stressful work without breaking any major rules, and we give you a credential and a guarantee that you will be liberated by the truth. It’s not going to be that easy and that simple. Seeing, holding, and speaking truth requires preparation, skill development, discipline, accountability to and support from others, practice, courage, and sacrifice!

I am a social scientist. I believe that scientific inquiry helps to reveal truths about human behavior and social interaction. There is a body of rigorous research in the social sciences that provides strong evidence to support the assertion that people, indeed, have a very hard time handling the truth. Social scientists would concur with Jack Nicholson. Many of us, quite often, can’t handle the truth!

People's inability to handle the truth has come to be called "confirmation bias" or "motivated reasoning" by some social scientists. Although there has been contemporary research that supports the assertion that we can't handle the truth, my favorite piece of research in this area was conducted long ago, in the 1950s.

A group of Stanford University researchers, led by psychologist Leon Festinger, infiltrated a cult called The Seekers. People in this cult believed that their leader, Dorothy Martin, was transcribing interstellar messages from aliens.

When Dorothy Martin indicated that the aliens were predicting that the world would end on December 21, 1954, some of The Seekers quit their jobs and sold their property. They prepared to be rescued by a flying saucer, even going so far as to remove their bras and the zippers out of their pants, because they feared that the metal would somehow disrupt the operation of the flying saucer.

Well, December 21, 1954 arrived and, guess what? The world did not end. Festinger wondered how these people, so emotionally invested in their belief system, would react, now that their beliefs were refuted.

Festinger reported that, after a brief period of struggle, The Seekers claimed that they received a new message indicating that, in essence, the faith of the small group had spread so much light that God had saved the world from destruction. So the demolition of their entire belief system paradoxically led to a strengthening of beliefs.

So how can we discern when our own reasoning might be rationalizing instead? Not only are there psychological forces at work, but there are all of the people around us. Psychological and social forces seem to conspire against us when we have reason to question beliefs in which we are heavily invested.

How do we know truth when we see it? How do we overcome what we know to be our own inclination to reject evidence that brings our beliefs into question? I have a deep desire for some kind of security in believing that I have some things figured out. Don't rock my world too much, or I start to lose that sense of security.

So if it can be so difficult to handle truths that compete with our current beliefs, and if truth is something unfixed that we can all reconstruct together, how do we expect to discern truth? How do we accept and embrace it despite the confusion and fear it may create in us?

We work on the skills we must have to be skeptical, yet open, inquisitive, and bold. We are not confident in what we know, but confident in our desire to know, and relentless in our openness to learning.

Before I stop and take a seat, let me assert two truths about the experience you will have at Juniata College that I believe are essential truths for you to handle. First, we will not all experience our

time at Juniata College in the same way. Some will feel more embraced, included, and understood than others. Your social class, sexual identity, race, urban/suburban/small town/rural identity, national origin, and religion can all be expected to profoundly shape the ways in which you will encounter people and ideas over these next few years. The second truth I want to assert is this: Juniata is the place where you can find support to look for truth, speak your truth, and handle your truth...to develop, in a supportive environment, the skills, desire, and commitment to handle the truth and use it for change. When I say that I believe that we can all develop an ability to handle the truth, I really mean handle it. Not just see it. Not just accept it. Not just hold it. But to handle it like a cowgirl handles a roped steer! To handle it like a construction worker handles a jackhammer or a power saw. To use the truth for good in the world. That, in my book, is the only moral reason to want to know the truth: to use it for good in the world.

I believe that you can handle the truth. So handle it. Deal with it.

Use it to help to create a better world. That's why we are here.

You can handle the truth!