

Ethics and Leadership

What I Was Trying To Say

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Well, it's over. Either your academic year -- and we hope you will be back -- or your Alvernia career -- and we hope you will remember us proudly. Also hope you enjoyed filling out your student feedback forms. I once received one from a dear friend who wrote, "The notes were great -- oh wait -- there were none!" Yep.

There were none because I wanted a class filled with dialogue. I wanted students to engage. Both the material and each other. It's hard to do that when folks are fixated on a board, whether white, black, green, or smart, waiting for the next jotting that is sure to be on the test because, after all, the prof took the time to write it down. That's not enough. DIY as they say. I want students to do it themselves, to come to terms with texts primary and secondary, simple and complex.

Such engagement has a serious precondition, however, confidence. Now I don't mean the sort of verbal fencing that too often passes for discussion and resigns itself to a diffident, "You have your opinion, and I have mine." The kind of confidence I seek comes only from highly developed, polished skills. Those come only from diligent effort continuously applied. Here's a life lesson for you graduating seniors: bring the same effort to the world of work.

But engagement is about more than skills and confidence affects more than work. Engaging belief systems, which inevitably is what good education does, has consequences, the most significant of which is the loss of your safety net. This is a good thing. Too often in classes I have taught I have heard students avow, "I won't change my beliefs!" Why this politics of fear? Indolence? Insolence? Or are the last two symptoms of the first? Listen, work toward an open-ended future and never be afraid of letting go. It takes courage to work without that net of immutability, but all tradition, even that set down in creeds by the great ecumenical councils of Nicaea and Chalcedon, is dynamic. Life lesson two: develop mastery and confidence sufficient to enable you to work toward an open-ended future whose joys and sorrows you have not yet imagined.

Don't grasp this future desperately, saying, "This is mine alone." Don't cheat yourself. Life teems with possibilities, but only through connecting. Engaging also means greeting the other, someone whom you do not know who may seem quite foreign to you, alien. In a sense we are all strangers to each other. We are all Other. Connect. The universe has more stars than black holes. Venture out. Odds are small that you will be sucked into nothingness. Life lesson three: you are always connected.

What I was trying to say in those lectures with no notes is that you must bring diligent, focused effort to all that you do, that you must embrace an open-ended future, especially in discerning meaning and a spiritual path for your life, and that you must recognize the natural connections of being alive and in the world.

Graduates: good luck. Returning students: have a nice summer. Go fishing, everyone.

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