

The Magic of Teaching

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College of Education Commencement Address - Fall 2009

Thank you Dean Gerlach, Faculty, Parents, Family, Friends, and of course Graduates of 2009... This is truly an exciting day for all of us...

Graduates, in a world that awaits you beyond the spirit of UT-Arlington, no one can say what your true colors will be. But this I do know: You have a first-class education from a first class school. And so you need not, probably cannot, live a "paint-by-numbers" life. The decisions you make from this point forward are critical and choices do come back. So, as you set off from UTA into the real world, I hope that you will consider making three very important choices:

First, appreciate this moment in time... You all have achieved a great deal here today... so really take a moment and reflect and realize the opportunities and freedoms that now await you in the next phase of your life. Most of you have chosen the noblest of professions... teaching... and let me be the first to officially welcome you to a profession filled with service, compassion, and lots and lots of meaning. I can tell you for sure there is no better feeling in the world than to know you have truly helped another person by way of your own creativity, courage, and hard work. I must qualify this statement however by adding... you will never achieve this kind of magical teaching feeling by simply lecturing to your students. As much as we think we might be helping students learn by lecturing to them, we all know that to really teach, is to teach by example.

I wish I could tell you about all the inspirational teachers I had in math and science from my elementary or junior high or high school days. But as I think back on it, there were none. There was only remote memorization about the Periodic Table of Elements, levers and inclined planes, green plant photosynthesis, and the difference between anthracite and bituminous coal. But there was no sense of wonder, no hint of an evolutionary perspective, and certainly nothing about all those mistaken ideas that everybody had once believed in. In high school laboratory courses, there was an answer we were supposed to get right all the time. We were marked off if we didn't get it. There was no encouragement to pursue our own interests or hunches or conceptual mistakes. And math wasn't any better... long division was taught as a set of rules from a cookbook, with no explanation or example of how this particular sequence of short division, multiplications, and subtractions got you to the right answer and how this process might be useful in the real world. In high school, extracting square roots were a method once handed down from Mt. Sinai, and it was our job merely to remember what we had been commanded to do. Get the right answer, and never mind that you don't understand what you're doing. So for me, you guessed it... I became a PE teacher.... Because that was the only subject in school that I really felt the magic of education.

Good teachers characteristically approach their tasks from an internal frame of reference. That is to say, they are people, rather than things oriented. They are emotionally involved, continuously tuned in to how things seem to the persons they work with... Aesop tells a wonderful fable about a crab and his son scurrying over the sand. The father chastises his child: "Stop walking

sideways! It's much more becoming to stroll straightforward." The young crab replied: "I will, father dear, just as soon as I see how. Show me the straight way, and I'll walk in it behind you." There is nothing like the quite power of intellectual, moral, and physical example. Teachers and parents do this in everything they do and more often than not, learners will walk it the way you walk it...

Let me see if I can give you a more modern example... You don't teach a student how to play baseball by simply describing to them what a good baseball player does...? No, you teach them by playing a game of baseball and then guiding them when a teachable moment occurs... I truly believe that good teachers are a lot like good magicians, they have the ability to grab your attention, present the impossible, show you that it can be done, and then leave you inspired enough to want to go figure out how to master it yourself. Graduates, I know that all of you have experienced this kind of magic during your time here at UT-Arlington, and I know you are all very anxious to go out and find your own... new... powers.

The second choice I hope you will make... pay your parents back for helping you get to this point. You know, there is an old saying that a parent's heart is the child's schoolroom. Ultimately... it is our parent's dreams, efforts, examples, and loving exhortations that set the boundaries of our education. The seminal lessons taught in the home stay with children as they make their way through school and life, shaping their interests, ideals, and enthusiasm for learning. Parents are children's first and most important teachers. Seeing that he or she gets a good education is, in many respects, the crux of a parent's number one job... Parents, you have accomplished that goal here tonight and will all the parents please stand and be recognized at this time... (Yeh, Parents are alright...). Graduates, in your own way and in your own time, you must find a way and make the time to thank those people around you who have supported you in getting here. Don't ever forget who you are and where you come from.

The third and last choice I hope each of you make... strive to find success in your life and work hard to maintain it. Your degree has provided you a platform in which to achieve great success. But let me remind you that "Success" is not a destination... it is a journey. The more you aim at success (and make it a target), the more you are going to miss it. Like happiness, success cannot be pursued... it must ensue, and only as an unintended side-effect of one's dedication to a cause greater than oneself. Listen to what your conscience is telling you and go on and carry it out to the best of your knowledge and ability. Then, and only then, you will live to see that success follows you precisely because you had forgotten to think of it. The truth of the matter is, most of us discover where we are headed when we arrive... At that time, we turn around and say, yes, this is obviously where I was going all along.

Thank You Graduates and Good Luck!