

Stepping Into the Beautiful Project :
Uncertainty, Grace, and Being Human
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Baccalaureate Address Colorado College ~ Colorado Springs, CO
May 16, 2004

Members of the administration, faculty, and College community, parents and friends, and, especially, graduates :

These last two years I've spent some time each spring here at Colorado College, and it's been a very enjoyable experience. I feel much affection for the faculty and students I've met, and a real appreciation for the college and what it offers. That makes it all the more an honor to be invited to give this talk.

For a very very long time, generation after generation of people have stepped into the beautiful project, which is the exploration of what it means to be human. We ask, over and over : What's a human life for?

We have to keep asking, because we come into this world without an instruction booklet (Enclosed, one human life. Step A : Begin breathing). Really, that we ask the question seems an essential part of our nature. We are a creature who wonders what it means to be alive.

What does it mean to be alive in a universe that's like a vast sea, and everything we know and experience is no more than the sunlit foam on the surface of the waves of that sea? And how is it that that sunlit foam the world as we experience it is so terribly lovely and so awesomely difficult, all at the same time?

These and more are questions you'll answer over time, with your own life, as you discover what it means to be the particular human you are. And as you explore what others have discovered, and those things that can be found only in relationship to others. When you do the thing you didn't think you could, see something in a way no one ever quite has before, love beyond what you could have imagined, you add to what it means to be human, for yourself and for all of us.

Here's the good news : The project you're stepping into has been underway a long time, and it will probably continue awhile longer. There are a lot of people working on it. So you don't have to do everything yourself, which means you can concentrate on the things you're meant to do. And while you're figuring that out, it also means that there will be many others

walking alongside you, to catch you when you slip, so you can try, and make mistakes, and try again.

And the life you live will not only be intimately connected with the lives of other people, but also deeply embedded in the rest of this world. As the ecologist John Seed said, “I try to remember that it’s not me trying to protect the rainforest. Rather I am part of the rainforest protecting myself, I am that part of the rainforest recently emerged into human thinking.”

It’s also true that this is a really complicated project. On the one hand we see the magnificent things we as human beings have done. I’m profoundly happy to be living in a time when I can see the images of the ultra deep field sent back by the Hubble space telescope, and to walk down a street in many American cities and hear all the different languages and accents, see people from all over the world bustling and jostling and somehow on most days more or less harmoniously making together a culture never before seen on this planet.

And yet, this is a complicated project. We’ve been doing it a long time, and it’s not too hard to despair of our ever getting it right. The evidence of our failures is all around us, right there at the breakfast table when we pick up the newspaper and get our heart broken again.

But let’s assume for the moment that we care about this exhilarating, heartbreaking, complicated project that that’s why were here, as students, as parents, as educators, because we care. We want the project to continue, we want to see how its going to turn out, at least in our lifetimes.

So now, dear graduates, it’s time for me to add my voice to the chorus Mary Oliver described in a poem which begins, “One day you finally knew what you had to do, and began, though the voices around you kept shouting their bad advice.”

Here’s my bit of bad advice : to enter this project of discovering what it means to be human, we have to be willing to hold the opposites, to get good and comfortable with uncertainty and contradiction, to accept that well get much more intimate with the dreadful than we ever thought possible, and that well also receive more grace, from more unexpected places, than we ever imagined. If you care about what it means to be human, you can’t go to sleep to either the tremendous beauty or the tremendous pain of life. You can’t pick one at the expense of the other. Neither don’t worry, be happy, nor don’t be happy, worry, because then you’re not any more, not in all the way.

And so we need a lot of what John Keats called negative capability, the capacity to be in uncertainties, mysteries, doubts, without any irritable reaching after fact and reason. To stay awhile with what we don't yet know, can't figure out, wonder about, without immediately jumping to solve it or explain it or fix it. To accept that we might never be able to solve or explain or fix some things, but that doesn't mean that we have to turn away from them. "To try to learn to love the questions themselves," as the poet Rilke said, for it is a question of experiencing everything.

My chosen tradition of Zen loves uncertainty. For meditation practice, the three virtues are great faith, great perseverance, and great doubt. Here's a modern expression of this great doubt : when asked, "What is Zen?", the teacher Suzuki Shunryu replied, "I can sum it up in two words, 'Not always so.'"

To live with an attitude of 'not always so' is a way of appreciating that whatever we know, however we judge things, that knowledge and those judgments are provisional; they're subject to change, to refinement and improvement and being completely overthrown, in the same way that everything in the known universe is subject to change. And it's to be interested in the ways our ideas and opinions will change. "The agile mind is pleased to find what it was not looking for," as Lewis Hyde said.

To live with an attitude of 'not always so' is, paradoxically, a way of engaging with the way things actually are, as best we understand that, and the way things inevitably change over time, rather than trying to impose a vision of how we think the world ought to be. We humans are so good at manufacturing these visions of the way things should be, be they political, religious, economic, involving carbohydrates or exercise or the members of our own family. The difficulty, of course, is that the world or the members of our own families so seldom cooperate, so seldom bow their heads in wonder at the magnificence of our vision and so if we stick with the vision at the expense of the actual world or our actual loved ones, we can find ourselves in a chronic state of disappointment, and of complaint towards life for being life. And the thing is that, as best we can tell, life is going to continue being life for the foreseeable future.

On the other hand, to entertain doubt, even about our own most cherished views, to love the questions, to not irritably reach for solutions before we've actually lived with the difficulty for awhile that opens the way not just to accept life on its own terms, but also to be

unequivocally happy for life in all its undomesticated thusness. It pulls us into life, into appreciating life as a beautiful project, even when it's difficult.

On the other other hand, if there's one thing human history makes clear, it's the consequences of personal beliefs and public institutions insisting that their way is the one and only way. The Israeli Yehuda Amichai, who saw some of those consequences up close, wrote this poem, called "The Place Where We Are Right" :

From the place where we are right
flowers will never grow
in the spring.

The place where we are right
is hard and trampled
like a yard.

But doubts and loves
dig up the world
like a mole, a plow.
And a whisper will be heard in the place where the ruined
house once stood.

Doubts and loves. Wondering and caring. Curiosity and kindness. As a compact, take-it-with-you-anywhere method for a happy life, you could do a lot worse.

Here's one of the things about living like that : it means being aware that, at any given moment, whatever I choose and you choose is bound in some way to be a mistake. We don't know how our choices are going to turn out, we don't know what would have happened if we'd chosen one of the other alternatives up for consideration. Every choice, even the ones that seem inevitable, involves some kind of loss or sacrifice, some kind of risk. So then maybe the question becomes, in any situation, what's the most beautiful mistake you can make? What do you most care about, what seems to have the most possibility, for yourself and for the world? There's something freeing in the humility of, *Yep, here goes another mistake, but I think it's a lovely one, and I'm really interested to see how it turns out.*

Sometimes the mistake turns out pretty well, and there's something to learn from that. Sometimes it turns out not so well, and there's something to learn from that, too. In my tradition this is sometimes expressed as, "You're perfect just as you are, and you could use a little improvement."

I began my bad advice by saying that it's helpful to be able to hold apparent opposites. Another example is having a kind of dual perspective on things : the short range, intimate view; and the long range, spacious view. It's a way of remembering that, wherever we are, we're in a particular landscape, a particular neighborhood, at a particular time and also to remember that if we lift our eyes to the horizon, the view is infinite, and timeless. Both those things are true at the same time, and neither one of them is complete without the other.

Perhaps they are like the foreground and the background, both always present but one more vivid than the other at a particular moment. You've spent the morning packing for a hike in the wilderness, and the local landscape, what gear to schlep, who'll take care of the dog while you're gone is very much in the foreground. Why you ever thought this trip was a good idea recedes from view. Then you get out there and climb awhile, and you come over the top of a rise and there's range after range of mountains stretching out before you. Background, the awesome vastness of the larger landscape, suddenly becomes foreground, and the nagging details of daily life fall away.

Life is made up of both kinds of moments, the intimate domestic ones and the grand, transpersonal ones, and perhaps, with time, we come to see them not as separate, but the intimate and the transpersonal as two aspects of every moment. Here's a poem about that, "What the Dog Perhaps Hears" by Lisel Mueller :

If an inaudible whistle
blown between our lips
can send him home to us,
then silence is perhaps
the sound of spiders breathing
and roots mining the earth;
it may be asparagus heaving,
headfirst, into the light
and the long brown sound
of cracked cups, when it happens.
We would like to ask the dog
if there is a continuous whir
because the child in the house
keeps growing, if the snake
really stretches full length
without a click and the sun
breaks through clouds without

a decibel of effort,
whether in autumn, when the trees
dry up their wells, there isn't a shudder
too high for us to hear.

What is it like up there
above the shut-off level
of our simple ears?
For us there was no birth cry,
the newborn bird is suddenly here,
the egg broken, the nest alive,
and we heard nothing when the world
changed.

Even the simplest moments of our individual lives, full of cracked cups and autumn leaves, take place in the vast sea of life, with its inaudible roar. That roaring vastness isn't a place beyond or above or underneath where we live everyday; it's here all the time, in the moments of the everyday.

The short view pretty much takes care of itself through simple paying attention to what's happening around you an easy thing to say and something you can spend your whole life getting better at. Then what's your long view? Maybe it's looking at the night sky, aware of the immensity of things; or a spiritual belief in something greater than yourself; or a humanist belief in the long arc of human progress. There's an old Chippewa song that says, "Sometimes I go about weeping, and all the while I am being carried across the sky on a great wind." That's remembering the long view. So another bit of bad advice : if you don't have a long view, get one. I promise you it'll help.

Right now we as a nation are getting a lot of bad news. The short, intimate view of this time is made up of the daily news and how we react to it, and so there's a lot of sorrow and anger and confusion in the neighborhood at the moment. Here's a thought about what a long view of this time might be : we're in a descent. We're in one of those times that happen to every person and every people, when what were doing isn't in some way working, and we and others are suffering because of it. If we think of it like that, perhaps we also have a reason to hope. From that perspective, this is a time when it would be almost impossible not to re-examine our assumptions and our actions, to consider whether there might not be better mistakes we could be making. We might notice what's been skipped over for instance, a

national conversation about what our role in the world should be and go back and pick those things up. This opportunity to look again is being given to us at great cost, and I do hope that we as a people do not turn away from it.

Because life does give every indication of intending to go on being life. Painful and complicated things are going to go on happening. And if we hope to do what we can to help with that, it's all the more important to live life not only fiercely, with a fierce caring for the world, but also sweetly, with a sweet enjoyment of it as well.

Our lives are made up of the work we do, yes, and they are also made up of evenings spent cooking dinner with friends, sitting up all night with a sick child, finally getting to visit the land of your ancestors, making gardens, hang gliding, and three whole hours to do nothing but read by the fire. And the things you didn't expect, but make all the difference : raising a child you didn't give birth to, helping an elderly neighbor as she's dying, spending time in a foreign country because you fell in love with someone who lives there.

I know you already know this. I'm just reminding you, because if you think it's been hard to find time for the sweetness of life these last few years, believe me, it's only going to get harder. You have to work at it, you have to protect it.

So take good care of each other. May you find refuge again and again in the shelter of this world and may you offer that shelter to others.

And when you're caring fiercely about the world, remember that caring opens our hearts, it makes us vulnerable. It can be a lonely thing to do on your own. So care in groups. Finding people who care about the same things you do is one of the places in our lives the sweetness and the fierceness come together, and it's more precious than rubies.

If, because of your caring fiercely about the world, you find yourself in the position of fighting for something, never forget what you're fighting for, because it can be so easy to get fixated on what you're fighting against. Right after September 11, 2001, the novelist Salman Rushdie wrote a beautiful piece about this. He said, "We must agree on what matters : kissing in public places, bacon sandwiches, disagreement, cutting-edge fashion, literature, generosity, water, a more equitable distribution of the world's resources, movies, music, freedom of thought, beauty, love." Your list might be different, but oh, how I hope you have one.

When what you're fighting with is the same as what you're fighting for, that's about as powerful as it gets. I remember an interview with an Afrikaaner policeman, who spoke about

the anti-apartheid movement in South Africa. It was when the demonstrators started singing that the police got really afraid, he said, because they knew that nobody who could sing like that would lose.

In the earliest days of my tradition, the source of all things was called the Dark Mysterious. And from that original darkness stream branches of light, which become Ponderosa pine and the cars on I-25 and all of us gathered in this church. Each of us is given a little bit of that light into our care. What will you make of your bright shard? What shape will it take in your hands in the particular hands fourteen billion years old, made from the original stuff of the universe that are yours? It is an old project, this one bit of light meeting and blending and fighting and bringing the world into existence, over and over again. Life is no less than this. You will take your place, helping to bring the world into existence each moment, each generation, and give it the particular shape it will have in your time, in your hands.

Congratulations on what you have accomplished, and many blessings for what you are about to.