

In the Spring of 2004 as I was putting the finishing touches on my MFA thesis and preparing for the class exhibition, I was approached by the head of the Design and Technology department and asked to give a short commencement address at our department's commencement ceremonies.

I had been asked a few months earlier to submit a commencement address for New School University president Bob Kerry's consideration. That commencement speech would have been given to a very large crowd at Madison Square Garden, and the musician in me was very excited by the prospect, but in the end another speech was chosen and my dreams of performing on the stage of the Garden have yet to be realized. In the end I had the great pleasure of giving the following address to a much smaller (and friendlier) crowd...

I had initially written a speech for consideration for tomorrow's commencement ceremonies. My submission discussed my Parson's experience and how it affirmed a suspicion I had. I have long suspected that McLuhan's global village was in fact a lie without true citizens. That is to say without the practice of citizenship.

It was a lovely little diatribe and I'm sure I could have bored you all to tears if only given the chance.

But when asked to speak to this group, I realized that its something you folks know all too well. Because there is a real sense of community here... It's what drew me to the program in the first place.

"THE PROGRAM" it sounds like an AA meeting...

Hi. My name's Bob and I'm a design and technology junky.

Hi Bob

So instead of the global village diatribe I had planned, I decided instead to conduct a little community experiment.

I'm a big listener of the Press Club radio broadcasts, where all kinds of muckity-mucks get up to that podium and ramble on about this and that.

All of them...and I do mean all of them...start off with a little truism, a poignant story or a meaningful quote. These are what orators like to call warm ups - they serve the important function of getting the first laugh or smile out of the way and help the audience to relate with the speaker.

It's kind of like my little comment about the program was supposed to do.

The point is, a few weeks after hearing one of these broadcasts I hardly ever can remember the specifics of the speech. But I always remember the opening warm up. They're the best part.

What if that was the entire content of a speech? Warm ups? So I thought I'd try it out here today. I drew up a list of people who've been particularly important to my Parsons experience and approached them for their favorite quotes and truisms. These I combined with a few of my own favorites and edited them all together to make a patchwork quilt

A quotation oration (trademark pending, Mr. Travis)

I hope this will not only be entertaining but perhaps even somewhat enlightening as well.

The quotes I got weren't all something I could weave into a speech. And I must admit in advance that I don't really remember who gave me what quotes, but Dalo's Joan Rivers quote was a little disturbing. She said:

"I knew I was an unwanted baby when I saw my bath toys were a toaster and a radio."

What's with that David?

And Brian Green kept quoting some guy named Chucky

But if I'm going to do this right I think I need to start out with my family's suggestions, cause after all they're buying dinner for me tonight....

My father-in-law Dr. Herb Kleber who not only helped produce my lovely wife, Pamela but also allowed me to stay rent free in his apartment for my first year here at Parsons. His favorite quote and hence the family's credo is

"Guilt is the gift that keeps on giving."

Remember this when and if you raise your own children, as it will be invaluable. For those of you going on to teach - it' be helpful too. But Herb would also inevitably remind the teachers among us that education is the act of "throwing fake pearls before real swine."

Present company excepted of course.

(That's actually part of the quote)

And as long as we're on the topic of pearls...

Pamela, the real jewel in my life (who's support was crucial for my attendance at this fine institution) caught my attention about twenty-five years ago by whispering in my ear her favorite quote:

Somerset Maughn said to "follow your inclination with due regard to the policeman around the corner."

It has served her well and is good advice to some of the animators I've come to know here at Parsons.

I could spin this back to my whole global village/ citizenship schpiel, but I'd rather bring us to our own jewel, Anezka Sebek who came up with a particularly timely quote when I asked for her favorite. She said:

"Those who do not learn from history are destined to repeat it"

She didn't ascribe a speaker, so from now on I'll associate Anezka with the remark.

Well, Anezka, your quote brought to mind what Karl Marx said about History. That it “repeats itself the first time as tragedy, the second as Farce”

But I kind of prefer Julian Barnes who questioned Marx and said MAYBE “History just burps, and we taste again the raw onion sandwich it swallowed centuries ago.”

Perhaps this explains the current administration better than anything else I can think of. I’m pretty sure that the Carnegie deli has a Raw Onion Sandwich they call the Rumsfeld, don’t they?

Maybe I’m mistaken.

But as long as we’re politically bent I think it was Tor who mentioned the story of an American GI coming into a bombed out European city near the end of the second world war who said:

[Staten Island Accent]

“We sure liberated the Hell out of this place.”

Well after the last two years here in “The Program” most of us feel a little like that city - Liberated, but obliterated.

Yet I think the process has prepared us in more ways than we are aware. We aren’t just loaded with new skill sets. Many of us have had our eyes opened to new approaches and new possibilities, but also to ideas of how we might weave these into patterns of our own making.

Dave Kanter, who has been a very important element of my Parsons education, kept shoving Walter Benjamin at me last year despite my obvious desire for some LIGHT reading. Benjamin, that font of opinion and judgment once said that:

[In Kissinger accent]

“These are days when no one should rely unduly on his “competence.” Strength lies in improvisation. All the decisive blows are struck left-handed.”

Benjamin was a little egocentric. I think this is a maxim not just for his time, but also for all times. And I think we all should keep it in mind as we move forward.

Peter Fang sent me a Bruce Mau quote about process being more important than outcome. He said:

“If process drives outcome we may not know where we’re going but we will know we want to be there.”

For my thesis project’s sake, I hope that’s true.

But someone like the Corace Kid or Jimmy “the Greek” Rouvelle mentioned a really important Max Frisch quote to me last week that we should also keep in mind now that we’re done with this part of our education. Frisch said that technology is the “knack of so arranging the world that we need not experience it.”

I bring this up because many of us spend inordinate amounts of time with our heads stuck in our computers. Don’t let all this stuff keep you from experiencing the world around you. Make it one of the tools you use in your experiencing.

And watch out for trying to achieve too much too fast. Guy Clark used to say that “the early bird gets the worm, but the second mouse gets the cheese.”

Which one of you guys gave me that one? I love it.

Take it from a guy who let his career get in the way of his life for a while. Though what we make of our lives professionally is important, lets never believe that it is more important than what contributes to our lives emotionally.

And by that I mean the important contributors like our friends and our loved ones. They are the real essence of life – everything else, and I mean everything else is just window dressing. And for the usability Nazis amongst us- it was probably Donald Norman who quipped that “The problem with window dressing is that it can block out the view.”

And the view is pretty damn important folks. There's that lovely scene in the film King of Hearts when the Duke turns to the Duchess and says dying isn't so bad, you just shut your eyes and go to sleep. "But," she replies, "I'll want to open my eyes and see the lovely flowers.

Near the end of her life Gilda Radner said:

"Life is about not knowing, having to change, taking the moment and making the best of it, without knowing what's going to happen next."

Many of you have left strong impressions on my mind, heart and soul over the last couple of years, and I thank you for making that a reality. I don't know what the future holds, but may I make a request?

Lets never forget to say thank you, lets all try to be humbled by the world in ways that make us learn to be better men and women, and lets all try to find the shining moments in our lives that give us strength through whatever else comes along. Cause believe me, something is going to come along.

This has been a great experience these last two years. And these last ten minutes. I thank you all very much for the opportunity to come up here and babble at you.

May you go in peace.