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Achievements and Awards: So What? Now What?

[Sunil Bhatia , Associate Professor of Human Development](#)

Remarks at the Honors and Awards Ceremony, April 26, 2006

President Fainstein, Dean Hoffmann, Dean Ammirati, faculty, students, families and friends, I feel fortunate and deeply honored to have received the John King Teaching award. Before I go ahead and make my speech, let me take this opportunity to congratulate the award recipients from the Class of 2006. Let's give both the students and their parents a round of applause.

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So what? Now what?

Let me remind the award winners that you have now been identified as outstanding, excellent and a "class apart" from the rest of the crowd. You have won this award, but now you must also face the two simple but inevitable questions: So what? Now what? Where do you go from here? What do you want to do with this award?

One day, some time in the future, when you are older and you are not living in your mom's house, and you have started paying your own bills, this award can be used to accomplish many small goals. Here are two tips for what you can do with this award :

1) You are losing an argument with your co-workers. You are unable to convince them about the merits of your points. So just get in their face and scream, "But I won an outstanding award at Connecticut College. I am still awesome." This statement should also convince your colleagues that you have gifted verbal skills.

2) You have been denied a promotion, your novel has been rejected and you have dropped out of graduate school. Look at your award and keep repeating to yourself, "I was good then, and I am good now." Let me tell you from personal experience, "It works."

Well, my point is that all awards, however prestigious, do not ensure that you will be outstanding forever.

Bask in the glow

Dear students, this is your moment to feel special in this new glow of recognition and youthful optimism. Consume it, seize it and revel in this moment of feeling unique and brilliant because, one day, the march of time will make this moment a faded memory.

As you soak in the praises and adulations, I also urge you to please take a moment to realize that there may be occasions in the future where you will not be an award winner.

Winning this award does not make you entitled to win other awards.

Well, I am not here to dampen your high spirits and subdue your good mood. Rather, as you are engaged in this moment of self-congratulation, I want you to ponder on these questions - especially as you envision a life outside the cocoon of Connecticut College. What will you do

when you don't get into your top-choice graduate school, you can't buy the big house, the fancy car, and you are generally experiencing what Freud called, "common unhappiness?"

What will you do when the radiance of these awards has been diminished, and you are no longer considered "special, unique, outstanding and gifted?" What will you do when the world does not give a damn about your activism, intellectualism and your entitlements and privileges?

Don't be seduced by materialism

I don't need to tell you this, but the world you are about to enter is a dangerous place. Conventional wisdom, corporate gods, savvy media outlets with their pseudo-news, seductive advertising and material allure are ready to shield you from the dangers of poverty, hunger, war, and racism in our society.

Be aware, there are people out there who want your brand loyalty and will seduce you into their beautiful images so that you don't become too loyal to fighting social causes.

Martin Luther King Jr., once said, that "our lives begin to end the day we become silent about things that matter." In the past, we had slavery, caste-system and holocaust because too many people were silent. Those who were silent about such immoral practices, in the end, became beneficiaries of that system. Believe me, your silence, passivity and inaction can make you complicit in creating an unjust system.

Correct and beat the system(s)

So my first piece of advice to you is: Please do not give up your ambitions to become an artist, investment banker, teacher or a musician so you could rescue the world on a full-time basis. But rather I say to you that speak up about the inequalities and injustices in any system you find yourself in. If you don't take time to correct the system, it will correct you: it will correct you by shaping and molding you in its image. If you don't rescue the system, someone will have to come along and rescue it from you. So my advice to you is, beat the system.

Systems are not abstract entities, but rather they are living spaces where people reside. Let me name a few of these systems for you. There is the family system, prison system, school system, class system, eco-system, healthcare system and political system. In a nutshell, these are essential life-support systems. As we speak, someone, somewhere in some system is getting robbed of their human dignity-they are being discriminated, neglected, overlooked, exploited, tortured and oppressed. These systems have many desperate people who don't necessarily live "out there" on fringes of society- they are actually living within the scope of your vision.

Perhaps they don't look, talk and dress like you so you have passed them several times without noticing their presence and their plight. Tonight, I ask you, will you make eye contact with these people? Will you strike up a conversation with those people whose only award is just "staying alive?" Will you, above all, take time to study and understand your systems?

Be ready to name the problem before you intervene in it. It is absolutely critical that you seek consent and permission from those individuals who want to be helped in their respective systems. How do you create meaningful change in your system?

Drawing on the wisdom of the Irish poet, Brendan Kennelly, the great philosopher and rock star of our times, Bono, declares that, "If you want to serve the age, betray it." What does that phrase mean? He explains, "Well, to me, betraying the age means exposing its conceits, its foibles, its

phony moral certitudes. It means telling the secrets of the age and facing harsher truths. Every age has its massive moral blind spots. We might not see them, but our children will."

See the moral blind spots of our age

Are you ready to see the moral blind spots of our age? Go for a walk in your own backyard called New London, and you will see many blind spots of our age. You will see urban decay, racially segregated neighborhoods and poverty. I have also noticed that, after dark, there is a deathly knell of unmistakable silence and loneliness in the streets of downtown New London. The street lights are always on full glow in the night, but you will notice that very few people walk underneath those lights. What do those lights expose? What harsh truths do they reveal? Go, find out. Beat the system. Go to the place, look for yourself and make sure you ask, "Why?" Why do these conditions exist? Get up, go there, study it, see it, and never stop asking, "Why?"

Always interrogate

So my second advice to you is: always interrogate. I think your liberal arts education at Connecticut College has prepared you well to ask questions. The real issue here is not whether you have the capacity to ask good questions, but whether you will ask them in a timely manner. If you want to betray the ages, then the present is the best time to ask hard questions. There are clear and present dangers that are threatening all our life-support systems. I believe that ambivalence and ambiguity are the two main pillars of good thinking. Confusion will create restlessness in the mind. A restless and curious mind will often ask questions in order to uncover the truth. Any philosopher would tell you that good questions can lead you to important truths. However, there may be times when the people who run the systems don't want to see and hear the truth.

When someone does not want to hear your harsh truth, they will tell you, "I don't understand your question. Can you be clear?" When you are challenging people and holding them accountable, you will sometimes hear them say, "You are being ambivalent. Can you please restate your question?"

An "unambiguous question"

If you ever find yourself in these circumstances, my advice to you is restate your so-called ambiguous question - a million times if you have to. Remember, it took almost 200 years for some societies to realize that the question about slavery and colonialism is an "unambiguous question."

I believe that unqualified clarity is overrated. Being clear also can imply that you are merely restating what your audience wants to hear. You are merely repeating conventional knowledge. Being clear in certain situations implies that, "Let the status quo remain . . . Everything is clear."

Ask the hard questions

So, today I urge you to not let anyone use the cloak of clarity to prevent you from asking hard questions. Be ambiguous, be confused, be hesitant, be inarticulate, but ask the hard questions.

As a teacher, I feel I have done my job when my students ask plenty of questions in the classroom. I tell my students, "Don't worry about asking questions that have to sound profound all the time."

I also tell them that if our class discussion ends with no conclusive answers, but plenty of questions, then we are all really "cool." We ask questions, therefore, we are learning and so we

are "cool." By asking questions, we are fulfilling one of the central missions of a liberal arts education—we are becoming thoughtful, analytical and intellectual. I often remind my students there is no shame in being an intellectual.

Geeks rule the world

Look around you: Geeks rule the world. They also get most of the awards.

I tell my students just get used to asking questions: good, confusing, provocative, insightful, superficial, tangential and bizarre questions. Just keep them coming. When my students ask questions, I know they are alive-alive in the class, alive in their spirit and in their minds. Of course, not every student in the class is thinking about asking questions. Given the state of the world today, I know there is a lot on their minds these days.

I know some students are making plans for how fast and how easily can they alter their state of consciousness on Thursday nights. They appear very busy in the class asking probing questions: Will the TNE at Cro be any different this week? Will there be curly fries and pizza in Cro at 2 am in the morning? How will I smuggle a keg in my room? How can I get rid of my weird roommate? I live in Windham, but how did I wake up in a stranger's room in Smith-Burdick? You know, what I am talking about. We won't go there.

In conclusion, feel special and brilliant in this recognition that has been bestowed upon you. Indeed, this is your moment. Acknowledge the sacrifices of your parents, the good work of your faculty and the wisdom of the selection committee. Be prepared to beat the system and expose the blind spots of our times. They are many. The world needs a new, educated perspective so be ready to provide it.

Drawing on the poetry of the great Bob Marley

I will now end my remarks with the poetry of the great Rastafarian, Bob Marley.

"Most people think great god will come from the sky
Take away everything, and make everybody feel high
But if you know what life is worth
You would look for yours on earth
And now you see the light
You stand up for your right, yeah!"

Dear students, don't wait for the gods to come and fix the system. You will be disappointed.

Do it yourself. This is your right!

Congratulations! Best of luck and good night.