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86th Commencement Student Speech

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86th Commencement
at Connecticut College

Remarks by Dan Cayer '04

The other day, in the college bookstore, my mother decided to buy me a diploma frame. “Great!” I said, “I’ll have my secretary hang it in the office!”

“Well,” she said, “some day you might have an office.”

“Are you hiring?”

She sighed, “Well, Dan, what do philosophers do after college?”

In theory, philosophers live with uncomfortable questions. We constantly ask if what we’re doing is right. Like little children, we are always asking why? Or, at least, we write papers about people like that.

To be a philosopher is a luxury. Most people get dropped into life’s paradoxes like Blinko Balls, but philosophers tend to cook up their own dilemmas.

Fortunately, most philosophical problems are like bug bites they will stop itching if you ignore them. The unresolved issues of truth, art, and trees falling in forests, slip away unnoticed with the first whiff of lasagna. Children, however, are difficult to ignore. When I was five years old, my parents called their marriage quits. Now that the union was over, the big question was: what to do with the child?

Because my father was a career man and because my mother had carried me already, I ended up with her. On the Fourth of July, my dad moved out. That evening, my mom and I watched “Ghostbusters,” sobbing as if the film were some sort of ghost tragedy. We finished our first day of the new life by eating ice cream until we fell asleep on the living room floor.

We imagined ourselves as settlers on the frontier. Instead of rattlesnakes, starvation, and the pox; we tried to cut down on TV dinners and keep me in my bed for a whole night. We each helped out in our important ways. She would take care of bills, meals, and driving; and I would sing Bruce Springsteen to our guests. Morale was the household’s main concern.

In the early days after the divorce, I was basically allowed to be a psycho. I ran through the supermarket with my He-Man helmet and sword, attacking elderly shoppers, stabbing their Wonderbread to death. I invited homeless people to stay in our house. And for a brief while, I wondered aloud to family members whether I might not be the second Jesus Christ. I think my mom actually enjoyed the rampages, if only because the alternative was worse: me drifting through the house like a melancholy Socrates, pushing the question, “Why, mom?”

My mother used to stay up late in the dangerous company of her doubts. While she slumped over the kitchen table, revising endless To-Do lists, a question sat beside her. “How do you know he’ll turn out alright?”

Indeed, this was an experiment. Remove the father figure to a weekly dinner commitment, and leave one mother with a full-time job to do the work of two parents. In theory, he will be raised half as well.

We were somewhat of an oddity in the neighborhood; mother and son. To help me practice pitching, my mom would don the glove of her ex-husband and make like a catcher in the front yard. While dads down the street were bullying their sons into throwing hard, my mom and I played nerve-wracking rounds of catch. To make a wild pitch, or worse, to hurt one another, was to reveal weakness to the neighbors. Consequently, our version of catch looked more like an egg-throwing contest than baseball.

“How do you know,” she must have wondered, “if he’ll turn out alright?”

In sixth grade, I selected my first girlfriend solely on the fact that she had the biggest chest in school. Perhaps troubled by my interpretation of manhood, my mother enlisted cousins, coaches, and friends’ dads to reinforce my father’s influence. Still, it took years to invent a macho persona. Thanks to my mom, my musical tastes were as gay as an orange. However, with pressure from friends, I eventually turned against Bette Midler and Barbara Streisand, and I forgot about the Tonys altogether.

When philosophers find themselves in an undesirable position, they lean back from the problem. They approach it from a new angle. Because philosophers get in trouble when they are locked too long in an internal debate. Their insight becomes stale and they lose orientation.

That is the story of my mother and me during the teenage years. In middle school, I seemed destined for jail. Besides smoking in the woods and discovering the tawdry world of Internet pornography, I became a local vandal. One night, I lit a neighbor’s lawn on fire with shaving cream and threw pumpkins into their pool. Since I was the only kid on our secluded dead end road, the crime was easily solved. As punishment, I spent weeks raking leaves across that charred lawn. Near the end of autumn that year, some high school kids drove over their yard and demolished my leaf piles. When I heard the screeching of tires that night, I ran over in dismay. Then I threw their Hibachi into the pool.

Here is a fact that philosophers sometimes fail to acknowledge: humans are not wholly rational actors. When I was a senior in high school, my mother and I lived in a constant state of quarrel. Our time together was dwindling, and the easiest thing to do was yell at each other. Daily screaming and crying eventually eased my apprehension about leaving home, and it turned my mother on to many new kinds of wine.

Suddenly, I was a freshman at Connecticut College, and the adventure of my mom and me was over. Thirteen years of life on the frontier, and now I was moving out. I had broken the non-abandonment pact between us, and for what? To live in a dorm where Instant Messenger chimes like cathedral bells through the hallway?

My mom set up an 800-number to the house, like a hotline for lonely sons. I worried: who will do all the dumb, burly stuff like put up ladders and the storm windows before winter? I wondered, who will turn off the television and gently wake my mother from the recliner?

Yet, things got easier for me. I fell in love with the college. In between water polo games, improv shows, and fifteen-page papers, I tried to keep my mom informed. Yet, I felt us veer apart, not in severe rifts, but like continents inching away from each other.

When I return home, however, time becomes nothing at all and I relive our struggle; my mom and I making salad against the world, decorating the Christmas tree against the world.

At one time in my life, all I wanted was to hear my mom sing. I told her she was more beautiful and melodious than even Whitney Houston. Now, I go home for break and tell her her books are

dumb, and make her eat soy dogs. It is easy to see faults in your parents, especially once you've seen them in a bathing suit.

Have I learned anything from philosophy?

In Intro. Philosophy classes, they tell to you never to take the premises for granted. Perhaps if I had paid more attention in class, it wouldn't have taken me until graduation to ask, "Mom, why did you never give up on me?"

Seniors, we might all ask the same question of why we are even loved at all. You may not get an answer. Though, a warm, pleasant sensation may fill you nonetheless. Just look at the incredulous expression on your parents' faces. If your parents are anything like mine, they are truly astonished that you turned out so well.

And take a look at this ceremony we are sharing. Realize the hours spent arranging your chairs, the way the grass is meticulously cut beneath your feet, and feel the soft, pillowy fabric of your underwear. There is a lot to be grateful for.

Mom, in case you were wondering, the diploma frame is coming home with me. In my bedroom, next to the Mario Brothers' drawings and the Little League trophies. In the place where, sixteen years ago, our adventure began.