

## RECAPTURING AND TEACHING HUMANITY (RIVIER COLLEGE COMMENCEMENT ADDRESS, MAY 13, 2006)

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Laziness, apathy, and disappointment were some of the words that **stole my humanity** some 26 years ago. Many of my current classmates and teachers would be surprised to learn that this was a period of underachievement for which I blamed everyone else but myself.

In the Christmas film, *It's a Wonderful Life*, there is a quip borrowed from George Bernard Shaw, uttered when George Bailey promises to lasso the moon and give it to young Mary Hatch, but passes up a chance to kiss her behind the bushes. A nearby onlooker yells, "Youth is wasted on the young." **In my case**, he was right. Like the character, George Bailey and so many other despondent people who can't see the value of their true existence in the world, I, too, simply resisted change and growth that comes from a commitment to lifelong learning. I was lost. More important than that was **what** I could have lost: my education, my parents' trust, good friends and, worst of all, my faith in God. So how did I rediscover **humanity**?

Perhaps rediscovery comes from some of life's harsh realities. I realized that waiting on tables and packaging plastic molded toilet seats wasn't the fast track towards recovery from my cosmic stupor. I quickly figured out that I needed to go back to school. I earned an Associate's Degree by working several jobs, one of which included singing in smoke-filled nightclubs. I successfully worked my way up "young ambition's ladder," to quote Shakespeare's *Julius Caesar*, in the computer industry. Yet ambition is like pride: a little bit goes a **long way**, while too much goes the **wrong way**. How could I still have been so lost?

It was because I had dedicated my personal best to my professional career, which had resulted in stolen precious hours from my family. I had rationalized my misappropriated priorities by **thinking** how happy my family must be now that I bought a second car and installed a pool in our backyard. At the time, however, I had failed to realize that I really wasn't **thinking** at all. As a matter of fact, I felt unfulfilled in my own self-absorption. I had no real purpose.

So here I stand, in the autumn of my purposeful life, about to receive a Bachelor of Arts from Rivier College in English Education. I got here because God never abandoned me as I struggled and made mistakes; forgiveness, by the way, is a large part of what it means to be human. Likewise, my husband, Christopher, an unselfish man profoundly in touch with the significance of life, also helped me find the path to my humanity. I became the prodigal daughter returning to the fold when Sr. Marjorie Francouer began our first Shakespeare class with a prayer. Reflection and prayer amid the familiarity of a nun's tutelage in a Catholic school again so many seasons after my parochial school training began to revive values I had once learned as a child.

However, I am not alone. Throughout our college journey, all of us have explored, defended, and cherished our values-our belief system-in our personal and academic writing. Our beliefs were also challenged through the literature we read. We made pilgrimages to Canterbury, confronted good and evil in Paradise, and wandered into *The Heart of Darkness* and came out alive, but changed. We learned to **think**. "To be or not to be?" We asked ourselves. This has been the true purpose of our education. In answering this question, we have constructed our humanity.

“To be” means more than a mere physical existence in which we selfishly, satisfy our desires, while neglecting the needs of the soul. Rivier College students can attest to the pleasure experienced in response to human need. Addressing our peers at school, we have shared our human, soulful connections, such as those made through service to the Casa de Esperanza de los Ninos safe house for abused children, many of whom were HIV positive. “To be” commands a soulful existence in which we discover satisfaction in daily self-improvement whether in the work place practicing tolerance and fairness with employees or exhibiting kindness to patients in a home health hospice situation. “To be” demands participation in our local, state, and federal government policies to maintain or improve our human social order. “To be” requires a profound understanding of an integral set of different words crucial to humanity’s lexicon. Humanity’s survival is dependent upon our ability to embrace and model the interdisciplinary, borderless, and universal ideology behind these words: free, love, hope, and soul.

In this country where humanity’s survival is based on our founding fathers principles of self-reliance, we are free individuals who are able to choose right action over evil. This becomes increasingly important in our growing technological world that has the ability to influence they way we think and act. We have learned to think critically about what we hear, read, and view, so that we may choose to act in accordance with the moral conscience required of a civil society. We have learned that we must not become anesthetized by the hypnotic beat of some of the music whose lyrics promote violence and cultural division. We have learned caution in regards to “get rich quick schemes,” credit card fraud and identity theft that lurks in the shadows of Internet and television advertisements. We now know that just because words are written in a book or newspaper or blog, it doesn’t necessarily make them true. The truth is, whether we have learned to care for the sick, tackle business ethics, perform quantitative research, conduct DNA tests, transfer conceptual ideas into visual artistic expressions, speak a foreign language, or apply effective teaching strategies, we must all assume the role of teacher in order to regain and sustain the humanity of our local and global community.

As we assume responsibility of our new occupations, we must never lose sight of what truly matters. Love. According to the Beatles, “money can’t buy” it. I’ll be the first one to agree with them. In our materialistic society teeming with superficial relationships, we must focus our attention on the vulnerable and the exploited. There are many children in our schools who have been damaged by our broken world. Working long hours to provide them with automobiles, designer clothing, expensive electronics, and every activity under the sun doesn’t equal the love of a parent who is present in his or her child’s life. Seize this opportunity to teach children about priorities. Teach them that love requires patience, devoted time and open communication grounded in moral standards and consistency. Likewise, we must also love our parents in the same fashion, forgiving all of their mistakes because we are **not** perfect beings. By modeling love and respect for our parents, we are teaching our children **unconditional** love that has the potential to transcend biological bonds into the larger human world.

If we excel in love, then we will live in hope. I am not above my religious roots or this Catholic college to share that hope, which, according to Hebrews, Chapter 6, Verse 19, is the “sure and steadfast anchor of the soul.” Hope is expressed and nourished in prayer that will help us abandon laziness, greed, isolation and failure. Hope is our defense against the daily struggles that test our humanity. May God bless us and keep us humane in all our future endeavors.

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