

MICROBES, COMMUNICATION, AND COMMUNITY: AURTMTC/C The Convocation Address, Part II (September 8, 2009)

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This is a difficult task: standing in front of a class of incoming first year students, delivering the second part of a convocation speech.

- I remember being a first year college student sitting through a similar convocation. Watching the faculty march into the hall with their robes, I thought perhaps I was in the wrong place. Hogwarts? Ok. Ok. An anarchism, but I still thought I was in the wrong place.
- Which is part of why this is such a difficult task?
- I remember sitting and watching, but I have no recollection of who the speaker was or what that speaker said. I didn't really want to sit there either. I wanted to get on with the business of being a college student. What would the classes be like? Would I get along with my roommate? How would I fit it?
- This is also a difficult task because I follow Dr. Barbaro who beautifully presented Bill McKibbin's critique of growth, tying his argument into similar understandings in her discipline.
- I also follow speakers of previous years who created a high standard: for example, last year at this convocation Dr. Lizotte summarized McKibbin's work in the phrases "everything is connected" and "everything has to go somewhere".
- This is also difficult because I really want to have you understand why we're going through this ceremony, why we're speaking. And we're telling you this because....
- And that's where words fail me... and this task becomes extremely difficult.
- So as I was preparing for this talk, trying to shape what I see as McKibbin's main point--that "more" does not necessarily lead to better; in fact, it may lead to just the opposite--to make this point into something that maybe, just maybe, one of you might remember years from now, I wasn't quite sure what to say.
- So how to get across that this experience at Rivier, this experience you are about to begin, this experience intends for you to have more, this experience can help you to be better, but this experience can also help you to realize that happiness and true success, as McKibbin tells us, go far beyond having more.
- So I thought maybe I'd tell you a story.
- Maybe I'd tell you about how I thought about what to say in this talk as I stood in line a week and a half ago at the JFK Library for Ted Kennedy's "lying in repose." How my sons kept asking me who this man was and why we were there. How I told them that Kennedy was a deeply flawed man—I wrote a play about his accident at Chappaquiddick and his responsibility in the death of Mary Jo Kopenchne. Something like that doesn't just go away. I told my sons that though Kennedy was deeply flawed, he kept going after a grievous mistake, and worked to make the world better. He

teaches us about redemption. Whether or not he did make the world better is not really the point; the point is, he committed himself to serving the people of the United States when he could very easily have stayed at home and lived on his wealth. He shows us that we can go forward even after horrific things.

- Maybe, instead, I'd tell you about my first semester in my sophomore year of college, when I had an existential crisis. At the time an economic major, I had a paper to write for my comparative literature class on Samuel Beckett's play *Waiting for Godot*. In the play, two rather miserable characters keep waiting for the arrival of another character, Godot. They wait and they wait, suffering through their miseries, just knowing that when Godot gets there everything will be all right. But, of course, he never comes.

That semester, as I tried to write a paper that just seemed impossible to write because I was so passionate about it and as I majored in a subject I knew would make me a lot of money **when** I graduated and **when** I got that job at the big brokerage firm on Wall Street, I realized I was waiting for Godot. I was waiting for Godot, and he wouldn't come—but that didn't mean life was for naught. It meant I had to celebrate what was around me instead of waiting for tomorrow.

- Or – I could tell you stories about faculty here who do celebrate what is around them. About Prof. Judie O'Hara's passion for each of the classes she teaches. About Dr. Tim Doherty's dedication to each student paper he considers. About how Dr. Sue Gately's interest in the field of education has lead her to travel to Antigua and Honduras to collaborate with teachers there.

I could tell you stories about how each of the faculty are here, because we love what we do. We choose to be here. We're excited to meet you, to learn from you. We want you to knock on our office doors and engage in the dialectic.

And I could tell you that study after study shows that when students celebrate the faculty around them and build strong academic relationships with faculty, the students are far more likely to succeed.

- But that gets us back to where McKibbon started: how to succeed. Having us rethink that more leads to better.
- Then, as I was working on this very difficult talk—suddenly a phrase began spinning in my head, in Latin of all things:
- “Altiora y meliora.”
- Higher and better.
- Not more and better, but higher and better.
- The Rivier College motto also tells us what Bill McKibbon is saying: that **it is how** we get at the better that matters.

PAUSE

- So I won't bore you with stories. It's time for you to get on with the business of being college students. But in your classes, remember that “more” is not always the answer (and I'm sure those of you who will be my students will remind me of this as I give out writing assignments).
- At Rivier College, we have you read Bill McKibbon's book to begin thinking about how more is not necessarily the way to better. Higher and better is perhaps a preferable pairing.

- Founded in 1933 by Sr. Madeline of Jesus (who herself had stories to tell) and the Sisters of the Presentation of Mary, Rivier College is a Catholic institution of higher education, dedicated to transforming hearts and minds to serve the world.
- I'm here because of that. I think you will be here because of that too. Think, debate, ponder, research, write, explore, enjoy yourselves, grow, serve—seek the higher things.
- So we're telling you this because we want you to have at the back of your mind as you go about the business of being college students that more isn't necessarily the answer. You can reach higher to get better.
- *Altiora et meliora.*

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