



Colloquy, August 17, 2022
School of Arts & Sciences Dean Jennifer J. Cavanaugh Remarks

Good afternoon.

Thank you for the warm welcome. Despite a... and I hesitate to share this... a moderate fear of spiders, I feel embraced by, and am eager to embrace, my new academic home. I was honored to be asked to share some thoughts with our community today. As you come to know me you will learn that I am very relational, so, in the spirit of building relationships, let me start by sharing a little bit of my own journey into the world of higher education. Then I'll talk about us.

I am the youngest of five children and I grew up on the campus of a private K-12 school in the Bronx, Riverdale Country School, where my father served as headmaster for 23 years. My closest sibling is eight years older than I and my oldest brother is 20 years my senior. My mother who was 45 when I was born, referred to me lovingly throughout her life as "her best ever surprise." As an older mother myself I realize now how exhausting I must have been. As a child I was rambunctious and if my siblings are to be believed a tad demanding. When things didn't go my way, I could put on quite a show. Mom tried teach me patience and would often tell me that in life, when things didn't go your way, you just had to "build a bridge and get over it," or her other favorite "grin and bear it." When I became particularly demanding, she would shake her head and say, "Jennifer, you are not the Queen of France."

But really, I had a rather magical childhood—we lived on the school campus in a house that was always filled with people — students, teachers, parents — engaging in rich conversation over the dining table or the pool table or piano. There was lots of music and lots of laughter. The school was filled with activity — sports events, plays, concerts and it was all in my backyard. On the weekends I would roam the halls popping in and out of the empty classrooms fascinated by their *mise en scene*. The skeleton hanging in the science lab (who was that?), the drum set in the music room, the pictures of pyramids and pharaohs in the history room — I found all of these enthralling. But my favorite was the great central study hall- a long room with a dais and lectern at the front and rows upon rows of desks bolted to the ground. I would spend hours in that empty room “lecturing” my invisible students, sharing the vast knowledge of my eight-year-old brain. Schools were amazing places and I wanted more than anything else to be a teacher.

My father retired when I was twelve and we moved from New York city to a small town in the Adirondack mountains in upstate New York. Suddenly I was the new kid in a small school where everyone was either a close neighbor or a distant relation. Suffering from puberty and culture shock, I struggled to find my place in this new school. That is until my English teacher Mrs. Moore took me under her wing and invited me into the drama club.

Oh, brave new world! Here was a place where there was room for all of my emotions, a place where my imagination became a strength and not a distraction. Theater let me try on different identities, practice different attitudes and imagine multiple possibilities for myself. In the theater club I found my people and I began to thrive. Mrs. Moore would lend me books and scripts and we would talk about them after school — she encouraged me to start writing plays and then gave

me the opportunity to direct them. I didn't know it at the time, but she had set me on the path to my future career.

Fast forward to my freshman year in college. By now all of my siblings were out in the working world. My two older brothers had become teachers, my sister and third brother were struggling actors. My parents were proud that I had been accepted into an Ivy league school but they emphasized to me that I needed to major in something practical so that at least one of their children would make some money.

In my freshman fall I took a class called Schools and Society. I had signed up for it thinking it would be pretty easy, after all I had grown up on a school campus and was pretty sure I had a good handle on what schools were for and how they worked. My professor was Dr. Faith Dunne and she was brilliant, and patient, and completely revolutionized the way I thought about schools and education. In class we talked about how politics and religion impacted curriculum, and how property values determined budgets and created deeply unequal playing fields, and how a history of segregation continued to disadvantage children of color long after the laws had changed. Perhaps the most startling discovery of all for me was that mainstream media coverage of education rarely talked about any of these inequities. I cannot overemphasize how life changing that class was. My college didn't have an education major but I took every class I could.

My parents cautioned me not to limit my employment options by taking too many education courses (the irony of getting this advice from two people who had devoted their life to education was not lost on me). I could be anything they said, a doctor, a lawyer, a banker. Just no theater

and no teaching. So, I planned to be a lawyer and dutifully prepared for law school through interdisciplinary course work and summers spent as a paralegal. I loved my classes and I got a great education, but the paralegal work made me question whether or not a career in law was really for me. (Apologies to my Law School colleagues!)

My joy still came from theater but in keeping with my parent's wishes I actually never took a theater class in college. That didn't keep me from participating in just about every production I could and eventually heading up the student theater organization. I really did try to live up to my parents hopes — that I become something other than an actor or a teacher--well imagine their dismay when, upon graduation I became an acting teacher.

So, let me pause here and ask you a few questions.

Question #1: when you were a child — was there something that you dreamed about doing the way I dreamed about being a teacher? If it helps to close your eyes as you try to remember feel free to do so. I won't know if you're deeply engaged or just taking a little nap. What was your childhood dream? Is there any part of that dream in your current job?

Question #2: Who was your Mrs. Moore or Professor Dunne? Who opened your eyes to a whole new way of thinking or seeing? Who saw something in you and helped you to find the space and place to lean into your talents and passions? Have you ever told them what they meant to you? Or shared the impact they had on your life?

Question #3: How much of your life path (whether it was your college education, your career or even your choice of where to live to who to date?) was shaped by other people's expectations?

I ask these questions because I think they are really relevant to our work as college educators. Students come to us with dreams — some fresh and on the surface, others buried back in childhood. Knowing where they come from will help us set them on the path to their future.

I ask these questions also to remind us of the profound impact we can have on the students in our care. Most of us can think of students with whom we have shared a close mentoring relationship. If you are like me you have a special folder for the notes and emails that former students have written thanking you for the influence you have had on their lives. And if you are like me you pull these out on those tough days when you are not sure that your work is valued or appreciated. It is clear to me that at UR that faculty and staff commitment to mentoring students is a key part of the special sauce that makes this place so remarkable.

And I ask these questions because our students are facing tremendous pressures from their families, their peers, and the culture around them to approach their education with a return-on-investment attitude. I sometimes think about the classes I could have taken or the experiences I could have had but rejected because I thought my parents would think they were not “practical” or financially beneficial. I wish I knew then what I know now that choice of major is far less important than the skills and habits developed through a liberal arts education. That regardless of major, liberal arts graduates do well financially, overtaking the salaries of other graduates five or ten years out from graduation. That employers want the skills that liberal arts graduates possess.

I may not have known that at the time of my own college education but I am deeply aware now that the skills and passions I developed in college have all helped me build a relatively successful and a deeply fulfilling career as a theater educator and college administrator.

I'll end with one more lesson that I have learned from Mrs. Moore. I'm sure you all know the image of the comic and tragic mask? I remember Mrs. Moore telling me one day that when she looked at them, she didn't see comedy and tragedy, what she saw was agony and ecstasy. Both, she said, were a part of life and the two belonged together — two ends of a spectrum that define the emotional landscape of human experience.

I have been thinking about agony and ecstasy quite a bit lately. Across the country and indeed the globe we have had our share of agony over the past few years. Nearly six and a half million deaths from COVID worldwide, over 300 mass shootings in the U.S. so far in 2022, political division and hate crimes, natural disasters the list goes on. Sometimes it seems too much. Sometimes it's hard to be hopeful.

For two years educators have put our heads down and powered through. We gave up summers to find new ways to teach from our laptops in our kitchens and guest rooms, we learned how to split our focus between masked students in the room with us and muted students zooming in from afar. We went in and out of quarantine as our partners and parents, our children and colleagues tested positive for the virus. We saw our kids and our students struggle with prolonged isolation. We struggled with it too. We didn't go to weddings or funerals, we didn't visit our collaborators, or get to the archives. What we did do, was “grin and bear it.”

And good for us for soldiering on and figuring out how to make it work. Across academia leaders thanked the faculty and staff for their hard work under such difficult conditions. As they should have. But we all needed to get on with the business of education, and there weren't many opportunities to talk openly as a community about how we had been personally or collectively impacted by the trauma.

In Shakespeare's Scottish play [*Macbeth*], Malcom implores the grief-stricken Macduff "*Give sorrow words; the grief that does not speak knits up the o-er wrought heart and bids it break.*" I think what he is saying is: Don't grin and bear it. This year let's give each other and our students some space to acknowledge some of this agony, to sit with it, speak it, paint it, study it, dance it, write it, run it, and know that we are not alone. We will be stronger as a community if we can be real with each other.

And if you are worried about the direction this talk is going... or if you are weary of agony and trauma, don't forget the other mask. Ecstasy.

In her essay, "Ecstasy: Teaching and Learning without Limits", bell hooks recalls the educators who changed her life and set her on a path towards teaching, writing, and activism. She writes, "When I think about my life as a student, I can remember vividly the faces, gestures, habits of being of all the individual teachers who nurtured and guided me, who offered me an opportunity to experience joy in learning, who made the classroom a space of critical thinking, who made the exchange of information and ideas a kind of ecstasy." (hooks) In rereading hooks' essay I was

struck by the ways it speaks to my own sense of gratitude for being part of a community of teachers, artists and scholars. Think about the work we get to do every day and look at who we get to do it with; we are on a perpetual mission of discovery, pushing the boundaries of learning and affirming the transformative power of education. And this is where I find hope and this is where I find¹ joy. hooks closes her essay with this: “The academy is not paradise. But learning is a place where paradise can be created. The classroom with all its limitations, remains a location of possibility.” Ecstatic possibility.

Thank you for letting me share a little bit of my journey with you. By now it should be clear that I would not be standing here were it not for remarkable teachers and mentors who helped me find the courage and build the skills I needed to thrive in a career that I love. I haven’t been at the University of Richmond very long, but it is clear to me that this room is filled with people who awaken dreams, open minds and change lives every day.

So, I may not be the Queen of France, but I am the newest Spider Dean and I am living the dream.

Thank you, and happy new year!

1

hooks, bell. "Ecstasy: Teaching and Learning Without Limits." Schmidt, Phylis R. Freeman and Jan Zlotnik. *Wise Women: Reflections of Teachers at Midlife*. New York: Routledge, 2000. 173-177.