

# THE MOST PROFOUND LESSON I LEARNED IN COLLEGE

Commencement Speech, 1998

*Pacific Union College*

*By Julie Z. Lee, president of the graduating class*

I have been contemplating the theme for my commencement speech for quite some time now—although I have to admit that much of the pondering was consolidated into the past couple weeks—and while several ideas were tossed about, I kept returning to the same one: What has been the most profound lesson I have learned in college?

One day I was sitting in a classroom where a discussion had managed to run free of a steady topic. Eventually it landed on the issue of hypocrisy and how hints of it lurked on this campus. One student, obviously piqued, raised her hand to make a heated comment. She described how certain professors on campus were very hypocritical, because the ideas they brought up during class were questionable in regards to upholding traditional SDA standards. She felt that the offending professors should be dismissed. For after all, she said, “How dare they challenge my faith?”

Outrageous isn't it? That we should have to be terrified of opinions that clash with the conventional norms with which we were brought up. I came to PUC with the hopes that my faith would be enriched, fulfilled, and strengthened. I certainly did not come here for my doubt to be stimulated. Nor for my conviction to be questioned. Little did I realize that skepticism is a prolific weed, fed by the concepts of higher learning.

I found that certain ideas, while magnificently brilliant, were often in direct opposition to what has been deemed traditional in our religion. And the more I learned, the more I began to second-guess myself. Notions that had once held steadfast in my mind as stalwart fact began to fade slightly in confidence. I began to examine carefully my spirituality, stunned that suddenly truth was not as obvious as it once was.

Often I dissected every iota of my spirituality, the components of its building parts spread out before me for analysis. I have to admit that some days it never fit back together quite the same way it had been taken apart. But while this terrified me at first, today I am aware of the significance of this process.

Epistemology, the search for truth, has been with human civilization since the beginning of time. Countless philosophers have attempted to answer, to resolve what it is that people should believe. Some dictated truth, con-



vinced that they themselves had found the right and high path directly towards it. Yet I have not been seduced by their ways. Instead I have found a liking towards the method of one Socrates, last name unknown. Socrates created the dialectic—the idea that thesis plus antithesis equals synthesis. One concept plus its opposite results in a new and ideally progressed concept.

Here at PUC, I have found that the most profound lesson in education is the importance of a dialogue between the educator and the student. It has been in the classes where certain truth was not known, where we as a room of students had to contemplate upon the notions thrown upon us, that I learned the most, explored the most profound recesses of life. In these classes, where the dialectical approach thrived, I became hungry for truth. Never did my instructors impose their ideas upon us; never did they loom over our still undeveloped intellects with the advantageous power of having authority. My professors were not afraid to venture into precarious subject matters that had the potential to destroy me spiritually. They never told me that this was the way I had to believe, but rather that these were the ways I could.

My most profound moments were not during lectures, but rather during class discussions, where voices intermingled in a joint attempt to find answers. It is this constant intertwining of ideas, thought bounced off the intellects of others, that will lead forward, one step closer to what we must *individually* grasp as Truth. This, I firmly believe, is the essence of education, of an elevated education—that by participating in a dialogue with each other, we learn to think for ourselves. And this, this amazing ability to think for ourselves that God has provided us with, can only come about through a collision of thesis vs. antithesis, customary vs. unorthodox, comfortable vs. downright offensive. And yes, traveling this perilous road laden with binary oppositions will undeniably lead some down paths more well trodden and deviant in terms of Christianity. But this is an inescapable possibility during an individual's exploration of the world. Yet, horrifying as this may seem, two things that my professors told me stand out in my mind. One professor told me that "we should be terrified of ignorance, not of knowledge. The fear that we will uncover controversial ideas should not hinder

our search for what is truth." Another professor said, "If there is one lesson that I want my students to learn, it is that they be constantly seeking."

I applaud those professors who provoked my beliefs. I laud those who violated my well-padded zones of security by placing thorns in its cushions. I am grateful to those of you who have shaken my faith, who have caused me to gasp in horror at some of the things I have read, who have challenged me to take up the initiative to decide what is Truth for myself, *not* what is truth to others. You have decided not to spoon-feed me, but only to incite the hunger in me to learn. And most importantly, you have always shown that through a constant dialogue between the educator and the student, we have much to learn from each other.

How dare you challenge my faith? Please, do so. In more colloquial terms, I double dog dare you. It is through this continuing process of questioning that we grow stronger spiritually. If we never question what it is that we believe, then we will never completely understand *why* we believe.

My roommate, Laura A. Williams, took the definition of wings from the dictionary and transformed it into a beautiful poem titled "The Capacity of Flight" that perfectly illustrates what I would like to leave my fellow graduates with:

## The Capacity of Flight

*Such an appendage even though rudimentary if possessed by an animal belonging to a group characterized by the power of flight.*

*Any of various organic structures esp. of a flying fish or flying lemur providing means of limited flight.*

*Capacity of flight*

*Size and length must be proportional*

*But not overpowering to the weight of the body*

*To fly . . . Yes.*

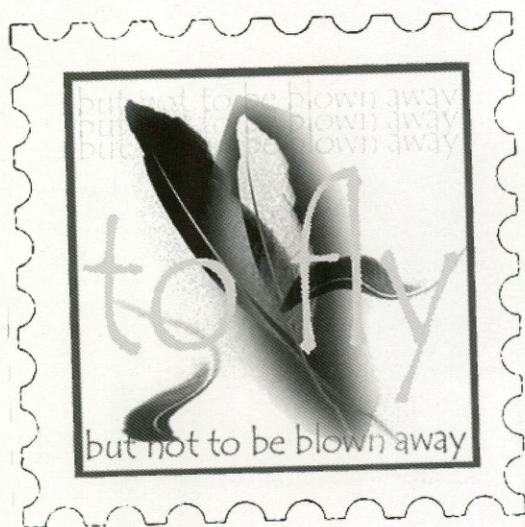
*But not to be blown away.*

My fellow graduates, just moments from now we will leave this nest, this haven. Entering into a plethora of information in this world, let us not be fooled into blindly accepting the suppositions of others on the basis that it is simply easier to be a passive participant in life than an active one. Let us be petrified at the thought of ignorance. Let us constantly seek. And find. And not, I repeat, not be blown away.



## *Afterword:* TESTING YOUR ABILITY TO SWIM

Several months after I delivered my graduation speech, someone who had been present at the ceremony asked if my speech was a “celebration of doubt.” Flustered, considering that the person questioning me was a professor of philosophy and a well-respected pastor, I stammered a series of no’s and I don’t think so’s, all the while running my speech



through my head for evidence of a “doubt jubilee.” He prodded me further, and asked, “After you’ve hit rock bottom, do you ever swim out of the swamps? Or do you stay there?”

The conversation left me stunned and horrified to think that maybe I had misspoken in praising the process of questioning your faith. After all, was I not still treading the murky waters of ecclesiastical rock bottom?

It was another epiphanic moment in my spiritual journey.

There are theories on the reason as to why God allowed humans to be subject to sin. One is called the fortunate fall, arguing that without sin, we would not fully appreciate the awesome love of the Divine. It is just an idea passed along during a philosophy lecture, but in some respects it applies to my personal experience.

I don’t consider it fortunate that I have grown skeptical of religion and faith. Mental anguish is not something I readily welcome (well not on most occasions). Yet falling is something we are all prone to. It is

the reality of this that allows me to stand behind what I said at my graduation.

Knowledge is frightening. As much as we tout enlightenment, I think education can be terrifying when placed in the context of spirituality. I was born into Adventism; my faith was given without choice. So when I was confronted with conflicting ideas later in college, I hardly knew where to tuck them away. It was then that I realized I couldn’t. When there are questions, it is not enough to ignore them under the fear of heresy. I would rather answer these doubts than have them linger in the background. Furthermore, I would like to explore them in a surrounding I regard as spiritually secure.

The spiritual journey is a perpetual one. I don’t know when I will fully comprehend all that I need to know. But for now, I am seeking. I am actively seeking. People may wag their fingers at the proponents of higher learning, but they are not aware of a person’s genuine desire to learn about what is true. Today I may wear the muck of hazy waters, but tomorrow I hope to find a new spring. This is my celebration. I am exalting my mental capacity to seek. Knowledge can destroy, but the wonderful fact is that knowledge can also rebuild. And the second time around, with the weaknesses detected and remedied, the structures are usually more sound.

I often reflect on that conversation with the pastor. For the most part, I know he was playing to the extreme just to keep me on my toes. But I couldn’t have been more grateful. In my speech I applauded those professors who had dared challenge my faith. Now someone had chosen to challenge my doubt. Granted, some trials push a little harder than others. But a journey towards Truth would be trifling without the occasional stumble. Besides, dusting your knees and getting back up—or rather swimming and not drowning—is a only a matter of willpower. And faith.

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