

On Believing in Doubt

Earlier I said that graduation is my favorite ceremony, and it is. At first glance there is no downside. It is spring. Most everyone is happy. Friends and family members are justifiably proud. Students and faculty are overjoyed to have completed their assignments. But if I were being totally honest, I'd have to admit that for myself there are always melancholic undertones this time of year. Though spring represents rebirth, fertility, and life itself, in the academic realm it is also associated with culminations, endings, and departures. Students leave. Colleagues retire or move on to other positions. For academics like me spring is always about letting go.

Melancholic emotions are in the background tonight, despite the well-earned joy. Speaking directly to our graduates for a moment let me say out loud some things I know you are thinking. Yet again you are facing a moment in your life when your friends are scattering. You may be moving to a new town or city. Heck, you may be moving home! There is lots of room for melancholy there! Either way, your future beckons, change is afoot and that means uncertainty reigns. You are already thinking beyond graduation to questions like: Will I enjoy my new job? Will I be liked? Will I be good at it? Given the way things are going, many of you are surely asking: Will there even be a new job? Those heading off to graduate school are worried too. They ask: Will I be as successful as I was in college? Or, will my new teachers discover limitations that the Hofstra faculty overlooked? Emotions such as these are a genuine part of every graduate's experience as they pick up their medals and their diplomas.

By now, some in tonight's audience are wondering "What kind of graduation speech is this?! Graduations don't call for dark reflections in a minor key. This is a celebration. There's even wine on the table!" I know. I ordered the wine. And I hope by the end to have brought things around from these disquieting beginnings. But tonight I'd like to reflect with our students on HOW they earned their exalted status as soon to be graduates of Hofstra University, with an honors college designation, to boot! And, to make my point, I have to turn things even a bit darker, so please bear with me.

I'm not surprising anyone when I say that if you could pick a year to graduate few would choose 2009. It carries the burden of economic collapse, global warming, and two wars! Well, we know whom to blame for the timing of your graduation. Look across the table – they did it. If only your parents had gotten you started a bit earlier, say in 1984 or 5 instead of 1986 or 7, you'd have had time to finish school AND enjoy the last of the boom years. If you were two years older maybe you'd have graduated in 2007 and taken one of those hot consulting jobs where bright young 21 year olds flew around the world telling 50-somethings how to do their jobs. Now that would have been fun. You missed out because your parents couldn't get down to the basic business of bringing you into existence sooner.

I don't think I surprise anyone by referencing the great tradition of blaming one's parents, when all else fails. We parents in the room are used to it, of course. It's a practice we engaged in when we were your age. You see, we have more in common with you than you realize. If I've done my calculations right, most parents here tonight "came of age" in the late '60's through the '70's. This was not exactly a

happy time. We had political assassinations, riots, an unpopular devastating war, an oil embargo, U.S. hostages, and a wonderful thing called “stagflation” (that’s where the economy looks much like it does today except *everything* is getting more expensive by the hour). I use the pronoun we because, your parents and I went through that mess together. We’re around the same age.

When we graduated we were quite certain that the folks who had come before us – our own parents – had left us quite a mess. Yes, I mean your grandparents, those sweet old folks who have done whatever they can to spoil you. Given the circumstances it was hard for us to see how things could be any more screwed up than they were. Adding insult to injury, someone enlisted the marketing industry to convince us that our generation was expected to be the world’s saviors. We were the first generation to be branded commercially – We were the “Pepsi generation.” (I kid you not!) We even had a jingle and tag line – “I’d like to teach the world to sing, in perfect harmony.” You could almost hear it as we marched up the aisle to receive our diplomas, shake the president’s hand and listen to uplifting speeches extolling our great virtues. Unfortunately for your generation the cool brands are already taken. Your grandparents belatedly got labeled “The Greatest Generation.” All that’s left are generic labels like Generation X, Y, and who knows, maybe Z.

I rehearse this generational history in order to make a point about doubt. You see, when the Pepsi generation was singing about creating a “perfect harmony” most of us who had any sense had doubts. I remember looking around a room at the people my age thinking if the world is depending on this motley crew we are

cooked. I'm assuming that you graduates are feeling much the same thing. Your thoughts right now are probably running something like "Could things be any worse than they are now? And to top it off, these Pepsi-generation boomers are expecting *us* to fix things as they head toward their retirement years? I've got news for them, I know this motley crew, and we are cooked."

So you see, you have much in common with your parents. We both found or find ourselves faced with daunting global circumstances left to us by our predecessors. We both had or have doubts about our ability to contribute in a positive way toward their resolution. And most importantly, whatever progress we made or will make is dependent on those doubts.

Let me explain. You see, I'm a great believer in doubt. Doubt is the underlying engine of human inquiry and ingenuity. No one inquires about anything without first having doubts. Every human effort is rooted in the vague fear that we don't really understand what's going on and that there is trouble up ahead. There could be no progress, no change, no discoveries, no hope, without doubt.

I know there are pop therapists who spend a great deal of their time trying to convince you that doubt is your enemy. They tell us that doubt is the opposite of confidence. It is not. Doubt is the gateway to wonder. Only by doubting what you know can the world open itself to you in new and exciting ways. Moreover, a little fear never hurt anyone. Think back over your college career. How often did some of your best work emerge as a response to fear of failure. That wasn't an accident. I can tell you now because you've succeeded and are about to be welcomed into the community of Hofstra and HUHC alumni. Most of your education has been about

accustoming you to experiencing, facing, and yes, embracing doubt. You've been prodded, tested, and pushed. And you've shown us that you are capable of handling an undeniable truth about humanity. We need doubt. We crave it. To understand my point, simply think about the fact that *every* story you've ever enjoyed, from Homer's *Odyssey* to the latest episode of South Park *is* a story because of the way it establishes and plays with doubt. Readers/listeners are engaged because they feel an urge to discover "what will happen next." All art and music rely on the same basic human drive. New works render old assumptions unstable, making way for the introduction of forms not yet tested or explored. Doubt, uncertainty, instability, are the raw material of human creativity.

So, you see, as your grandparents did for us, we parents of today are handing you a great opportunity. We present you a world in utter turmoil, a world that is unstable, with no clear pathway marked out. We know you have deep, deep doubts about your ability to contribute to getting us out of this situation. We also know that such doubts will set the stage for forms of creativity not yet imagined. Something you do may literally change the world. More likely, you will contribute in the same small ways your parents and I have contributed. We faced our doubts. We found partners and friends who helped us do so. Along the way we did what we could to carry things forward.

Tomorrow as you walk across the stage, you'll receive your handshake from President Rabinowitz and be recognized for the first time as Hofstra graduates. As you do, I hope you will be thinking about the many different ways you've prepared yourself for what is to come. You'll have doubts, of course, but that's a good thing.

And if it helps, you should know that your parents, and we in HUHC have great confidence in you. After all, we've had an up close view of what you can do.

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