

The Ivory Tower and You

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Warren G. Frisina

One of the best things about the opportunity to give a graduation speech is the way it allows you to get something off your chest. I know, as a graduation speaker I'm supposed to be uplifting, and I will be, eventually. But I'd like to begin this brief congratulatory oration with a complaint.

For too long now people have been talking about colleges and universities as if somehow the people in them (that would be our students, our faculty and our administrators) were disconnected from something called "real life." We hear that kind of talk all the time. You all know the "ivory tower" metaphor. People say things like: Don't be misled by that "ivory tower" while you are in college. Or, "What does she know, she's caught up in the "ivory tower." I'm willing to bet someone has said to some of our soon-to-be-graduates: "Now that you are graduating you are going to find that the 'REAL' world is not like that 'ivory tower' you've been living in."

Did you ever wonder what the phrase "ivory tower" even means? What is an ivory tower and why is living in one a problem? As it turns out, Steven Shapin, a professor of history at Harvard, has thought a lot about that question, and in a 27 page article titled "The Ivory Tower: the history of a figure of speech and its cultural

uses,” he manages to both explain and exemplify what it means to be in an ivory tower.¹

It turns out that while the “ivory tower’s” roots reach all the way back to ancient Hebrew, Greek and Roman texts, *what* the ivory tower symbolizes has changed over time. There have been times when being in an “ivory tower” was seen as a good thing. After all, before we all realized where ivory came from and how brutally it was produced, ivory was considered a rare and precious commodity. When you think about it that way who wouldn’t want to live in a tower made of ivory, were such a thing really possible? Traditionally, the good ivory tower represented a space where you could step back from the hurly burly of life and be given a chance to catch your breath before being pressed by circumstances to make hard choices and live with less than optimal consequences. To enter a good ivory tower meant you would have sufficient leisure to think about things, even if only for a moment.

Lately, however, that meaning of “ivory tower” has gone into abeyance. As Shapin points out, no one these days considers the ivory tower anything other than a bad thing. It symbolizes dangerous disengagement from the everyday world. People get locked in or trapped by their “ivory towers.” We are told to “come down from” ivory towers that are deemed elitist and overly intellectualized spaces. And these days, unlike in the past, the “ivory tower” metaphor seems to apply almost exclusively to colleges and universities. It is our colleges and universities that have

¹ Steven Shapin, “The Ivory Tower: the history of a figure of speech and its cultural uses,” *British Journal of the History of Science* (BJHS) 45 (1): p. 25, March 2012, [web link](#).

been attacked as “out of touch” and “dangerously disconnected” from the real world. Given how bad the rhetoric has become, it sometimes makes me wonder why so many people send their children off to college!

As you can imagine, someone like me might take this kind of talk personally. After all I’ve dedicated virtually my entire professional career to promoting and nurturing life on college and university campuses. I know what happens while people are “in college.” I know just how real it all is. To show you what I mean, I ask that you listen to this list of REAL LIFE things that happen on college campuses. If they didn’t happen to you, they surely happened to someone you knew while you were with us “in college.”

There was day one, that moment when you realized that the universe really *did* conspire to scatter all of your high school friends, that you really *were* being shipped away from your family to live with strangers, and that you had no idea whether this crazy college thing was going to work out. Those feelings, that mixture of fear, excitement, anticipation and dread – that was real life.

Then there was that moment when you realized that your original plan, the plan you had worked out with your parents, and that had been trumpeted as THE REASON you were going to college, the moment when that plan collapsed all around you either because you were not good enough at it or you didn’t like it enough, or you’d discovered something else. That moment when you had to let go of something in order to grab on to something else, that was real life.

Then there was that day when, perhaps for the first time in your young life when you woke to find your heart broken by someone for whom you cared deeply.

You wandered among us ghost-like for weeks until you found your way back. That drama, that was real-life.

And of course, as is true in all real life communities, there was the time when a grandparent or family member, a high school friend, or even someone from within the Hofstra community was lost forever, and all you could do was grieve and hold on to those who cared for you and shared your grief. That was real life too.

Now, not everything in your college years is hard and depressing because *real life* has much joy.

There was the time when you woke to discover it had snowed and nothing better could be done than gather the troops to mount a massive snowball fight, followed by the building of snowmen, who were left like sentinels guarding the great “snowball treaty.” That day, that was real life.

And there was the moment when one of your teachers turned to ask you a question, not in the way that teachers ask for answers they already know, but to hear what you were thinking because learning from you was the natural next step in your relationship with one another. That was real life. And the best part of that moment was that you were aware of it as it was happening.

And what about the first time you had to stand in front of a group (maybe a class, a club, or a team) and command their attention so you could lead them toward what YOU thought would be the best decision. That was real life too.

And of course, there was that moment when you fell in love with what you were studying; when you discovered that though it was hard, though it made you nervous, though you were afraid you were not good enough to master it, there was

nothing else you wanted to do more than plumb its depths and discover what it could teach you. It's almost impossible to finish a college degree without having at least one moment such as that. And that kind of passion for something, that's real life too.

As you can tell then, I'm pretty committed to the idea that the things that typically happen to students when they are in college are as real as anything found on the "outside." But as you leave us, as you head out from one kind of real world into another, I do want to point out what I think of as special about college and university life. While I'm certain there is no line to be drawn between reality and college, I'm just as certain that during your time with us something extraordinary was happening.

You'll recall I mentioned earlier how in the olden days the ivory tower was sometimes considered a good thing. It symbolized a place where it was possible to step away from the rush of life and gather your reflective powers. There can be no doubt that we've been striving to create a space where you might experience a kind of freedom that is VERY HARD to maintain outside of the university setting.

This came up in my C&E class this semester. Our theme had been risk and what it means in the modern period. Professor Brian Cox had just given a beautiful lecture on the book *Escape from Freedom* by Eric Fromm. My class was discussing Fromm's thesis that we humans both yearn for freedom and are frightened by it. We yearn for it because having the freedom to think and act in ways that are under our own control is what we mean by human dignity. We're frightened by it because

with that dignity comes the realization that we are responsible for our own thoughts and actions and the consequences that flow from both.

In the middle of that discussion one of my students turned to the group and observed that “being in college was a bit like being in a bubble.” Contrasting his day-to-day college life with the way things were outside of college, he was suggesting that while in college he and all of his classmates were experiencing a kind of freedom that is more difficult to maintain in the non-college world. There was an assumption that in college (both in classrooms but across the campus) we are freer to explore and test out ideas, that we are able to argue about big issues without creating schisms that break our sense of belonging to a community, that we can discover and explore the things that really do light us up in ways we never knew possible. OK, so he didn’t really say all of those things. He simply said being in college was a bit like being in a bubble. But I really did smile when he said it because I knew he was NOT suggesting that being in college was somehow disconnected from real life. He was NOT feeling disengaged from the problems of the world. Rather, he was trying to describe a growing awareness of how all the books and classroom discussions and requirements and tests and papers were designed to put him better touch with the real world.

Those of us who create and nurture college and university communities are in the business of cultivating in our students a taste for freedom. Not the blind, adolescent, slave to my physical urges, “I can do whatever I want” kind of freedom. But the freedom that comes when you have enough control over the information and yourself to begin to be capable of making good choices *that you own*. For that to

happen you have to learn to be open to the fact that you don't have all of the information. You need humility, empathy, and curiosity about what others think. College is NOT the only place where such values can be learned. But it is one of the things we do well. To be honest, I think we do it better here than anywhere else.

And so, as you leave us, as you head out into the other "real world" I know you are ready in a way you were not when you came to us four years ago. You've been given the time and space you needed to practice and develop a set of skills and values that are never listed on job applications. You know your own heart in ways you didn't. You've practiced listening to others, and you have a capacity for empathy that's more mature than it was. These things allow you to pick up on the nuances and shades of gray that haunt all situations where big decisions must be made. In sum, you are freer than you were when you arrived because you are leaving us with so much more information, so many more skills, and the wisdom that comes with having lived through four years of real life experiences.

We are proud of who you are. We look forward to all the wonderful things that are still to come in this shared real world. We know there will be disappointments, but there will also be triumphal moments for each of you. Please stay in touch. Nothing pleases us more than watching as your lives unfold.

Thank you.