

2003 Distinguished Teacher of the Year

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Thank you, Dr. Jessell, President Brogan, our illustrious faculty, industrious students, special guests. I have invited special guests of my own...my mother, Nancy Whelan, from Massachusetts, and my children, Stefani and Nico.

I feel so honored to be here receiving this award today. To be recognized by your students is the greatest tribute a teacher can receive. Actually, it took me about 25 years to reach this overnight success.

Today I would like to talk to you about diversity of learners.

There are many faces of learner diversity, including the obvious – race, color, native language, religious beliefs – but there are other types of diversity as well, especially in how we regard our students. Not all students weave a clear-cut path to their future. Some people's life paths (like mine) more closely resemble a pretzel pattern. A popular saying in Spanish captures the meaning well: "Caminante, no hay camino...se hace camino al andar." Loosely translated, this means "Traveler, there is no path to follow...you make the path as you go." It is important for teachers to remember that students will forge their own learning paths, in their own time.

We all have different learning styles, an internal syllabus, if you will, just as we have different teaching styles and different life styles. Many of us are not even aware of our learning styles; for example, most of us are predominantly visual learners.

Watch and see how visually oriented you really are: Put your forefinger and your thumb together, out like this....now touch your chin ... *(as I touch my cheek, people in the audience follow my visual lead and touch their cheeks)*. See what I mean...

Imagine the importance visuals vs. speech takes on when a non-native English-speaking student is learning academic content through a foreign language. How easy would it be for you to follow these directions?

(Speaking in Tagalog) Nagsasalita ba kayo ng Tagalog? Hindi ko maintindihan. Iwasto mo ang aking bigkas. Kausapin mo ako sa Tagalog lamang.

(Speaking in Spanish) O en otras palabras, para ustedes que entienden español, entienden lo que digo. Desafortunadamente, los otros que no saben no me van a entender .

Now if I give you English speakers a little test on what you just heard, and if you do not pass, perhaps teachers will determine that you have a learning disability and you will be referred to a special needs class, as we often do to second language learners. Or maybe we will speak louder so you will “get it.”

Some students follow a path that is very clear, and they know what they want to be when they grow up. Personally, I was not one of those individuals who always knew what her future was going to be. In fact, I took the 17-year plan to get my undergraduate degree, although I never stopped going to school. So I tell parents not to be too concerned about that student who changes majors frequently because eventually, in their own time, they encounter the right choice.

No one can judge what a student might later become solely based on school performance or youthful indiscretions. Allow me to illustrate some examples of the diverse paths of learners. Let me tell you about Bryan. At the age of five, Bryan’s IQ score was determined to be around 43; he could not talk and had problems with his vision.

Teachers and administrators suggested he be placed in an institution, but his parents believed he had more ability than what was projected, so they found help for him. He was tutored throughout his academic career and was taught learning skills to compensate for his weaknesses. He received speech therapy and was mainstreamed. Eventually, Bryan got through school and was even the class valedictorian. Today, Bryan is a doctoral student in one of my classes – he is a living, modern day hero and is an exemplary being. He is a role model of how diverse learners can overcome challenges.

Another student, Cynthia, hated school so much that she dropped out of high school. Paul, a high school classmate of mine who is now the headmaster of my old high school, had escorted Cynthia to the junior prom before she dropped out. They lost touch and went their own ways. About 20 years later, Paul had to take a student to court. Can you guess who the prosecutor was? Yes, it was Cynthia. Who knew that she would go back to school and become a successful attorney?

Let's look at one more example of a misjudged student who was a very quiet, painfully shy child. She lost herself, and found herself, in books. Her mother would tell her to vacuum the floor and she would do it while reading a book in one hand, the vacuum in the other. She read in the bathtub and spent every free moment in the library reading instead of playing with friends. When called on by teachers, she was too bashful to respond, for fear of giving the wrong answer.

At a parent /teacher conference, her sixth grade teacher told her parents that she was slow, she was not college material, she would never make it to college. Fortunately, her parents never told her what that teacher said about her. You might have guessed by now – I was that little girl.

But what I mostly remember about growing up is my mom and dad talking about how we needed to save money for college, and I would need nice clothing and ball gowns to wear to college functions. Well, that turned out to be quite a joke because when I got to college in 1970 bellbottoms, beads and flowers were the height of hippie fashion. So much for that college wardrobe and elegant ball gowns.

However, the residual effects of my mother's encouragement and belief in me have carried me through adulthood. A good friend of mine describes me as an introvert posing as an extrovert. I attribute that to the fact that Mom encouraged us to take risks, regardless of our fears.

I could be the poster child for the non-traditional student. Throughout my long-term college plan, I attended four colleges in Massachusetts, two colleges in Hawaii, two colleges in California, one college in Vermont, one university in Puerto Rico, two in Mexico, one school in New York and one in Spain. I never stopped going to school; I just liked many different majors.

I was the student services advisors' worst nightmare; can you imagine deciphering my transcripts? But that's not all – I went to other types of schools as well: flight school, cooking school, modeling, acting, real estate, business, cosmetology, secretarial and language schools. There might be others that I don't even remember.

And you don't even want to know about the job experience! I'll just mention the worst one, which was in a frozen meat packing plant – that lasted for three days. My meat-packing career ended when one lady proudly bragged that she had seniority for being there for 30 years, *packing frozen veal patties*. Now you see why I kept going back to school.

One of my more memorable jobs was being a bilingual justice of the peace in Massachusetts for several years. I got double duty from my doctoral robes; that was lovely, but it was a very emotional job. Whenever the bride and groom cried, so did I, and then I couldn't read the ceremony.

Undoubtedly, the greatest education I have received is due to traveling. I have been to about 60 countries and have lived in eight of them. When you live in another country, you really begin to know yourself, your country and your American values. When your values are challenged, you begin to understand your deep culture and recognize your own cultural identity.

I share with you my life of exploration to illustrate by example; we must never give up on our students, our children or ourselves. Not everyone is blessed with the foresight to know where he or she is headed within the standard timeframe. Sometimes we are like mollusks, and just get picked up with the tide and are carried along.

I owe my parents a great debt of gratitude because they never gave up on me. My mom always said, "You can be anything you want to be—but you must be something." And when I kept looking for something to be, they gave me the freedom to try everything. That was such a gift. My mom would always say, "Go, try it. What's the worst that can happen? If it doesn't work out, you can always come home." She gave me the strength to try everything, even if I was afraid. If I failed, I was not a failure. She would say, "Oh well, at least you tried."

My mother was a visionary and way ahead of her time. Perhaps it is because she was a WAVE in the Navy in the 1940s. When we were growing up, she always told us, "Bring home your friends. I don't care what color or race or religion they are. I don't care what the neighbors say, dear. "

And so we did. There were five of us, and our friends were always welcome. Mom's mantra was, "Go ... see the world." And we all did. As a result of her philosophy, we were exposed to a world of people from different cultures, which resulted in life-changing intercultural bonds.

My older sister married a Japanese,
her daughter married a Filipino,
my younger sister married a Hawaiian,
my younger brother married a Filipina,
I married a Colombian,
and my other brother lives in Thailand, so he will probably marry a Thai.

I learned that the best way for people to break down cultural and ethnic barriers is to get to know one another face-to-face, one on one. When my sister married Joe, the Japanese man, my four-year-old niece asked him innocently, "How can you see with your eyes?" His answer was simple, yet profound: "Ah, yes, my eyes are different, but they work better because *I can see around the corners.*"

From then on, Joe was not the different "Japanese" man, he was just Uncle Joe. As you might imagine, we have very interesting family reunions. Some of us eat raw fish, others eat fried ants, while others eat Boston baked beans. It's not uncommon to see rice, potato, poi and yucca at the same table. At our gatherings, you can hear Hawaiian pidgin, Spanish, Japanese and English.

If you come visit at the right time you might meet Ruti, a Samoan princess, or Rocky, the Hawaiian biker, Amber, the Buddhist, or John, the plumber.

As you can see, many roads lead to the future. Diversity is something to cherish. Diverse experience is a great teacher, although sometimes it is painful. Diverse experience opens your mind and shapes your life. We are each fashioned from unique molds. Tolerance for one another makes life so much simpler and encourages peace and acceptance of one another.

We have to understand that our own beliefs are a reflection of our cultural upbringing. We can't help seeing life through our own cultural lenses. Just by being raised in the United States, all our lives we hear that we are number one, we are the best in the world; doesn't that insinuate that everyone else in the world is a little inferior?

We must understand that stereotypes, discrimination, ethnocentrism and xenophobia can also spring from that same rich cultural upbringing if tolerance is not delivered in regular doses.

It is a tragic mistake to stereotype an entire religious or ethnic group because of a few zealots. Cherish the nontraditional individual. Diversity of all kinds is good and is a strength we should embrace and celebrate. That's what makes this country so uniquely wonderful.

My last thought is to emphasize that we must not judge young folks before they have a chance to grow up and prove their mettle. We have no idea how they will really turn out.

Think of my naughty cousin Wally, who told all the kids in our neighborhood that if they pulled the red fire alarm box, candy would come out. Well, they did what he said, and it wasn't candy that came out of the fire station. But guess what Wally does for a living today? You guessed it – he is a decorated, very well-respected firefighter.

I want to thank my students, and the award committees, from the bottom of my heart for honoring me with this most prestigious award. I am here because of my students, and I will always be here for them. I am so proud and delighted to have found a home, finally, at Florida Atlantic University

I would like to close with a little poem by Rudyard Kipling called “We and They.”

Father and Mother, and Me,
Sister and Auntie say
All the people like us are We,
And everyone else is They.
And They live over the sea,
While We live over the way,
But, would you believe it? – They look upon We
As only a sort of They!

All good people agree,
And all good people say,
All nice people, like Us, are We
And everyone else is They.
But if you cross over the sea,
Instead of over the way,
You may end by (think of it!) looking on We
As only a sort of They!

Thank you.