

## **In Praise of Struggle, Deliberation, Disorder, and Disagreement**

Thank you President Kelly, Provost Perry, honored colleagues and students, and assembled guests. Thank you to those from the Jupiter campus who have trekked down to mark this occasion with me. Your support means the world to me. Thank you to the student committee who have put their faith in me by granting me this award. For an educator, there can be no greater accolade than one given by students and no greater honor than to have students listen, consider, and engage.

I am a small part of many successful and cooperative teams. FAU, the Jupiter campus, the Wilkes Honors College, my research groups, my students, my friends, my family. Thank you to all of my team members who pull on their oars daily in our shared endeavors.

And thank you to my children, 8 year old Leo and 5 year old Rosie. Leo volunteered to do extra chores when work got busy. Rosie was skeptical about extra chores, but volunteered to draw me encouraging pictures. Children, thank you for being the best part of “team Vernon.”

My keynote address is going to be in praise of struggle, deliberation, disorder, and disagreement. Success rarely comes without struggles. Good decisions rarely come without deliberation and debate.

To persuade you of the sagacity of my subject matter, I could refer you to J. K. Rowling’s Harvard Commencement address on her failures and struggles and how reaching rock bottom gave her creative freedom. Or to Winston Churchill’s famously short exhortation to his audience to “Never never never give up.” Historians in attendance, I am aware he may actually have said, “Never give in, never give in, never, never, never, never” but it still fits my purpose. You may be longing for Mr. Churchill’s brevity before I am finished, but I hope I can add something to his pithy comments.

Many popular stories are about superheroes and other paragons of exceptionalism who discover hidden skills and abilities that emerge almost effortlessly. The whiz kid, the golden boy. A popular book series by Rick Riordan is about the “Heroes of Olympus” and Percy Jackson, the demigod son of Poseidon. I love Rick Riordan’s novels. I too bask in the glory of the characters’ unearned semi-divinity. These stories refer to the need for practice and perseverance, but none of us want to read too much about that part of the story.

But that is the part of the story I want to focus on. It is more real and ultimately more fruitful. I want to highlight struggle and particularly struggles a little closer to home and a little nearer and dearer to my heart.

Today I want to praise those who struggle academically. I am not being perverse or irreverent. I must admit it is delightful to see students flourish and succeed and there are many wonderful success stories in this room and at this university. But I am guessing that many of those success stories are also stories of struggle and we should praise both parts of the process. Equally important are the failures and college should be the perfect time and place for failures. The unfortunate trend in higher education is to require a student record of nearly perfect grades and fast-tracked education, often beginning in kindergarten.

I want to argue for a healthy meeting of minds somewhere in the middle. I think FAU is working to inhabit this middle ground.

FAU very wisely extended the withdrawal deadline for classes, so that students can take more risks by exploring disciplines where they might triumph or fail spectacularly. I want to applaud this policy. It leaves students the freedom to take a class they might find frightening- painting, genetics, creative writing, calculus- and to withdraw near the end of the semester if needed. In a different system entirely, the withdrawal would be unnecessary because there would be no shame in failure- but in the present system, this is an excellent middle-ground solution.

Simultaneously FAU is also supporting our high-achieving students, developing excellent programs like the Max Planck Honors Program. Working at the Wilkes Honors College, I am obviously a fan of these endeavors and delighted that FAU is constantly striving to offer its students more, giving us programs like the dozens put on by the Office for Undergraduate Research and Inquiry that encourage our undergraduate students to do graduate-level research. I hope we extend these efforts while continuing to add commensurate support for less advantaged students.

I also want to praise the undecided student with the undeclared major. I would argue that they are likely to know themselves and the world better when they finish college. They have taken their time and explored many options and they will be better for having experienced this identity crisis and career crisis.

In the same way academic struggles and soul-searching can lead to better knowledge, insight, and improved skills, I also want to praise psychological, social, and emotional struggle. I do not make light of suffering. I worked at the San Francisco VA Hospital for a year as a Clinical Psychology Intern and there I saw the impact of heart-wrenching tragedy and it is impossible to forget. But psychologists know too that there can be posttrauma growth. Some people, after trauma and tragedy, find ways to not only survive but also to thrive, adding more meaning to their lives, and deepening their relationships.

For college students, facing some manageable adversity and getting the support to overcome it can mean that they gain coping and emotional skills in a safe and supportive environment. In this realm also, some failure and struggle is inevitable and in fact desirable. I have watched us slowly grow the counseling and student affairs services for FAU students, add trainings for faculty and staff, and a counseling services section to our syllabi. I look forward to our future growth in these areas.

I also want to emphasize that those with mental disorders can make amazing contributions to society. Ernest Hemmingway, Vincent Van Gogh, and Demi Lovato are a few who are on the "who's who" list of those with bipolar disorder. Clinical psychology tells us that during manic phases, those with bipolar disorder can be more productive in a week or a month than many of us can be in a year. The following month, however, they may be so depressed that they are suicidal and will need assistance. As unbearable as depression can be, it also comes with benefits. Those with major depressive disorder actually see the world more accurately. They are not wearing the "rose-colored glasses" that the rest of us are, which optimistically distorts our vision of reality, ourselves, and our futures. Social psychologists note that the rest of us have self-serving biases. For example, nearly everyone thinks their sense of humor is above average. Statisticians and mathematicians will tell us it is a statistical impossibility, but psychologically that doesn't stop us!

I would argue that we need some pessimists to keep us honest. We need some quiet, thoughtful introverts to balance out the exuberant extroverts. We need some cautious folks to temper the risk-takers. My most introverted student is also my most interpersonally sensitive and aware student. Several times a year she approaches me with accurate and insightful concerns about fellow students who are struggling or suffering and she gets them appropriate help. Although she prefers to blend into the background, her contributions to the welfare of others stand out and I know she will continue to be a quiet leader.

I also want to praise disagreement and debate and difference. For most of us, they are not comfortable. The average person would prefer to be safely ensconced among like-minded company. But research suggests that diverse groups of people with different backgrounds, experiences, attitudes, and knowledge can creatively solve problems and help a group move in the right direction and that groups where there is no difference, or difference is suppressed, actually stray into dangerous territory. Problem-solving and decision-making in a diverse group is likely to be a fraught process, with some misunderstandings, challenged assumptions, and the occasional hurt feeling. Nonetheless, I believe it is ultimately superior. In forensic psychology, when diverse mock juries received only limited evidence from a complete case, they were more likely to come to the right conclusion and correctly reconstruct the case than were juries of similar individuals. At the broadest level, the World Bank reports that countries that include women in the workforce have stronger economies than those that exclude them.

I want to encourage the current and future leaders in the audience to build strong and diverse teams, even - and perhaps especially- when it makes you uncomfortable. Doris Kearns Goodwin wrote the premiere biography of Abraham Lincoln called "Team of Rivals". [Spoiler alert: the title gives it away]. Goodwin argues that part of Lincoln's genius and strong leadership is that he brought together such a disparate and diverse group of people on his Cabinet that they could only accurately be characterized as a "Team of Rivals".

Students, I want to suggest that you remember to include weaker students and "lesser" intellects in your projects and groups. I am not suggesting that you give a free ride to anyone, but that you look in unexpected places and listen to unexpected people for wisdom and creativity. One of the most creative ideas my lab is currently investigating came from a student who struggles with research methods and statistics concepts and frequently doubts herself. Her questions and observations led us in a potentially fruitful direction. We should be inclusive, even though it demands more work, effort, and discomfort, not simply because it is the morally right thing to do, but because it is the smart and efficient thing to do.

In my own experience as a professor, students who have gone the farthest are not the brightest but the most determined, the best at collaborating, those with the most flexible minds, who are able to take the perspectives of others- other genders, races, religions, cultures and other researchers, theorists, and scholars.

Professors, thank you for spending extra time with students who need it, even when you are perennially short on time. I hope you watch the seeds you plant start to grow and bloom. But even when you don't, have faith that eventually they will.

Administrators, thank you for continuing to develop programs for marginalized faculty and student groups and bridge programs for apparently less stellar students while you also build programs for exemplary students and faculty. We don't know where the next great idea may come from, nor do we know who will rise above poverty or persecution or obstacles with a little

encouragement.

Students, future leaders: remember to take risks, try the things that scare you, don't let failures discourage you for long, and continue to be inclusive. Remember to look to those who seem least likely to contribute as well as to the promising "stars" for ideas.

Some universities seem designed to help people build on their pre-existing privilege, and consolidate and extend their family's power. Places like FAU, in contrast, are designed to serve more broadly, to help everyone to build resiliency, insight, skills, and knowledge, and most importantly to give us training in how to find, evaluate, and cultivate these for ourselves. FAU was recently named a "Hispanic-serving institution" and this is just one of the many ways that we embrace diversity. Here we can build relationships not only based on similarity but on difference, nurturing understanding, and through disagreement and debate create shared work and a shared vision. These are meaningful and lasting endeavors and I am proud to be a part of them.

I will leave you with a last quote from Churchill: "Success is not final, failure is not fatal: it is the courage to continue that counts."

Thank you for this honor.