

1995 Distinguished Teacher of the Year

Jill Winland-Brown, Ph.D.
Associate Professor of Nursing
College of Nursing

Thank you, President Catanese, distinguished colleagues, award recipients, students, families and friends.

This is truly the greatest honor of my career. I am so excited!

I was beginning to feel like "always the bridesmaid and never the bride," having been up for this award for three out of the last four years. I now know how Sally Field felt when she accepted her first Oscar and said, "You like me, you really like me." And as the College of Nursing has never had a recipient, I can say, "You like us, you really like us."

I would like to congratulate the other candidates who were acknowledged by their colleges as distinguished teachers. They all gave so much of themselves, and truly eat, live and breathe teaching.

We all know that there are two types of thinkers in the world – those that are abstract thinkers and those that are concrete thinkers. The persons with abstract reasoning are the visionaries and the philosophers, and those with concrete thinking are the movers, the shakers, the doers. Most of us are in one category, with a sprinkling or smattering from the other. Finally after years of trying to be an abstract reasoner, I have come to accept the fact that I think concretely. Recently a colleague shared a perfect message that was published in the *Wall Street Journal* by United Technologies Corp – although the author is untitled. This prose somehow helps me accept my fate more realistically. It is called Keep it Simple.

Strike three. Get your hand off my knee. You're overdrawn. Your horse won. Yes. No. You have the account. Walk. Don't walk. The cat's dead. Basic events require simple language. Idiosyncratically euphemistic eccentricities are the promulgators of triturable obfuscation. What did you do last night? Enter into a meaningful romantic involvement or fall in love? What did you have for breakfast this morning? The upper part of a hog's hind leg with two oval bodies encased in a shell laid by a female bird or ham and eggs? David Belasco, the great American theatrical producer, once said, "If you can't write your idea on the back of my calling card, you didn't have a clear idea." So I humbly accept my fate. But I am the first to recognize and appreciate the fact that we do need

both kinds of people and that we need to collaborate and share with each other because students also come in both varieties. I know students also appreciate the fact that faculty of both types exist.

When interviewed by the final group of students for this award, they asked what I really wanted to impart to you all about teaching – and I said that in my classes I try to impress on students the need to be socially responsible and politically active. John Truslow Adams said that there are two educations – one should teach us how to make a living and the other how to live. I think that to be a productive part of today's society, we don't just need to learn the skills to make a living, but need to acquire the skills to be socially responsible and politically active. We can't wait for things to happen to us; we have to be part of the solution.

It's difficult to teach those two concepts – but we can be role models, have class assignments and encourage students in many ways as a mentor. One of our main responsibilities is to let people know what is going on – giving positive vibes, taking the initiative. Although the word mentor has several quite different accepted meanings – advisor, counselor, guide, preparer, monitor, teacher, instructor, professor, coach, preceptor, proctor, master, friend and guru. Faculty who think of mentoring almost exclusively in terms of imparting knowledge in their discipline will probably not be effective mentors for students who expect advice, counsel and guidance from a faculty member who is also a friend. Mentoring is dynamic and exhausting. In an article in the current volume of *New Directions for Teaching and Learning*, the author talks about one of the more difficult roles of being a mentor is helping students deal with failure. You might think it strange that at an honors convocation I'm talking about failure, but you know yourself that we learn twice as much from our mistakes than we do when we do everything perfectly. Failure in the academic world comes in many guises, ranging from one disappointing examination, to dealing with a frustrating relationship, to not getting the job or being accepted to the graduate or professional school of choice. She includes the following poem in a book by Lewis Timberlake that seems appropriate:

Failing doesn't mean I'm a failure; it just means I haven't yet succeeded.

Failing doesn't mean I have accomplished nothing; it just means I've learned something

...

Failing doesn't mean I've been disgraced; it just means I dared to try.

Failing doesn't mean I don't have what it takes; it just means I must do things differently next time.

Failing doesn't mean I'm inferior; it just means I'm not perfect.

Failing doesn't mean I've wasted my time; it just means I have reason to start over.

Failing doesn't mean I should give up; it just means I must try harder.

Failing doesn't mean I'll never make it; it just means I need more patience.

Failing doesn't mean I'm wrong; it just means I must find a better way.

The student who never tries and never runs the risk of failure will never know his or her capabilities. An understanding, insightful mentor can often help the student avoid unwise risks without eliminating those potential opportunities for personal and intellectual growth. We might even share that all honest faculty members will admit to having manuscripts rejected from one journal or another. As another colleague shared with me, "The price of success is much lower than the price of failure." We're here to help students succeed but also must teach that failure is part of life and we, too, grow from it.

We also have to encourage and allow students to adopt a healthy skepticism and to learn to ask impertinent questions. So much more information is gained and retained when we ask the unexpected and difficult question. Garry Trudeau, the creator of *Doonisbury*, won a Pulitzer Prize for cartooning], which was the first that went to a non-editorial page artist. He delivered an address at a Vassar College commencement titled "The Value of Impertinent Questions." He tells the following story: "I first learned about pertinent questions from my father, a retired physician who used to practice medicine in the Adirondacks. Like all parents racing against the clock to civilize their children, my father sought to instruct me in the ways of separating wheat from chaff, of asking sensible questions designed to yield useful answers. That is the way a diagnostician thinks. Fortunately for me, his own practical experience frequently contradicted his worthiest intentions.

"Here's a case in point: A man once turned up in my father's office complaining of an ulcer. My father asked the pertinent question: Was there some undue stress, he inquired, that might be causing the man to digest his stomach? The patient, who was married, thought about it for a moment and then allowed that he had a girlfriend in Syracuse, and that twice a week he'd been driving an old pick-up down to see her. Since the pick-up frequently broke down, he was often late in getting home, and he had to devise fabulous stories to tell his wife. My father, compassionately but sternly, told the man he had to make a hard decision about his personal priorities if he was ever to get well.

"The patient nodded and went away, and six months later came back completely cured, a new man. My father congratulated him and then delicately inquired if he'd made some change in his life.

"The man replied, 'Yep. Got me a new pick-up.' "

So, the pertinent question sometimes yields the impertinent answer. In spite of himself, Trudeau's father ended up teaching him that an unexpected or inconvenient truth is often the price of honest inquiry. Of course, you presumably wouldn't be here if you didn't already know that. I'm confident that your education has been fairly studded with pertinent questions yielding impertinent answers.

But how many of you have learned to turn that around – to ask the impertinent question to get at that which is pertinent? Maybe we don't ask our politicians enough impertinent questions – which brings me to the topic of the need for political activism. In Singapore, students are prohibited from waving political banners, chewing gum gets you a \$1,000 fine and sharing a marijuana cigarette invites the death penalty. In our democracy, we're lucky if we can get people out to vote. The Motor Voter Bill passed two years ago enables people to register to vote more easily, but that doesn't mean they will vote. In Palm Beach County, in the 94 gubernatorial elections, 67 percent of registered voters voted.

(I was afraid to ask how many citizens were not registered). In the last FAU student elections, 18 percent of students voted, which is higher than recent years. In one of my classes, I require students, at least those that are U.S. citizens, to obtain a voter's registration card prior to the end of the course. They also have to contact, in person or by writing, their legislator and inform him or her of pressing issues to our discipline. They've had many great responses. Students attend Political Action Days in Tallahassee every spring prior to the legislative session starting, and many participate in local meetings, demonstrations, etc. I encourage students to vote and hold those we vote for accountable. We get the political leaders we deserve. In the education arena, we all know where the legislators place education in the greater scheme of things. We must convince legislators to push education up on the list of priorities. In the *Boca News* several days ago on the editorial page, James Hoyle cites a study that says only Louisiana and Mississippi spend less per resident for higher education than we do. It was nice to see an editorial by the senior editor of the *Free Press* in a recent issue called "You've got to fight for your rights." Again, as mentors and role models we can set the stage and emphasize the importance of getting involved to students – both in the political arena and in social issues.

Regarding social responsibility, we have to accept the challenge of being in one of the nation's fastest growing regions, and as Dr. Catanese says, "We must fully understand the problems within our diverse communities and we must be prepared to lead the way toward finding viable solutions to those problems."

In an address a few years ago to the National Conference on Higher Education, Charles Robb, a former governor of Virginia, stated that we have not been fostering sound civic

values in young people, and that we particularly have an apparent unwillingness to make the cultivation of character and civic commitment a central purpose of education at all levels. Our national need for commitment to social involvement is probably greater today than ever before. National issues grow more complex daily. So, too, does our dependence on higher education for both the skills and the knowledge necessary to our individual success in this new climate.

The college years ought to be a period of personal growth, including growth in responsibility toward and awareness of the interests of others – social responsibility. Robb believes that the future of this nation in an increasingly complex and competitive world depends greatly on the capacity and the motivation of its citizens to participate actively in service to and leadership of their communities and the nation as a whole. One basic purpose of higher education in this nation is to provide education for citizenship. How do we do this? One method is through collaborative learning – non-competitive learning in which the reward structure encourages students to work together to accomplish a common end. As faculty, we can utilize teaching strategies to encourage group participation and involvement.

In a volume of the journal called *Change*, Gamson states that "collaborative learning leads to changes in authority relations between students and teacher and between students and knowledge. The process can lead to mutual interdependence, the capacity to benefit from differences, and the ability to resolve conflicts" – all skills essential in assuming social responsibility. As an added benefit, it enhances our sense of community. So as mentors using collaborative learning we have a double benefit.

Looking in the almanac issue of this season's *Chronicle of Higher Education*, there was research reflecting the attitudes and characteristics of freshmen. When asking them their activities in the past year, 40 percent stated that they participated in organized demonstrations, 70 percent performed volunteer work, and only 16 percent discussed politics. When asked what objective they considered essential or very important, 18 percent stated that influencing the political structure mattered to them, 40 percent said influencing social values was important, 32 percent keeping up to date with political affairs, and 31 percent felt that becoming a community leader was important. Our students need direction to assume social and political responsibility. What better place than a university setting that states in its purpose that we are committed to extending the educational experience of its constituency with particular emphasis on the development of knowledge and the acquisition of skills that will provide useful and informed citizens with the ability to adapt, intellectually and technologically, to a changing environment. The statement continues in our catalog that as a public university in a democratic society, FAU must provide the student with an understanding of humankind's place in the universe, a sense of history, a set of values

and ethics, a commitment to law and morality, a respect for dignity, an appreciation of human creativity, and an analytical and inquiring mind. How else to accomplish this than by a faculty of mentors?

The last 10 years of a century are the most transitional and have the biggest change. We are in the last half of that decade now. We must accept the challenge and transmit it to students who are going to carry the ball. The Chinese symbol for opportunity is chaos. As educators, we must make that chaos organized, so we can deal with it and hopefully promote political and social responsibility.

In closing, I would like to thank my colleagues for allowing me the opportunity to grow and the continuing dialogues we have on teaching styles, creative methods, teaching strategies. I would be remiss if I also didn't recognize and thank my husband, Harvey, who has given me unconditional support and love for the past 15 years and without whom I wouldn't be standing here.

In nursing, we believe that in nursing situations involving clients, that both the nurse and the client grow from their interactions. Likewise, in teaching situations, students and I both grow from our contact with each other. I am constantly learning and, I hope, growing from my students. So it is for the students that I humbly accept this award with a simple, concrete thanks.