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My Last Lecture

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It is an honor to be selected by my peers to present the 2015 Last Lecture. Thank you Chris and Marty for your continued guidance in the tradition of the Gutenberg Conspiracy and Faculty Colloquium. Those of us who have been here for many years truly appreciate the dedication and work that goes into arranging these sessions year after year. Thank you.

Eight years ago, almost to the day, I stood in front of the faculty of the School of Fine Arts delivering my vision for the School as they considered me for the dean's position. I was to follow in the footsteps of such leaders as Dr. Bill Trantham, Dr. Charles Wright and Dr. Charlie Fuller. Big shoes to fill. I was selected to serve and thus began my sojourn as an administrator launching a new era in the School of Fine Arts.

On June 30, I packed my things and left my home of 22 years in Verser Theatre, said goodbye to my colleagues, and arrived across campus in the office of my predecessors, in Mabee Fine Arts. The window looked out onto the center of campus and as I peered out from my new home, I realized that the three art buildings formed a triangle that surrounded the campus. Later I would realize the significance of this fleeting thought. The journey in front of me was daunting. I was about to be immersed into the world of the arts in a way I had not expected; like a painting by Kandinsky, a cacophony of images; drama, music and the visual arts swirled about presenting a maze of infinite possibilities.

So today, in this brief time, I would like to share with you my odyssey from professor to dean, some of my adventures during this eight year sojourn, and my anticipated homecoming to a familiar yet changed landscape of the classroom and the stage.

“Sometimes it's necessary to go a long distance out of the way in order to come back a short distance correctly.”

As I prepared for this journey I outlined several important goals, goals that were a little theoretical and lacked the details of application, but important just the same. As the dean I wanted

- To be a vital force in helping to create a vision for the School of Fine Arts.
- To promote academic, spiritual, and artistic excellence among our faculty and our students.
- To lead and collaborate with a community of artists/scholars who are committed to working together to produce students of the highest caliber in the arts of music, theatre, and the visual arts
- To see students emerge with a creative, collaborating, and challenging spirit that integrate their intellect with their art, their art with their faith, and their faith with their worldview.
- To be a strong advocate for the arts in the university, in the local, the regional, and the global community.

For this expedition to be successful I needed guidance and training, I needed a plan, I needed to gather as much data as possible, map out the route. I began to immerse myself in leadership literature. I attended conferences and professional meetings on leading academic units. I studied the guidelines from our accrediting agencies, NASM with whom we have been accredited with since 1956, NAST, and NASAD to familiarize myself with the best practices in arts higher education and curriculum design. Hours were spent pouring over degree plans for each major examining the many unique intricacies in the different majors. I joined the local Arts Organizations and a local Rotary club to become more entrenched and engaged in the community to promote Ouachita, and in particular the arts on our campus and throughout the state. I was appointed by Governor Beebe to the Arkansas Arts Council and had the opportunity to advocate for the arts with legislators and with national organizations by serving on different boards and committees. On campus I attended every recital, concert, exhibit, play, and opera not only to show my support for my faculty and students but to set an example for others in our school that we need to support one another's art or we can't expect those outside the arts to support us.

My expectations were high and I ventured out into deeper waters with hopeful exuberance believing I could make a difference in this world, but not realizing at the time how much this world was making a difference in me.

This odyssey began smoothly but unseen obstacles lay ahead. Like a good play there is no excitement or development of the character without complications and conflicts.

What I knew about the administration of a school at this time would not fill a thimble. I had been chair of the theatre department, artistic director of a summer theatre, and had other leadership roles but this was on a scale unlike these others. I was thankful for seasoned colleagues willing to mentor a novice in this venture, colleagues like Hal Bass, George Keck, Joe Jeffers, Stan Poole, Phil Rice, and Jeff Root. George Keck was truly my salvation. He guided me through some treacherous waters. In those first years we navigated budget deficits, faculty & staff changes, facility and equipment needs and repair, and calendaring conflicts just to name a few. And not only was I dean, but due to some faculty changes, I also became the acting chair of the Department of visual arts, an area about which I had very little concrete knowledge. It would take too long to enumerate the many lessons learned in my first years as dean, let alone what I have learned over this past eight years.

We were charting new territory. The School of Fine Arts had not had a dean that wasn't a music professor since its inception, so much of the process was outlining how the School of Fine Arts governing structure should function as a whole. And at times frustrations ran high, but through it all I have to commend the faculty for their patience and willingness to meet the challenges, especially on issues where they would have liked to have gone a different direction. The School voyaged onward, first by developing a mission statement for the School of Fine Arts, which provided a vision. During this time the school conducted an extensive program review of each area which led to the creation of an active strategic plan, curriculum restructuring, the remodeling of some facilities, and the creation of the arts series.

I could spend this whole hour and probably this whole day telling you of the things I have learned about serving as a dean for the School of Fine Arts, but that would take me off on another tangent which I have learned I like to do.

This eight year expedition has been an unbelievable personal growth experience. It has definitely stretched my faith but it has also created in me a stronger prayer life, it has confused my sense of calling and yet affirmed it at the same time, it has eroded my confidence as a teacher and yet has given me a new zeal for teaching, it has stretched me as a scholar and driven me to know more, it has given me a longing to create art again, it has drained me emotionally, physically, and intellectually, yet when I hear a student, who has struggled to make it, senior recital, I am rejuvenated.

The student walked out onto the stage, bowed, walked to the marimba, picked up his sticks and began to play, as the notes turned into phrases and melodic strains I sat thinking about the beauty of a human creating and learning to create. I pondered on my position knowing that what we offer this student is an entryway into his soul. A language to the discourse of art.

I admire the painting of a student and she walks up to me expecting a response. I turn and smile, I cannot speak for she has touch something in me and I hesitate to verbalize it for fear I will trivialize it. She has found a language in paint, in form. A language to the discourse of art.

The actor is drained from the performance, soaking wet from perspiration and adrenaline, but his face is bright and full. He has touched another's soul in his role. He discovered another and lived his life but for a short moment bringing insight and power to the art. The audience engaged, cannot, even when they see him after, separate the actor from the power of his imitation.

I was a primarily a theatre professor and theatre artist when I left my home in Verser to embark on this journey, but through this exploration I was able to observe, investigate, probe, scrutinize, and experience the arts on all levels and it transformed my appreciation, my understanding and my love for all of the arts. For I

- I encountered the power of creativity in the flute, the keyboard, paint, and the typography of a brand.
- I saw faculty artists provide a creative atmosphere whereby students thrive as performers with the freedom to experiment with various forms of art in a place that supports and encourages them to do so.
- I learned from a dynamic faculty the various artistic forms and processes needed by each student to achieve excellence.
- I have watched as visual arts students take tape and create design and form on sterile hallway walls.
- I listened as faculty guided students in music theory and music history.
- I observed faculty, in their studios, coaching students in their applied lessons.
- I watched as students laid the final touches on their artworks for exhibits.
- I was transported by outstanding concerts, recitals, plays, and exhibits.

- As I peruse faculty activity reports each year I discover that they are not just engaging their students in the classroom but they are modelling what it means to be an artist and I am inspired by their work.

I have learned so much from my colleagues through their dedication to their students, and to their work.

Along with this exploration into the arts with my colleagues, my foray into administration also took me outside my own school to discover the power of the overall Academy. Sitting on the Dean's council I am always mindful of the larger university's mission and my role as a leader in my school to encourage collaboration across disciplines. In this engagement with my fellow deans I became more aware of the dilemma for finding a balance between the Christian liberal arts education and the applied or professional education in our school. Our challenge throughout the academy is to encourage and promote the Christian liberal arts tradition which enriches our students' performances, paintings, designs, and teaching. Randall Wight said it best in a statement he made at the inauguration of Dr. Horne that "Liberal arts educators are more artists than entrepreneurs. We are academic Michelangelo's, chiseling to release the captives from stone. We struggle to free ourselves and our students from the imprisoning marble of ignorance. In that struggle truth makes us free, and the art of learning ennoble the soul to emerge in beauty of thought and deed."

I have been fortunate to have this adventure with my fellow deans. Men and woman who are truly committed to the mission of this university. From these bimonthly meetings and conversations I have learned what it truly means to be a part of the academy. The University is fortunate to have such Christ centered selfless leaders committed to the Mission of the university who not only seek the best for their school, their faculty and their students, but have a genuine interest in the success of other schools and other programs. I will miss this comradery.

The shore towards home is now in sight. Verser awaits my return. I will arrive on that shore on June 30. I am excited to return, but I know it will not be the same because I am not the same and my department is not the same. Even many of my ideas surrounding my own art is not the same. Through the many hours spent in curriculum restructuring, assessment design, and strategic planning my educational philosophy of teaching is definitely not the same.

However, as I return to the role of professor and theatre director I am reminded of the similarities of these roles to the role of the dean. Like a theatre director preparing to bring together the differences in artists to create a unified whole. Deans attempt to bring together the multifaceted faculty, students, and staff toward a common mission and construct a unique culture from the parts, making it whole.

Professors, like a director of a play, wear a multitude of hats. We are experts in some areas, semi-experts in others, we are analysts, researchers, critics, managers, psychologists, surrogate audience members, and so much more. Like the theatre director, professors are well grounded in traditions of the past as well as current practices. We understand how the past traditions inform the present. We possess a vibrant curiosity about the human condition and seek to create a laboratory for the study of human life in our classrooms. Out of this laboratory comes alchemy, whereby something common is transformed into something precious. So the director's art, like the professor's, is not in the final product but in the process – the liberation of fellow learners. The challenge is in our talent for touching the creative spirit in our students with a conceptual framework and an imaginative vision.

I am excited about returning, about focusing on my classroom and on my art. I am challenged by the past eight years to put into practice in the classroom and on the stage all of the things I have learned and all that I have gained in my collaboration with so many of my colleagues across the campus.

Marcel Proust stated that “the voyage of discovery is not in seeking new landscapes but having new eyes”. After my sojourn as dean I can truly say I have new eyes.

At the end of this year I will complete 30 years of service to Ouachita and I am blessed to be able to study, teach, and serve alongside so many of you. And to have known such great scholars and teachers that left us way too soon, like Jim Berryman, Roy Buckelew, Lavell Cole, Tom Greer, and Tom Auffmanberg. And to work alongside students, artists, musicians, designers, and scholars who inspire me every day to be a better teacher, artist, scholar, and servant.

Thank you for allowing me to share with you my odyssey and my anticipated homecoming. However the ending of one journey is only the beginning of another. And now it is time to make preparations for my new adventure.

Thank you.