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Deanna Jent '84
Illinois Wesleyan University

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Commencement Address

May 4, 2014

Deanna Jent '84

Story and Truth: the Dionysus Connection

President Wilson, honored guests, faculty, staff, students, parents, siblings and friends – I am honored to be on this side of the podium. 30 years ago I was sitting in one of those chairs with the other theatre majors (where are the theatre majors? Yes, with them)! So play your cards right and one of you could be up here in 30 years!

Those theatre majors probably know that the Greek God associated with theatre is Dionysus. Of course the other big thing he's known for is Wine! Yes, Dionysus is the symbol of the grape vine, the Happy Hour, the release from everyday concerns and the traditional order of things. He also gets a bad rap because of some of the things his frenzied followers did. (Good thing that doesn't happen in today's world.?.)

We are invoking Dionysus here today with our ritual costumes, which take us out of the everyday world. However, we don't need wine for today's transformative ceremony – we have a more powerful intoxicant: the power of story.

Once upon a time you were a student at Illinois Wesleyan University and by the end of this ceremony you will be a graduate, an alum. *What story are you telling yourself right now?* Is this an end or a beginning or somehow both?

When I received my Ph.D from Northwestern University, on one side of the field were the Bachelor of Arts degree recipients and on the other were the Bachelor of Science degree recipients. At one point during the ceremony, a chant started on the Bachelor of Arts side: “We had fun! We had fun!” At which point the Bachelor of Science side responded: “We have jobs! We have jobs!”

Those are the stories they were telling themselves. My favorite story, however, goes like this:

A long time ago, TRUTH walked around naked in the world. He would hear people say, “I just want to know the truth” and he would go to their house and

knock on their door – and when they opened it and saw him, they'd slam it shut and not let him in.

This got pretty discouraging, so after a while TRUTH visited his sister, STORY (who had to let him in because, well, that's what families do). STORY listened to him, gave him some tea, and said, "I have something for you."

She brought out two large suitcases filled with all kinds of clothes. After TRUTH dressed himself in a snazzy suit, he thanked her and went on his way.

So now, when TRUTH knocks, clothed in STORY, we open our doors and let him in.

The truth is that you are graduating. The story today is about your transformation – how a college education has changed you and will carry you through the next chapter of the novel called “Your Life.”

In your time here, you have absorbed ideas and information. You have analyzed, debated, proposed, tested, created. You have failed and succeeded (and told yourself stories about those events). You have engaged with each other, you have been a part of a community that asks you to show up every day, whether you feel like it or not. (Side note – as a professor, there are days that I don't want to come to class either!)

If you look up “story” on “dictionary.com,” it will tell you that its opposite is “truth.” I'm going to take a stand and disagree with “dictionary.com.”

You've learned that much in the world is not black and white; there are shades of grays and colors throughout. Truth and story intermingle. Near the end of Chaim Potok's novel *The Chosen*, the main characters, raised in very different Jewish traditions, discuss a passage from the Talmud that concludes “both these and those are the words of the living God.” This dialectic process of examining opposing sides, of holding the tension between this and that (knowing both have truth and story in them) is not easy. But getting to these seats so you could wear those robes and hats wasn't easy either.

While we hope that you find meaningful jobs in your field, your post-college employment experience might not be a stroll down a pristine beach toward tropical paradise, but rather dodging puddles in the rain trying to see the rainbow that was just there a minute ago.

At least, that's the way it was for me. While writing my dissertation and for several years after I received my Ph.D, I worked as an administrative assistant. One weekend, my grandpa asked me how work was going. "Fine," I told him. "But I sure didn't need a doctorate degree to be filing and typing. So much for all those years of school!"

"Hey," he said, with volume and passion I'd rarely seen in him. "Education is NEVER wasted. You don't have any idea when or where you'll use what you've learned."

What story had I telling myself? It was a Cinderella fairy tale, where I was banished to the office as a secretary instead of sitting at my rightful place as Princess of Academia. My Grandpa's words helped me shape a different story, in which the job I was doing and the people that I worked with were not detours from my life's true journey, but authentic parts of who I was becoming.

I also learned that "life lessons" don't come with a syllabus and assignment description. And mostly, you have to grade yourself. Think about what grades have meant to you. Were they markers of triumph or defeat? What stories did you tell yourself about grades? How will that translate into the stories will you tell yourself about happiness and success?

You probably don't recognize the name Julia Butterfly Hill but you probably have heard of the woman who lived for two years in a California Redwood tree to protest the "clear-cutting" method being used by the logging company. I heard her speak a few years ago. She didn't set out to be an environmental activist; she didn't even know anything about the Redwood forests when she first traveled to California. She'd lost her job and some friends were going out there for the summer so she tagged along.

As they headed toward San Francisco, they stopped at a convenience store, pooled their money and bought bread and sandwich supplies. Back on the road, one of the women got upset because there wasn't any mustard. According to Julia, she wouldn't stop complaining about it, so finally Julia said, "get off at the next exit and let's find this girl some mustard!"

They found a gas station that had mustard packets, but while they were stopped, one of her friends saw a sign about an event happening in one of the nearby Redwood forests and they all decided to check it out. At that event, she met some

people who would eventually introduce her to other people who were working with environmentalists to try and save trees – and eventually Julia joined them in their work.

So she ended up living in a tree for 2 years because someone needed mustard. And that's really how life is. We think we're in charge of writing our story but often find we're in a different story than we imagined, and whether we resist the new story or not makes all the difference.

Here's something that sounds easy, but has taken me a long time to learn: Tell the Truth. Not to everybody, all the time, but find someone or some place where you can tell the truth. The messy truth, the way your life really is truth, the stuff I'm ashamed of truth.

For me, telling the truth meant writing a play which explored the dynamics of caring for a child severely affected by autism. The story I wanted for my family, the one where all three of my children had friends, found meaningful relationships and vocations and lived independently – that story was rewritten – for all of us. We had to find new ways to define “normal” and “success” – and ultimately I had to surrender to the narrative that was claiming me.

Glennon Doyle Melton, author of *Carry on Warrior*, writes about how life is both brutal and beautiful at the same time. To accurately describe her life, she coined the phrase BRUTIFUL. Our lives, our stories, can be Brutiful. The challenge is to live and love in those brutiful places.

So all the wisdom of my 30 years since college can be summed up in three sentences:

- 1) Continually ask “What story am I telling myself?” and examine how that story is making you feel and act.
- 2) Boldly write your own story, but when another story starts to write you, surrender to the new narrative.
- 3) Never be ashamed to tell your Brutiful Truth.

The spirit of Dionysus is embodied in storytelling and celebrating the moment. Look around you. In this moment you are sitting next to these people, breathing this air, hearing my voice (and perhaps wondering when I'll be finished). So let's

take this moment and embrace it! Stand up, shake a hand, introduce yourself to each other, give a high-five!

Okay, now sit back down. We're going to do something to really celebrate here, and it won't be in the text of the speech that's published. This is the story of the moment that we create together.

Something fun happens here – a moment of celebration!

Dionysus would be proud. Thanks you for listening, and best wishes to the graduates!