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The Importance of Unlearning (text only)

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The Importance of Unlearning

1993

Mona J. Gardner

President Myers, distinguished guests, colleagues and friends, students (especially those in the class of 1993), thank you for the great honor of being a part of this program today. In the few years I have been at Illinois Wesleyan, I have been privileged on similar occasions to attend the presentations of Professors Pam Muirhead, Tom Griffiths, Bob Bray, and John Wenum, all of which have been imaginative and insightful. I assure you, therefore, that it is with great humility—and a considerable amount of trepidation—that I've approached this task. In addition to reflecting on the four speeches I have heard myself, I looked back at remarks of winners since the initiation of this award in 1960 and found topics ranging from "Inflation", by the first winner, the late Professor William Beadles, to "The Occult Revisited" by the late Professor Max Pape. As you will see, I finally determined to make my own contribution to this distinguished history a very simple one, having little to do with my academic discipline.

I am teacher. For most of my life—certainly as far back as I can remember—I have always loved considering new ideas, commanding new facts and figures, developing new skills, mastering new technology. In brief, learning has always seemed to be one of those rare unequivocally-good things, and helping someone else learn, among the highest human callings. Since becoming a teacher, I have spent most of my time expounding this belief to my students. I have often stressed that knowledge is cumulative, that it builds on itself, that previous learning becomes the foundation for subsequent learning. I suppose that over time I have felt vindicated and reinforced in my beliefs by many references in the media to the "knowledge explosion" and by frequent reminders that more knowledge is created in a modern decade than was created in some previous centuries. So much to learn ... so little time.

Still, as much as I want my students to leave my classes with a keen desire to learn more than I could possibly teach them, only recently have I begun to realize that I must also encourage them to unlearn if I truly want to help them mature intellectually and personally. And I have finally seen that if I really wish my own actions to reflect my fundamental values and beliefs, I too must know what and when to unlearn.

Today, I hope to share with the graduates of the class of 1993 (many of whom have been my students and advisees), with other students, and with my colleagues and friends, further thoughts on the importance of unlearning. I will focus especially on three types of unlearning that strike me as crucial: unlearning the boundaries of specialization; unlearning stereotypes; and unlearning cynicism. I hope also to issue challenges to the class of 1993 so that as you leave us, armed with your hard-earned degrees, you'll embark upon a path not only of sustained learning but also of lifelong unlearning.

Members of the class of 1993, you are justly proud of your accomplishments. Most of you have chosen your major fields of study carefully and have acquired the level of expertise that you desired, and that we on the faculty demanded, in the vocabulary, the methodology, and the culture of your discipline. Some of you have already taken, or will soon take, exams that qualify you for a license or certificate of proficiency in your field. Others have taken a graduate record field exam, on the basis of which you will go on to acquire even greater expertise in that area in the future. Whatever your future, if you are like many of your predecessors—including the person I see in the mirror each day—many of you have begun to learn some things very well: that the world as seen through your discipline is the world as it really is; that the methodology with which you approach problem-solving will lead to the best solutions; and that the language through which you communicate is clear, precise, and definitive. You have learned, and perhaps have adopted, the shared values that underlie your discipline or profession and may even feel that part of your responsibility to that discipline or profession is advocacy of those values.

When I step back from my own field for a moment, many of my personal observations suggest, however, that these specialized lessons so well learned in school are often not the ones on which human progress is founded. My discipline of finance, for example, employs elaborate mathematical models and arcane jargon (such as “arbitrage pricing theory,” “semi-strong market efficiency,” and “delta-neutral hedging”), phrases born of the enthusiasm that characterizes a group of academics talking to itself. Yet I am struck by the fact that finance professionals consistently rate human relations as the most desired talent among new graduates. After all, I have a PhD in finance—what do they know that I don’t know? Or could it be that I have learned not to see what they see?

The methodology with which I am most comfortable dictates that problems are best solved by developing hypotheses, collecting vast amounts of empirical evidence, subjecting the evidence to statistical analysis, and dismissing data points that don’t seem to behave like the rest of the group as “outliers” from which little of importance can be gleaned. Yet I know that a historian may use a single unusual incident or individual (my “outlier”) to illuminate a generation. How could an intelligent person be so misguided? Or could it be that I’ve learned not to see what the historian sees?

Sometimes the steadfastness with which we view the world according to our specialization not only prevents us from communicating well with others, as my previous illustrations suggest, but it actually impedes personal development. Two years ago, a fine senior biology major enrolled in a management class to broaden her understanding of the relationship between science and business. She soon withdrew from the course, however, because she was unable to adjust to the fact that, for example, the word *un-ion-ized* in management was *u-n-ion-ized* and not *un-ion-ized*! Of course, a senior business student might well have had the

same problem in reverse. But while this true story is mildly amusing in retrospect, it illustrates, I believe, how much unlearning is sometimes necessary before we can enjoy further intellectual progress.

Today, therefore, my first challenge to members of the class of 1993 is to begin your post-baccalaureate days determined to discover what discipline-bound lessons you must unlearn to enable you to learn new lessons in the future. If you are entering law or medicine—fields that may well lead to the top economic stratum of almost any society—seek also to understand that society from an inner-city teacher's eyes. If you are a mathematician, make sure you understand how a nurse sees the world. If you plan a management career, consider how a minister or social worker might look upon commercial values. If you are an artist, musician, or actor, recognize and understand the beliefs that motivate business decisions. If you are a chemist, an economist, or an accountant, try to view the world through a poet's eyes. In brief, make it your objective not merely to acknowledge that those outside your field may see the world differently—that's easy—but try genuinely to understand how they may see it. I am virtually certain that to do so, you will be forced to venture outside the intellectual ghetto in which it is very tempting to settle down comfortably.

Do I offer this challenge because I have simplistically concluded that, if we unlearn the behaviors and language that define, and often restrict, our own specialties, we will find that "people are the same everywhere," and we will all live happily together? Of course not! Such a conclusion would not only be foolish, but also dangerous and undesirable, because it would fail to acknowledge the importance of diversity. Do I instead offer the challenge because I believe such intellectual boundary-spanning will allow you personally to lead, in the words of IWU's mission statement, "more fully realized lives"? No again, although I do believe it will. But that motivation would be essentially appealing only to your self-interest, and I hope to do more than that. Instead, I urge you to discover what narrow lessons you must unlearn—and then to unlearn them—because I am convinced that identifying and respecting differences in intellectual perspective is the only real basis on which human progress can be made on the social, economic, and political issues that divide us—and will conquer us if we let them.

Consider, for example, health care reform as one such issue. For us as a nation to enjoy universal but affordable health care will certainly require policy makers and health care specialists to listen to and to consider the needs of many interest groups, including doctors, lawyers, hospitals, employers, state governors, insurance companies, and, of course, people who need health care. Yet as important as the role of policy-makers and specialists is, a truly workable solution will be found only when members of each interest group understand and respect the positions held by the other interest groups. Developing such understanding almost always requires unlearning some of the cherished "truths" one

has previously learned. We will soon begin to see whether we have the will to do it.

A second area in which we must make greater unlearning efforts is that of stereotyping. This statement is neither startling nor original. Nonetheless, I am amazed and saddened, by the alarming frequency with which stereotypes of race, gender, regional or national origin, age, sexual orientation, religious preference, class, height, weight, and occupation dictate the terms of human interaction—even in relatively benign environments such as ours. My generation, and generations younger, often consider ourselves enlightened about and aware of the dangers of stereotypes. Many of us have taken classes in which acting on the basis of stereotypes is rigorously analyzed, dissected, and almost universally rejected as an impediment to our personal development, to the development of others, and to solutions to social and economic problems. If we are so well educated on these matters, then why do stereotypes persist with such a vengeance? More specifically, why do Willie Horton ads work? Why do Atlanta Braves fans continue to do the tomahawk chop? Why is the movie *Falling Down*, in which contemporary white males are symbolized by a crazed maniac who truly “just doesn’t get it,” so wildly popular? Why do surveys show that most men and many women prefer male bosses, when most respondents have never had a female supervisor? It is not simply the fact that politicians, baseball executives, movie producers, or pollsters play to stereotypes that deeply disturbs me, it is that large numbers of people continue to find those stereotypes acceptable.

At one point in the 1940s musical comedy *South Pacific*, the heroine, a sheltered white woman from Arkansas named Nellie Forbush, breaks off with the man she loves because she learns he is a widower with two Polynesian children. Speaking to another character, Lieutenant Cable, Nellie justifies her reluctance to embrace these children as her own by noting, “I can’t help it ... There is no reason ... This is emotional... This is something that’s born in me..” To Nellie’s surprise, Lieutenant Cable is not sympathetic, and replies in a dramatic and, when *South Pacific* debuted in the late 1940s, highly controversial, song entitled “You’ve Got to Be Carefully Taught.” Although Nellie’s personal stereotypes may seem dated today, the message that Rodgers and Hammerstein sent through Joe Cable to audiences in that era is what anthropologists had long before told us, and what they continue to tell us: that stereotypes are embedded in culture, and that culture is learned not innate. Therein lies the best news of all: what is learned can certainly be unlearned—but only if we first recognize the importance of unlearning.

I listened with interest at a recent diversity workshop when Malik Jones, one of our Admissions Counselors, discussed his preparations to travel to Nigeria this past January with other members of the IWU community. Malik noted that the most important action he took was not to learn all he could about Africa

before the trip, but to make his mind a clean slate—to eradicate the images of Africa he had acquired over a lifetime of Tarzan movies so that he had even a hope of seeing it as it really is. Malik's insight mirrors my belief that stereotypes persist in part because many of us have simply "pasted" new knowledge about particular groups or societies over what we have already learned is true, failing first to unlearn the stereotypes we may have been carefully taught. Thus, our subsequent encounters with people from that group are informed not only by our new knowledge but also by the deeply embedded beliefs we have failed to unlearn. The consequences of this pasting over are, of course, undesirable for those whom we stereotype. But neither are they good for us: Only after Nellie Forbush unlearned the lessons so carefully taught in her native Arkansas was she free to learn that her destiny lay on a Pacific plantation with a French husband and two Polynesian children.

Thus, my second challenge to students, and especially to graduating seniors, is to unlearn the inevitable stereotypes you carry with you, despite the certainty you may have that, through your classes, your travels, and your social contacts, you don't have them. Your personal efforts to unlearn will not, of course, eradicate the evils of stereotyping. They will not, for example, prevent the Jesse Helmses of the world from waging political campaigns on blatant appeals to prejudice. But they may prevent him from winning with such strategies the next time. Your personal unlearning should also make you more able to help others unlearn and therefore not to contribute inadvertently to the persistence of stereotypes on this campus, in your hometown, in your company, or even in your family. And you may well find that your own life is richer because you are now open to experiences your embedded stereotypes may cause you to reject today.

The third and final lesson I hope my students, and especially those in the class of 1993, will unlearn, is cynicism. I am concerned that somehow you have learned to be cynical; that some of you may doubt yours, or indeed anyone's, ability to change the world for the better, that you have concluded that factors such as competence and personal integrity don't count. I'll tell you why I'm worried. Last year, only a few days before it was announced that I would be the speaker at this year's Honors Day convocation, the *Argus* ran a column from a graduating senior entitled "Columnist Learned Lessons Well." Permit me to read excerpts:

I learned that brown-nosing can get you points just as well as studying.

I learned that being popular means not caring enough to say the truth.

I learned that doing the work yourself is unimportant: taking credit for work well done is essential.

I learned that learning something from your work is not necessary for success.

I learned that making a difference in the world is easy—pollution, prejudice, and political corruption come without effort.

I learned that impressing the right people is more important than knowing much of anything.

Maybe college did teach me how to succeed in life after all.
(from the *Argus*, May 8, 1992)

If those are some of the lessons of a college education, they are lessons in desperate need of unlearning. In this case, as in the others I have shared this morning, I know because I've "been there," because at times in my life I have personally felt the sentiments she expressed. Like many of my faculty colleagues in the audience, when I was in college, Martin Luther King and Robert Kennedy were assassinated. We came of age during the deep national divisions provoked by the Vietnam War. The year after I graduated, student protestors at Jackson State University and Kent State University were killed by young men who in another era might have been their classmates. Shortly thereafter many of us watched with disbelief when the Watergate episode revealed that the President of the United States had abused the awesome powers of his office to conceal his involvement in a petty crime. Like many in my generation at that time, after living through this series of events, my faith in established systems and institutions ebbed to almost nothing. Inevitably, too, my belief in the contribution that any individual, especially myself, could make to any form of human progress completely eroded. At that time, I could have, and no doubt did to friends and colleagues, express many of the sentiments the *Argus* columnist expressed just last year.

Yet I had once been a genuine idealist. There had been a time when I had not yet come to believe that it made little difference what I did or said, when I did not believe that the system was truly corrupt. Admittedly, my newly learned lessons in cynicism did not make me happy, but at least I felt I was finally prepared to meet the world as it truly was. I felt I had gained wisdom by putting aside the naive dreams of my past. And I believed these lessons were necessary for survival.

In the song "Against the Wind," the rock artist Bob Seger penned what I consider, as a member of the first rock and roll generation, to be a memorable line: "Wish I didn't know now what I didn't know then." For me, there was not really a defining moment in my days of cynicism when I knew that I, too, "wished I didn't know now what I didn't know then,"—when I wished I hadn't come to believe that most systems were hopelessly corrupt and that my indi-

vidual actions to the contrary didn't matter. Instead, my recognition was gradual. Perhaps I became discontent with always feeling discontent. More likely, after becoming a teacher, I began to remember that the best teachers I had had—including my late mother—were not cynics, but idealists, were not people of little faith in the power of one person's words and deeds, but people of great faith in them, were not purveyors of hopelessness, but of inspiration. So, though I can't define a dramatic moment (it would make for a much more entertaining speech today!), I am glad that I finally recognized that if I really wished I "didn't know now what I didn't know then," I could do something about it—that cynicism, like excessive specialization and like stereotypes, was learned and, therefore, could be unlearned.

My third and final challenge to the class of 1993 is to discover, and then to unlearn, the beliefs that tempt you to be cynical. But don't expect it to be easy. It's clear each generation has many opportunities to become cynical. Like my 1960s generation, during your college days, you have witnessed more than your share of events that could undermine your ideals—from the horrors of ethnic cleansing, to political corruption here and abroad, to headline-grabbing financial scandals, to television evangelists' exploitation of the weak and the infirm. Furthermore, individuals within each generation also have personal experiences which, like those of our *Argus* columnist, can teach cynicism. You may witness a peer cheating undetected and receiving a high grade or a promotion in the process. You may encounter times when hidden, rather than shared, agendas prevail within groups. You may—indeed, I'm sure you will—suffer broken promises and disappointments not of your own making.

And, as if an abundance of opportunities to become cynical weren't enough, the difficulty of unlearning cynicism is compounded by its very nature. Cynicism is sometimes allied with intellectual sophistication, with a certain *savoir faire*, with cleverness. Because most of us value being acknowledged for our intellect and wit, we may wonder if we will deny ourselves important recognition if we fail to endorse the cynic's view of the world. So if you choose to unlearn cynicism, it will not be without cost, at least within some circles.

In challenging you to unlearn cynicism, I do not fail to recognize the contributions of an H.L. Mencken (perhaps the most widely recognized professional cynic in American history) or of a film, novel, or play whose theme has a hard-boiled edge. Indeed, such shared and creative expressions of cynicism often serve as useful catharses for readers and audiences. Neither do I suggest that you approach your lives as scientists, physicians, teachers, nurses, lawyers, writers, accountants, politicians, artists, or managers as naive rubes, blindly ready to be "taken" by those who would willingly do so. Instead, I advocate adopting mature idealism, tempered with wisdom born of past experience. But *I am* suggesting that, even as you recognize that all human endeavors can be, and often are, conducted in the style highlighted by last year's *Argus* columnist—that is, by emphasizing form over substance, by using others, by taking personal credit

where it is not due, by sacrificing integrity for popularity—even in recognizing these things, I challenge you to show by example that these same endeavors can also be conducted competently, courageously, and nobly, despite inevitable temptations to behave to the contrary. To be sure, you may never reap tangible benefits by adopting such a course of conduct. But someone—a friend, a colleague, even a stranger—may be watching at a critical moment in his or her personal struggle with cynicism. And if you are perchance the unknowing instrument through which that struggle is peacefully resolved, you will have contributed to human progress. Although you may never know of such contributions with certainty, you cannot afford to live as if they are not possible, or do not matter.

In George Bernard Shaw's play *Major Barbara* one character notes to another, "You have learned something. That always feels at first as if you have lost something." The statement on its face seems puzzling. How can learning create a sense of loss? And if it can, how discouraging a thought. Losing anything is rarely a human goal, and most of us will go to great lengths to avoid it. But Shaw implies, and I have suggested this morning, that if we really are to learn personally and collectively, there are times when we must lose something first—namely, useless, outmoded, and dangerous lessons from the past. The next time you feel a sense of loss as you consider an unfamiliar idea or encounter a view of reality differing wildly from your own, don't be disturbed. It may be that you have just learned the importance of unlearning.