

"The Pursuit of Academic Excellence and Academia"

Delivered to the Loyola student body by Mr. Andrew Donacik on May 15, 2009.

I would like to speak about academic excellence, which is tethered to academia, the setting, such as a high school or a college, where academic excellence occurs. Now academia cannot be confused with macadamia, a type of nut. Although the phonetic coincidence is perhaps striking, given that academia can make us somewhat nutty every once in a while—you know, *omigosh, I have a 10-page philosophy paper, a biology test, and all of "Hamlet" to get through. And that's just for Monday!*. But more on academic nuttiness later.

I offer three perspective of academia, perspectives that might inform and animate your own journey in academic excellence.

The first perspective is academia is varied; it offers a little something for everyone. Call academia an intellectual smorgasbord: you, the developing student, are sampling right now—I think I'll try a dollop of this, two scoops of this, and, mmmmm. . . three globs of this. You're trying a little bit of everything, spurring cognitive growth on multiple fronts while assessing your strengths and weaknesses, your passions and your sources of indifference. Some choices will intrigue you—you'll want to come back for seconds later—while others might provoke wry, downturned lips and wincing of displeasure. The point here is that academic excellence hinges on openness, a word that we've certainly heard elsewhere in our reflections in this space. Embrace the optimist's view; namely, life is long. And because life is long, you simply don't know what you'll need in your future. You don't know the subtle and nuanced ways in which one academic course, no matter how seemingly irrelevant today, will cultivate and nourish your future learning and your future interests. You don't know.

The second perspective is academia can give birth to liberating intellectual experience. Here's how. Say you encounter in your American history course the economic policies of the Roosevelt administration during the Great Depression. You're slightly engaged. Not over-the-top engaged, but engaged nonetheless. So you check out current books at a bookstore and find one that gives you pause: the author, according to the synopsis provided on the inside jacket, contends that FDR's policies, rather than relieve the astringent conditions of the Great Depression, might have actually exacerbated them and perhaps, even, prolonged them. Mmmmm, you mumble inquisitively. This is getting pretty good. You're caught.

How liberating! To find intellectual pleasure without any strings attached. After all, reading this book is not wedded to any grade, any deadline, any requirement imposed by a superior, or, for that

matter, any immediate practical end. Just you, your brain, and your book. You have touched the very dignity of being human.

Let's now return to the occasional nuttiness of the academic slog. In this lies the third perspective. The human experience is a roller coaster ride, isn't it? Some days are exhilarating, affirming with crystal-like clarity the choices we've made. And other days. . . well, you feel as if the entire world is conspiring against you. To dissipate the dreariness of such self-pity, you need a poem. A poem that you have memorized, a poem that you can summon on those days in which you are riled by interior storms.

I conclude by sharing with you my own poem. It is by Robert Frost.

Two roads diverged in a yellow wood  
And sorry I could not travel both  
And be one traveler, long I stood  
And looked down one as far as I could  
To where it bent in the undergrowth;

Then took the other, as just as fair,  
And having perhaps the better claim,  
Because it was grassy and wanted wear.  
Though as for that the passing there  
Had worn them really about the same

And both that morning equally lay  
In leaves no step had trodden black.  
Oh, I kept the first for another day!  
Yet knowing how way leads on to way,  
I doubted if I should ever come back.

I shall be telling this with a sigh  
Somewhere ages and ages hence:  
Two roads diverged in a wood, and I—  
I took the one less traveled by,  
And that has made all the difference.