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Address to the Class Of 2003

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I am very honored to have this opportunity to greet you, the Class of 2003, or double-ought three, as I like to put it. I congratulate you on your choice of Bridgewater State College. As an alumnus of Bridgewater, I am enormously proud of this college, and it is my most sincere hope that you will grow to love it as much as I do.

Dean Jones, two years ago at one of those June orientation sessions with parents, let it slip that for some of you Bridgewater was not your first choice. That was two years ago and I have scarcely recovered from the shock. Yet I know what she said is true, for I had a young man in my Freshman Seminar last year who declared that Bridgewater was his safety school, but he was feeling better about it. By midsemester, he acknowledged that he “kinda” liked the place, and thought he would stay. Then he confided in me that he wanted to be an English major. The final blow came during the career exploration unit when he announced that he wanted to be an English teacher. I nearly broke out into “Give Love a Chance.” There you are! I only tell you this to remind you that it’s not easy screwing up what might have been a promising young career. Even if Bridgewater was not your first choice, give us a chance and we will win your hearts.

I am speaking to you today because, as Vice President Lydecker mentioned, I am the recipient of the 1999 V. James DiNardo Award. It is a great honor to have received this award because (1) I know, respect, and love the man for whom it is named, (2) because such outrageous compliments have been showered upon me so extravagantly. I thought I’d have to die before I heard the like, and (3) the award was accompanied by a very generous check from the Alumni Association.

After I got word that I was to receive this award, I mentioned to one of my colleagues that I feared if I lived long enough the DiNardo Award would get around to me. “I know,” she said, sensitively touching my arm, “you’re so modest, it will be difficult hearing all those nice things said about you.” I looked around, thinking she must be talking to someone else. “Hell, no. I love compliments. I adore them. I grovel shamelessly for them.” “Then what then?” asked my colleague, growing less and less sensitive by the second. It’s this having to speak to the incoming freshman class. It’s a set-up.

Take an aging member of the faculty, a professional talker, in mortal danger of becoming venerable, throw an award at him to make him think he deserves to be listened to, might even have something to say, and give that person an incarcerated audience of 700 freshmen filled with anxiety over what the next few days and weeks have in store for them, and what do you have? The perfect occasion for the dreaded few-words-of-advice speech. You know the genre—filled with roads-less-traveled-by metaphors, with their bumps, twists, and hazards, lots of “when I was your age” references, and polysyllabic words like perseverance, introspection, self actualization and perspiration. I can predict with a good deal of certainty what is in store for you. Most of you will be born again intellectually.

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As enormously appealing as the prospect must be of my sharing the wisdom of my years with you, I must disappoint you. I don’t ask for advice. I rarely take advice when offered, and I try very hard not to give it, even when asked. I can identify with Thoreau when he said, “I have lived some thirty years on this planet, and I have yet to hear the first syllable of valuable or even earnest advice from my seniors.” Although I must confess that the image of all 700 of you on your knees, hands upraised in supplication, begging me to share with you my secrets of long life and happiness appeals to my fascination with the ludicrous, nothing can make me give up a single word of advice.

Instead, I would ask you to indulge me in another of my many gifts. That is the gift of prophecy. From having watched thirty classes very much like yours move through Bridgewater, I can predict with a good deal of certainty what
is in store for you. Most of you will be born again intellectually. You will discover that you really do have a mind and that it's a crime to waste it. This is the first day of a new beginning.

Most of your professors don’t give a rat’s posterior where you went to high school or what your standing in your class was. What they care about is what you do tomorrow and the day after that. It is the time to forget the roles you adopted or were forced to adopt in high school and flesh out a new role for yourself.

In taking those cursed GER courses you have heard so much about, you will be turned on by subjects you haven’t studied before—anthropology, sociology, philosophy, dance, architecture. Or you may think history’s not my thing until you discover History of Assassinations. Hundreds of undeclared students find their majors this way.

While the majority of you now are clueless about what it is you want to do with your life, by the end of the sophomore year you will have chosen a major, in most cases as a preparation for a career. This will bring a dimension of reality into your studies you have never experienced before. Unless you are a completely unfeeling and irredeemable dolt, preparing for a career anticipates taking pride in your performance in that career. I have never met anyone who studies to be incompetent in a career. As I tell my student teachers as they are about to go out into the field to do their student teaching, I don’t have to worry about how much time you will spend in preparing for your classes. The prospect of making an ass of yourself in front of twenty-four hostile adolescents is not pleasant to contemplate. You will want to be the very best you can be. You will listen to your teachers with an ever-increasing urgency, very likely adopting one as a mentor. You may even feel disappointed when one of them calls in sick, instead of offering up prayers for a prognosis of long and hideous debilitation.

Your mind will grow rapidly. The catalog of information in your brain will quadruple. Your skills will reach genuine expertise in many areas. You will learn to read, to really read.

You will learn to write good papers, long, logically connected, fluent papers you can be proud of. You will learn to make informational technology work for you. But, most important, we will educate your imaginations. Your intellectual imagination. You will be compulsive about looking for alternative explanations for what others take as obvious.

You will learn that all science and much of technology is bright people following their informed hunches. To succeed in business is to have the intellectual imagination to anticipate human need and to satisfy it. The imagination to find a better way of doing something. The imagination to see connections where no one has seen them before. What is a gifted reader-critic but someone who sees connections you wished you had seen? The historian who finds patterns, shifts, and trends and the sociologist who sees significance in the most mundane social habits are both exercising their intellectual imaginations. If you become a teacher, in the great Bridgewater tradition, you will be able to imagine creative, engaging activities connected to explicit, clearly articulated goals.

We will educate your linguistic imagination. You will no longer trust like Humpty Dumpy that when I use a word it means exactly what I want it to mean. You will be able to get outside of your language and look in, to see how much of your thinking is affected by the language you do your thinking in. You will have the empathy to imagine how words affect others, that words can hurt. Words can separate and divide, and words can quite literally kill. The very word cancer keeps thousands of men and women from seeking medical advice and treatment in the presence of unmistakable symptoms. Every year fear of words like faggot and dyke drive hundreds of your contemporaries in this state alone to take their lives.

You will have the imagination to look for and see that goodness and virtue take many forms and that evil often comes dressed in a business suit.

Finally, we will educate your moral imagination. If we do not increase your capacity for empathy, then we have failed. You will have the imagination to look for and see that goodness and virtue take many forms and that evil often comes dressed in a business suit. You will have the imagination to see that honor and profits can be harmonized in the business world, that dreams must be connected to action, and that our every action has implications and repercussions for others.

I wish you great success at Bridgewater. You look like a fine class. I thank you for being such a wonderful audience. Buckle your seatbelts; you’re in for a great ride.

Dr. Clifford Wood is Professor of English.