

graduates, family & friends, faculty

This day is a culmination for all of you here -- as well it should be. The road to this point has been hard, I'm sure (in particular I'm remembering ^{struggles of students, struggles of} family putting up w/ ^{struggles of students} my own courses in statistics and experimental design). I'm sure it has also been rewarding. Now at last you've reached your goal -- the Ph.D. degree in psychology, a prestigious, and much sought-after degree.

But today is also a beginning, ~~and that is what I'd like to talk about now.~~ This is the beginning not only of the doctor of psychology you have all just become, but also the beginning of the person you will be for the rest of your life. It is easy after having invested so much time, psychic energy, and money ~~in the pursuit of profession to feel that you are your profession.~~ That is one important thing your degree does for you: it provides you with a role, a doctor of psychology. By its very nature, a degree is a fixed, immutable entity. It is something tangible that, ~~barring extreme unprofessional behavior, no one can deprive you of. You've got the security of the degree for the rest of your life.~~

the balance to this ending part

So in a sense this degree is a culmination. The beginning part has to do with the person who has accomplished this great feat. Chaim Potok writes in his book In The Beginning: "Beginnings are hard. Especially a beginning you make by yourself. That's the hardest beginning of all." Only a person, a true person, in Yiddish a mensch, can make a beginning. And all of you here in this room are poised at the edge of such beginnings ^{ready to smuggle your denkeys.}

These beginnings are hard, because we are all consumed by the fear of truly risking, truly struggling to push ourselves one step higher. They are also hard because they are lonely. For all the warm support and love of friends and family without which none of us would have the strength to go forward, true beginnings are always made alone. They emanate from that small core within each of us, that spark of soul that illuminates our lives. ~~True beginnings nurture that spark, fan it and keep it alive.~~

*Sylvester
+ magic pebble
choice in
fear - his true
beginning in
be rock-
ism again
from love &
hope*

What is the nature of a true beginning? Potok has some thoughts on that as well. In *The Chosen*, he writes, "It may be asked what value is there to a human life. What does it all mean if our lives are nothing more than the blink of an eye? A blink of an eye in itself is nothing. But the eye that blinks, that is something. A span of life is nothing. But the man who lives that span, he is something. He can fill that tiny span with meaning, so its quality is immeasurable though its quantity may be insignificant. A man must fill his life with meaning, meaning is not automatically given to life. And it is hard work to fill one's life with meaning."

Unfortunately, there is no magical transformation which occurs with the awarding of that glorious and long-desired Ph.D, although perhaps modern medicine will one day discover a hormone to stimulate spiritual growth. You are still the same person as you were an hour ago, and your struggle is still the same: How to truly begin your life, how to live it with integrity and fill it with meaning. Of course, degrees open doors, and that is one reason we pursue them: doors to professional advancement, doors to more fulfilling work, even doors to more money. But perhaps the most important

doors are not opened by degrees, ~~but by people~~. These are the doors of ^{love, of kindness, of charity.} ~~Being a doctor doesn't open these doors,~~ ^{the doors to the essence of things - donkey doors.} ^{if you will} ^{true beginning} only you can -- and it is hard work. But it is also good work, and ~~I~~ ~~feel more and more~~ that it is perhaps the only truly important job that all of us have before us, ~~especially now at a time when the world is~~ ~~poised on the brink of nuclear madness.~~

^{OUR} My plea to all of you here is to make your own beginning today, to do your best to fill every aspect of your life with meaning and with love. That is something a degree cannot do, but a person can.

But we have to try - and that is what this talk is about - trying. Ram Dass has said that we will fall off the path a thousand times - our task is to climb back the 1001 time. There is pain and falling off + resistance to climbing on - Once, when Deane & I were leaving ^{home} for a talk, our oldest daughter wrote us a ^{purpose} note. Dear Mom + Dad, I wish you didn't have to go but I know you must. Pursuing a balance is full of hard choices, and there is always a cost somewhere in the equation. But it is the task which has been given us.

We are all given magic pebbles in life, but sometimes we misuse them. We make choices in fear rather than in joy. We run away from the lions in our lives and turn ourselves to stone. These are our inevitable errors, our stumbling from the path. But like Sylvester, we must struggle against sleep, struggle to keep that small spark alive. We must make our own small beginnings, alone in our rocks, and wait to receive the love and hope which will allow us to be born again & again.

All of us have to engage in some degree of smuggling in our lives, in the sense of being cunning and clever, and in the sense of circumventing established and conventional ways of being in the world. ^{This kind of "smuggling" has a chance of enriching our lives} And we have a choice about what we select to smuggle.

Often, unfortunately, we make the wrong choice, and end up smuggling jewels when we should be smuggling donkeys. We are seduced by the glitter & the allure of things which ultimately count for very little and in the end ~~do~~ bring us only trouble - and we ignore the most important things, the essence of things, ^{the donkeys in our lives} which could truly make us rich.

1) * You will notice that donkeys crop up frequently in our talk tonight. As you all know, donkeys are foolish and stubborn animals, not unlike human beings. But as we can see from the story of Nasrudin sometimes it is only the foolish who are truly wise.

What is this essence? Some have suggested that it is a ~~harmonious~~ ^{harmonious internal & external} balance of all the many facets of human existence - the spiritual & the physical, the professional and the interpersonal, the family & the individual. But posing such an answer leads immediately to another question: Is it possible, in the short span of a single life, to achieve this balance and the sense of meaning & purpose which flows from it?