If You Throw That Again, You'll Have to Sit with the Grownups!

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Liberal Arts Symposium is designed to be a demonstration and a celebration of the creativity of Juniata students. This is important enough that we set aside a full day and cancel classes – the celebration – and we have research papers and jazz concerts and art installations – the demonstration. Creativity takes many forms. But what is it?

John Cleese, of Monty Python and Fawlty Towers fame, gave a speech about creativity about thirty years ago. In that speech he drew, among others, on the work of a UCLA psychologist, Donald MacKinnon, who studied creativity in the 1960s. What MacKinnon found was that people who were regarded by their peers as most creative were not different from their peers in most ways. There were no differences in training or in intellect – no differences in IQ, for example. What WAS different was what Cleese calls their "way of operating." As he said, "It is not an ability that you either have or don't have." What was different was their ability to play. "Indeed he [MacKinnon] described the most creative … as being childlike. For they were able to play with their ideas … to explore them … not for any immediate practical purpose but just for enjoyment. Play for its own sake."

Now there is a funny thing about play. We are trained not to do it. We are trained to treat it as a distraction. Don't play with your food, don't play with matches, don't be loud at the table, don't throw things. Sit up and behave, and ignore everything but Your Task. We are trained to ignore anything that is not "useful," or statistically average, or mainstream. As Angus Fletcher tells us, we are trained to ignore the exceptional and focus on the average or typical, and to exclude "outliers." That is what we think school is FOR. A recent talk by Fletcher here at Juniata highlights this:

> Unfortunately, [the] natural ability [to recognize exceptional information] is trained out of us in school today. In school, children are taught instead to think like computers, so children gradually lose their ability to spot exceptional

> information. By fourth grade, most children have lost so much of that ability that they have become measurably less creative, and by the time those students graduate from college, they notice less than 1% of the exceptional information in their environment. That leaves students unable to be as creative as they were when they were younger and unable to react as swiftly to change. It makes them less resilient. It makes them more fragile.

We faculty are taught in graduate school that excluding the exceptional is an important part of teaching. We should focus our classes on what is statistically regular, what has "worked" in the past, what a majority of people in our discipline think. Exceptional information is disruptive to what we think we know, and which means things that occur with statistical frequency. As Fletcher notes, that is what computers do. We become experts at categorization, and we teach our students to categorize rather than to take their own, fresh, look at the data – after all, if it had worked, somebody would have done it. Right?

In other words, we train students to be respectable members of the adults' table. But that takes time and repetition. Learning to ignore the irregular means learning to ignore signals that might mean danger, for example, or ignoring questions that might lead to success. Education means making students less original. We separate the kids' table from the adult table because we don't expect children to behave in the ways that adults find "regular." We expect children to be childlike, to run around and yell, while adults should be adultlike, sit quietly and behave. Sitting at the adult table is punishment because you have to behave like an adult – or, as we say more simply, behave. Sitting at the kids' table is a lot more fun. As long as the grownups don't know what the kids are doing, children can be noisy, or throw stuff, or get up and run around the table – adults are not allowed to do that, and (most of the time at least) will not do it. That has been trained out of us. We become professors because we behave like adults – we learned not to ask questions that fall outside of certain parameters, or are socially unacceptable, or weird. We are trained to be mainstream members of our disciplinary fraternities, and not push the boundaries of what is considered acceptable inquiry.

This is where the "childlike" part of creativity comes in, and this is where LAS gives me some hope. Kids don't know what has been done, or what has worked. They haven't done a lit review; they want to find out for themselves. They are happy to move fast, try something, and then move on to something else. And if something gets broken in the process, well, that is the price of discovery.

Aristotle says that philosophy begins with the sense of wonder – a childlike contemplation of what appears, at first sight, to be difficult to explain (*Metaphysics*, 982b). How do we find an explanation – how, in Aristotle's time, do we picture the sun going around the earth or the planets moving in the heavens? Why do things change? How do things change? And why do some of the changes in things seem to present regularities?

We have moved on, as Aristotle predicted, from simpler to more complicated questions. LAS gives us scope – and permission – to ask them and to seek answers. But there is more. Because we also set this day aside to remind ourselves that the questions, and the process of questioning, are more important than the answers. The questions remain, even when the answers are discarded as outmoded or wrong. Learning how to frame a question well is the first step in figuring out how to answer it.

We now explain the motions of the planets and the sun quite differently than Aristotle did. We now know, for example, that the earth goes around the sun. More research – more questions – more wonder – more play – may yet make us change our minds about even something as fundamental as that. That we would ask those questions – that we would play – is the best thing that can happen at a liberal arts college like Juniata. We hope you will be excited by framing and asking questions. We hope you will become disrupters – in the best and most productive way. We hope your questions will lead your generation forward. Which is another way of saying, we hope you will throw stuff at the table.

So that is my first point to students. Pursue your questions even if other people think it is wrong or foolish or childish to do so. You are here, and we are celebrating you, because you have asked questions, you have pushed the boundaries, and you have thought – and challenged us to think – in new and different ways about the world.

My second point is related. LISTEN. Talk to people who disagree with you and hear what they have to say. The Nobel prize winning economist, Daniel Kahneman, died last month, and he is remembered as a practitioner of what he called "adversarial collaboration."[1] This type of collaboration means that you find someone who has questioned or challenged your approach or your findings and convince them to work with you to investigate the truth. This, too, is childlike behavior. We often see children – frequently siblings – who argue until someone is in tears, only to turn within minutes to a project where both cooperate. Adults hold grudges or turn their backs or simply withdraw. Children are much more resilient.

In my discipline of political science, perhaps the outstanding example of adversarial collaboration is the United States Constitution. The Philadelphia Convention created a system of three separate branches of government, each with its own will, but jointly responsible to the people for governing the country and – most importantly – unable to act separately. The framers knew that there were fundamentally opposing ideas about how the nation was to be governed – slavery is the most obvious example – and yet they created a system in which people had to work together, to create common solutions, to listen to others, and to compromise.

Previous political theory had led to structures where people did not have to listen to each other – one side, or most often one class, could simply ignore the others. These theorists were preoccupied with outcomes, rather than procedures. Of course that worked very well, until it didn't. The Constitutional Convention's solution was to focus instead on procedures and design a system that was flexible, that could change with the times, and that would – not always easily or quickly – reflect public opinion. Most of all, it required compromise and bargaining – it created an endlessly frustrating political system in which no one ever won a complete victory or won all the time.

Listening to your opponents sounds like grownup behavior – that is to say, it sounds boring. After all, why would you want to listen to people who are clearly wrong? But in fact listening to those who disagree is not statistically typical adult behavior. Many grownups don't listen. They have closed their minds – just look at American politics today. We no longer have that sense of "adversarial collaboration." We're all at the adult table, but no one is talking to anyone else. That this is not a good situation is agreed on almost all sides. But how do ears, and minds, become open? This is the contemporary challenge for a creative thinker – how do we get beyond politics based on algorithms?

So this is my second point: don't close your mind. Be open to those who disagree, talk with them, and see how – together – you can increase everyone's knowledge. Often, when you work with people who have arrived at a different answer than you have, you discover that they care about the issue or problem just as much as you do. That is what Daniel Kahneman discovered. That is something you can build on to make discoveries happen. That is what happens when you let your sense of wonder -- in this case, a shared sense of wonder – lead you to new questions.

Keeping your sense of wonder is essential to preserving your childlike openness to new and interesting information. Get distracted by it! Be ready to go down a few rabbit holes – but keep at it. You may start pursuing some question and completely lose track of what time it is. But if you enjoy your work, it will never feel like work. Juniata's mission is to prepare you to lead interesting and "useful" lives, which should mean a life that brings satisfaction through your accomplishments – whatever they are. But it could also mean a life of disruption.

The famous William von Liebig was a student here, as you know. He had a passion and a talent for biology. Family circumstances led him to leave Juniata and finish his education at the Philadelphia College of Textiles. He went into the textile industry. But he never forgot his love of biology, and after World War II he became aware of a need for artificial blood vessels in medicine. He thought: why not use fabric? And so he designed a fabric that could be used to replace blood vessels – and built it into a billion dollar company. He designed a creative – and profitable – solution to a vexing problem.

But notice his question. Why not? Why do we do it this way, and not that way? Von Liebig was throwing stuff at the table. LAS is our invitation to you to do the same thing – to ask new questions. So ask them. Challenge the old answers – challenge US to look at things in new ways. Unleash your sense of wonder, the sense of "why not?" that will lead you to look at information in a new way and to be as creative as you can be.

I hope that your participation in LAS has helped you discover your inner child, or at least raised the possibility that you will act in such a way that someone will threaten to punish you by sending you to the grownups' table.

[1] Cass Sunstein, "The Nobel Winner Who Liked to Collaborate with his Adversaries," *New York Times*, April 1, 2024.