

Some Advice from an Obscure Economist who Teaches at an Unknown Central PA College

Dr. Brad Andrew

Juniata College Awards Convocation Speech, May 1, 2024

Brad Andrew is Professor of Economics and International Studies at Juniata College.

First, I need to reassure all of you that unlike my colleague Li Shen, who delivered the opening convocation speech in the fall, I'm not singing! But I do have a few recommendations for you, as the title indicates. I've been thinking about them for a while, in some cases for several years, and I think they're worth sharing. I started writing this speech last October. It got very long—eleven pages, single-spaced. At one point I even had four pages, single-spaced, about my son Cameron. I told him that I had written too much, including four pages about him, and that I needed to edit it. He asked me what other parts of the speech I was going to cut so that I could include the four pages about him. Yes, my boy is funny! One time he looked me in the eye and said “Dad, when I move out, you're going to be the man of the house!”

You probably noticed that I'm sitting here, instead of standing at the podium. There are two reasons for that. First, I'm starting to get arthritis in both of my hips. I also herniated a disk in my lower back about fifteen years ago and that eventually led to sciatic nerve pain that radiates from my hip down to my left foot. I can't walk or stand for more than ten minutes without being in pain or losing feeling in the lower half of my left leg. That's why I'm sitting. It's frustrating.

Adding to that frustration: I've dropped 100 pounds over the last two decades. I lost it slowly so that it's hard to notice. You'd think that the weight loss would have prevented some of these lower body maladies, but no. I am frustrated by this situation, but if I focus on that frustration, it would just make me more miserable. Or, I could focus on something else: there are people out there who can't walk one step without feeling pain. There are people who can't walk at all and who would love to have the ability that I have. Envy is a key part of the human psyche. Heck, it's one of the seven deadly sins. But you'll live a happier life if you focus on what you do have rather than on what you've lost or never had. I'm not going to lie: It's difficult to do. But it's worth it to try, and that leads me to **Recommendation 1: Avoid envy—focus on gratitude for what you do have.**

My mom died, very unexpectedly, when I was 12. When it was happening, my dad called an ambulance and told my brother and I to go out and meet it. The street I grew up on has a strange feature;

it is split in two by a brook, and the ambulance went to the wrong side of Wellington Ave. We ran after it, but we weren't fast enough. My mom died. I held on to the pain of her loss for years, not talking about it, and it warped me in ways I didn't understand until much later. It wasn't until that soul sucking siege known as graduate school that I got help, and even then, it took a couple more rounds of counselling before I was able to process and live with her loss. The people who love you, whether here or in the hereafter, don't want you to be miserable. They want you to be living a happy, meaningful life. Learn from other people's mistakes, from my mistakes. If you are in pain and it's affecting you, seek help. And that leads us to **Recommendation 2: Seek help if you are in pain.**

Many people said wonderful things about my mom at her funeral. I have experienced that same thing at many funerals since then, where people described the virtues of the person who passed; I suspect you have experienced that, too. I've come to consider this as one of the greatest ironies of life: People say the nicest things about someone when they can no longer hear them—at their funeral. For some reason, we are uncomfortable telling people how we feel about them when they're alive. So, here is **Recommendation 3: Have a celebration of life while the person is still alive.** Get everyone you can together in person and say all of the wonderful things you would normally say at a funeral to them in person...while they're still alive to enjoy those expressions of love and appreciation.

I fear that some of you, when told repeatedly by college officials that you need to embrace and even celebrate those different from you, eventually tuned them out. You smiled, nodded, and kept your mouth shut. Some of you grew weary at what eventually seemed like thinly veiled criticisms of your belief system. However, it is a crucially important message. My colleagues are right, but I think the means by which they try to get that message across may be counterproductive because it can engender defensiveness. Let me suggest a different starting point for this important message.

Think back to a time, or multiple times, when you felt excluded, left out and in some way just a lesser person by some in-group who generated their self-esteem from keeping people out of their clique. For me it was kickball during recess, where I was the fat kid who was the last one chosen by a team ("We don't want Brad on our team, we want the kid with the broken leg."). Focus on how miserable you felt then. And now, imagine that people from underrepresented groups may feel like that every day. There are simple things that you can do to help. Channel how miserable you felt when you were excluded, then smile, say hello, and be kind and friendly to those whose lives are more difficult than you or I can understand. In essence, follow the golden rule—do unto others as you would have them do unto you. That's a simple recommendation that's consistent with the values of any good person. **Recommendation 4: Be kind to others, particularly those who are different from you in some way.**

Last October, I was at my colleague Jerry Kruse's 60th birthday party. There were, unsurprisingly, a lot of people at his party because Jerry is a great guy. I was talking to Jim Tuten and Mark McKellop at the party and Mark said, "I've got another year and a half before I turn 60, and I can tell you that I'm not

going to do this. There's no way this many people would show up to a birthday party for me!" I think many of us have had an experience where we later thought of a great comeback line but sadly the moment had passed. That happened to me the day after Jerry's birthday party. Only in this case, I knew I was giving a speech several months later that Mark would be attending, so I'd get a chance to use that line! So, Mark, while you wouldn't get over a hundred people to come to your birthday party, you could easily top Jerry Kruse's numbers if it were a roast!

Mark also spoke about his daughter Carly that night. He talked, with a bit of frustration in his voice, about how his daughter called him five times a week from college. Mark, you weren't complaining, you were bragging! And rightfully so. If your daughter is calling you five times a week from college, you've done something very right. She wants to stay connected to her Dad. THAT...IS...AWESOME! Take the win, Mark!

I've had experiences like that many times before, where I was reminded of how many great fathers there are on this campus. Randy Rosenberger regularly had his children in his office because he was taking them to some event. Emeritus Professor of Russian Jim Roney would go to concerts with his children because he wanted to have more ways to stay connected with them, more things to talk about. I could go on because there are many more examples. But I want to focus on my own reaction to what I observed: In the presence of what I saw as great dads, there were times over the years I felt like a mediocre father. But that's okay because that guilt forced me to recognize my own shortcomings and motivated me to do better. And being a better father is an important part of being a better person. And that brings me to **Recommendation 5: Try to work at a place that nudges and encourages you to be a better person.**

So, to sum up this advice:

Recommendation 1: Avoid envy—focus on gratitude for what you do have.

Recommendation 2: Seek help if you are in pain.

Recommendation 3: Have a celebration of life while the person is still alive.

Recommendation 4: Be kind to others, particularly those who are different from you in some way.

Recommendation 5: Work at a place that nudges and encourages you to be a better person.

Let me close by saying that professors take jobs at big research universities because they want to do a lot of research and publish a lot of papers. That work makes their CV very long. A CV is short for curriculum vitae, the academic equivalent of a resume. I think many professors at those big universities want to eventually have long CVs like their more experienced colleagues. They suffer from CV envy.

Luckily, few Juniata professors suffer from CV envy. Professors teach at Juniata primarily because we want to live vicariously through your success. We judge ourselves based on how well we are able to help you grow into adults that create happy, meaningful lives. Please stay in touch. It means a lot to us. Thank you.