

Convocation 2009: Find and Embrace Your Inner Dork

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WHEN I WENT TO COLLEGE, I STARTED OUT MAJORING IN INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS, WITH A GOAL OF WORKING IN THE FOREIGN SERVICE, HAVING ADVENTURES AT US EMBASSIES ABROAD AND ALL THAT. FORTUNATELY, WITHIN A MONTH OR SO, I REALIZED THAT I HATED MY MAJOR. THE MAJOR REQUIRED FOUR COURSES IN ONE AREA OF STUDY IN FACT, WHICH SHALL GO UNNAMED, THAT MADE ME WANT TO SCREAM IT WAS SO ANNOYING. I HAD TO FIND SOMETHING ELSE. I EVEN THOUGHT ABOUT TRANSFERRING TO ANOTHER COLLEGE I HATED MY MAJOR SO MUCH. BUT THAT WOULD HAVE BEEN A MISTAKE. THERE WAS ANOTHER MAJOR WAITING FOR ME.

BUT I HAD TO FIND IT. MY ROOMMATE'S GIRLFRIEND WAS REALLY EXCITED ABOUT A COURSE IN PSYCHOLOGY SHE WAS TAKING, SO I DECIDED TO TRY THAT IN THE SPRING SEMESTER OF MY FRESHMAN YEAR. IT WAS AMAZING. I DECIDED AT THAT POINT THAT I WANTED TO BECOME A THERAPIST, AND HELP PEOPLE WITH THEIR PROBLEMS. (DIDN'T HAPPEN)

IN MY SOPHOMORE YEAR, I HAD A CLASS CALLED GENERAL EXPERIMENTAL PSYCHOLOGY, REQUIRED FOR THE MAJOR. LIKE MOST COLLEGE STUDENTS, I WAS STUDYING ONE NIGHT AROUND 1:30 OR 2:00 IN THE MORNING FOR AN EXAM THE NEXT MORNING AT 9, TOTALLY WIRED ON CAFFEINE. STUDYING REQUIRED READING SOME REALLY DULL PAPERS DISCUSSING RESEARCH – THE KIND WHERE YOU ARE JUST TRYING TO GET THROUGH IT SO YOU CAN SAY TO YOURSELF “AT LEAST I READ IT!” HONESTLY, EVEN IN GRADUATE SCHOOL, WHEN I HAD ASSIGNED READINGS LIKE THAT, I WOULD END UP FOCUSING MORE ON TRYING TO ESTIMATE HOW MUCH LONGER IT WAS GOING TO TAKE TO GET TO THE END (BECAUSE THAT'S THE MOST EXCITING THING ABOUT IT; THAT IT IS GOING TO END). YOU KNOW THE KIND OF READINGS I'M TALKING ABOUT ... SOMEBODY MUST FIND THAT STUFF INTERESTING?

TO MY SURPRISE, IN THE MIDST OF THOSE ASSIGNED PAPERS, I READ SOMETHING THAT GOT ME THINKING – AND I GOT EXCITED – IT HAD TO DO WITH MEASURING PEOPLE'S ABILITY TO FIGURE OUT WHERE SOMETHING WAS BY SOUND ALONE. NOW, WHEN I WAS A KID, MY GRANDPARENTS WERE WHEAT FARMERS IN A REALLY RURAL PART OF EASTERN WASHINGTON STATE, AND SOMETIMES DURING HARVEST TIME, I WOULD SPEND THE DAY RIDING ALONG IN ONE OF THE TRUCKS CARRYING LOADS OF WHEAT FROM THE FIELDS TO THE NEAREST GRAIN ELEVATOR. IT INVOLVED A LOT OF SITTING AND WAITING FOR COMBINES TO BE READY TO FILL THE TRUCK. ONE OF THE DRIVERS I RODE WITH LIKED TO SIT IN THE TRUCK AND KEEP HER HEAD DOWN AND TRY TO GUESS WHERE THINGS WERE BY SOUND ALONE (THERE WASN'T MUCH ELSE TO DO). AS A KID, I WAS IMPRESSED BY HER SKILL. SO, YEARS LATER, THERE I AM AT 2:00 IN THE MORNING, READING ABOUT BORING RESEARCH ON SOUND LOCALIZATION SKILLS, STUDYING FOR AN EXAM, AND I GOT SO JAZZED UP ABOUT THE ISSUE, I STARTED THINKING ABOUT WAYS TO DO MORE RESEARCH ON IT. I THOUGHT, “YOU KNOW, IF YOU SET UP 8 SPEAKERS [POINT] YOU COULD MAKE SOUNDS SEEM TO COME FROM ANYWHERE AROUND A PERSON, AND YOU COULD MAP OUT THEIR ABILITY TO LOCALIZE THE SOUNDS IN 3 DIMENSIONS ...” AND I SAT THERE IN THE MIDDLE OF THE NIGHT, IN THE ALL-NIGHT READING ROOM IN THE LIBRARY, DESIGNING AN EXPERIMENT. I MAY ACTUALLY STILL HAVE MY NOTES IN THE MARGIN OF THE READING SOMEWHERE. (BY THE WAY, AN INTERESTING PHENOMENON IS THAT IF A SOUND

COMES FROM OVER YOUR HEAD, ALONG A LINE PERPENDICULAR TO YOUR EARS, YOU CAN'T TELL WHERE IT IS ALONG THAT LINE). AND I JUST GOT COMPLETELY CAUGHT UP IN THINKING ABOUT THE PROBLEM. TIME SLIPPED AWAY FROM ME, AND I WAS COMPLETELY ENGAGED IN WORKING ON THE PROBLEM (SO MUCH FOR STUDYING).

NOW, YOU'RE PROBABLY ALL THINKING, "WOW, WHAT A DORK." WELL, THAT'S PRETTY MUCH WHAT I THOUGHT AT THE TIME – WHAT A DORK I MUST BE.

AND THE DORKINESS KEPT COMING BACK IN MY EXPERIENCES AS A STUDENT. DURING MY JUNIOR YEAR, I STARTED WORKING AS A RESEARCH ASSISTANT TO ONE OF MY PSYCH PROFESSORS – A VERY SUCCESSFUL RESEARCHER, SHE'S HAD FEDERAL GRANTS TO SUPPORT HER RESEARCH CONTINUOUSLY FOR THE LAST 30 YEARS OR SO. WE WERE DISCUSSING HOW TO SET UP AN EXPERIMENT WE WERE WORKING ON, AND I NOTICED THAT THERE WAS A CRITICAL CONTROL CONDITION MISSING FROM THE DESIGN. SHE LOOKED AT ME KIND OF FUNNY – SHE WAS PROBABLY THINKING, HE'S WAS A BRIGHT KID AND ALL, SHE HAD DESIGNED THE EXPERIMENT, IT WAS ALL READY; WE WERE JUST DISCUSSING HOW TO GET IT READY FOR TESTING PEOPLE. BUT SHE ASKED ME TO EXPLAIN, AND WHEN I DID, SHE THOUGHT ABOUT IT FOR A MOMENT, AND SAID, "YES, YOU'RE RIGHT, WE DO NEED THAT CONTROL CONDITION."

THAT WAS A HUGE MOMENT FOR ME – AS AN UNDERGRADUATE, I HAD MADE A SIGNIFICANT CONTRIBUTION TO THE RESEARCH; IF WE HADN'T INCLUDED THE CONTROL CONDITION, WE WOULD VERY LIKELY NOT HAVE BEEN ABLE TO PUBLISH THE RESEARCH, WHICH WE EVENTUALLY DID. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY DOES ACTUALLY MATTER, BY THE WAY, BECAUSE IT'S THE ONLY WAY WE KNOW ABOUT CAUSE – THE MISSING CONDITION WOULD HAVE MEANT WE COULDN'T REALLY KNOW WHAT THE RESULTS OF THE EXPERIMENT MEANT.

THE RESEARCH PROJECT WAS IN THE AREA OF ADULT AGE-RELATED CHANGES IN THE STRUCTURE OF PEOPLE'S KNOWLEDGE OF WORDS. LIKE MANY RESEARCH PROJECTS, IT WAS EXAMINING A VERY TINY ASPECT OF THE FIELD. WE FOUND THAT OLDER ADULTS ARE PRETTY MUCH LIKE YOUNGER ADULTS IN HOW THEY UNDERSTAND THE MEANINGS AND CONNECTIONS BETWEEN WORDS. (LIKE THE FACT THAT "DOCTOR" AND "NURSE" ARE RELATED.)

SO YOU'RE PROBABLY ALL THINKING, "WOW, WHEN IS THE DORK GOING TO STOP TALKING?"

AS A KID, I SPENT A LOT OF MY TIME WITH MY GRANDPARENTS ON THE FARM. MY GRANDMOTHER WAS ONE OF 9 CHILDREN, INCLUDING 8 GIRLS AND ONE BOY. WHILE THE FARM WAS OBVIOUSLY IN A VERY RURAL AREA, I SPENT MY SUMMERS IN THE COMPANY OF A LOT OF OLD PEOPLE – MOST OF MY GRANDMOTHER'S SISTERS AND THEIR FAMILIES LIVED RELATIVELY NEARBY, AND I WAS EVEN LUCKY TO BE ABLE TO SPEND TIME WITH MY GRANDMOTHER'S MOTHER – WEEDING HER GARDEN, AND THEN DRINKING LEMONADE AND TALKING ABOUT WHEN MY GRANDMOTHER WAS A LITTLE GIRL, MY GREAT GRANDFATHER'S FIRST CAR, AND WHAT LIFE WAS LIKE 100 YEARS AGO. GROWING UP, I LOVED LISTENING TO AND TALKING WITH OLDER PEOPLE. EVERYONE THOUGHT I WAS A REALLY SLOW EATER BECAUSE I WOULD SIT AT THE TABLE AS LONG AS I COULD AND LISTEN TO THE OLD PEOPLE TALK.

SO THERE I AM IN COLLEGE WORKING AS A RESEARCH ASSISTANT IN THE LAB, 3000 MILES FROM THAT FARM. AND ONE DAY, WHILE TESTING AN OLDER ADULT IN THE EXPERIMENT, I HAD A SUDDEN INSIGHT. I SUDDENLY REALIZED THAT THIS ODD SKILL I HAD AT DESIGNING EXPERIMENTS, AND MY FASCINATION WITH TINY RESEARCH QUESTIONS WAS ACTUALLY A WAY OF STUDYING THOSE AMAZING AND FASCINATING OLD PEOPLE IN MY FAMILY. AND FURTHERMORE, THE RESEARCH WAS FINDING THAT, CONTRARY TO STEREOTYPES ABOUT OLD PEOPLE BEING KIND OF SOFT IN THE HEAD, THERE ARE MANY CHARACTERISTICS OF OLDER ADULTS THAT MAKE THEM JUST LIKE YOUNGER ADULTS AND IN SOME WAYS SMARTER AND MORE CAPABLE. AND BY BEING INVOLVED IN RESEARCH, I REALIZED THAT I COULD EVEN BE OF HELP TO THEM.

THERE WAS THIS SUDDEN EPIPHANY THAT MY SOMEWHAT UNUSUAL SKILLS AND INTERESTS – YES, MY DORKY FASCINATION WITH EXPERIMENTAL DESIGN – COULD BE OF REAL VALUE TO NOT ONLY FURTHERING THE DISCIPLINE OF PSYCHOLOGY, BUT OF REAL VALUE TO MY FAMILY AND OLDER PEOPLE IN GENERAL. IN FACT, FOR THE MOST PART, MY RESEARCH ON OLDER ADULTS EVER SINCE HAS BEEN AIMED AT IDENTIFYING GOOD THINGS ABOUT AGING.

I HAD GONE TO COLLEGE TO STUDY INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS, AND NEVER IMAGINED THAT I WOULD FIND PASSION, ENTHUSIASM, AND SKILL IN EXPERIMENTAL PSYCHOLOGY AND RESEARCH METHODOLOGY. AND IF YOU LOOK FOR IT, AND KEEP OPEN TO IT, SOMETHING IN COLLEGE WILL GRAB YOU, AND HOLD YOUR ATTENTION, AND MAKE YOU MORE CURIOUS ABOUT IT... AND IT WILL LEAD TO AMAZING THINGS.

BEFORE I FINISH, LET ME MAKE ONE MORE COMMENT. YOU MAY THINK, “WELL, THIS IS A GREAT STORY ABOUT HOW TO BECOME A PROFESSOR... BUT I DON’T WANT TO DO THAT.” HOWEVER, EVEN THE DORKY SKILLS IN RESEARCH DESIGN HAVE BEEN USEFUL FOR SOME FRIENDS OF MINE IN OTHER PROFESSIONS – I HAVE ONE FRIEND WHO IS A VP IN A POLLING COMPANY DOING WORK ON MARKETING AND BRANDING. ANOTHER FORMER FELLOW STUDENT BECAME A DIRECTOR OF RESEARCH IN A PHARMACEUTICAL COMPANY AT AGE 26, STRAIGHT OUT OF GRADUATE SCHOOL. BOTH WERE PSYCHOLOGY MAJORS AS STUDENTS.

PASSION ABOUT SOME ACADEMIC TOPIC, DIVING DEEPLY INTO SOMETHING YOU FIND INTERESTING HAS TWO INTERESTING OUTCOMES: FIRST, THERE WILL BE INTERESTING PROFESSIONS YOU CAN PURSUE THAT WILL NEED THAT PASSION, WHERE YOUR INTEREST WILL TAKE YOU TO REALLY COOL PLACES. SECOND, NO MATTER WHAT YOUR INTEREST IS, MOST OTHER PEOPLE WILL PROBABLY THINK YOU’RE A DORK.

SO TAKE THE TIME YOU NEED, AND YOU WILL FIND THE THING THAT EXCITES YOU. EMBRACE YOUR INNER DORK, OR AS MY WIFE SAID WHEN I TOLD HER ABOUT THIS, “OWN YOUR DORKINESS WITH PRIDE.”