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Emily Esch
Convocation Address at College of Saint Benedict
August 26, 2019

Good morning. I, too, want to welcome you, or welcome you back, to St Ben's.

I'm going to let you in on a secret. I do not want to be here delivering this speech. I'm feeling pretty uncomfortable. Like most people, I don't enjoy giving speeches in front of crowds. And, to make matters worse, I knew I'd be last, going after some eloquent and moving speakers.

So, I'm nervous and not feeling up to the task at hand. To be completely frank with you all, I have been thinking all summer on ways to get out of giving this speech. But my not wanting to give this speech isn't the secret I wanted to share with you. I've been telling anyone who would listen to me that I didn't want to give this speech. My family, my poor husband, my friends, my therapist, the man who drew my blood last week...so that's not exactly a secret. The secret is *why* I was so reluctant to give this address today.

I am on this stage because I am supposed to have some words of wisdom worth sharing with you. As a professional philosopher, someone who is paid to ponder the deep and enduring questions of existence and the mysteries of the universe, there's extra pressure to say something smart. But despite my job title, I don't feel all that wise. In fact, despite being a professor of philosophy for 13 years, I sometimes still feel like an intellectual fraud.

So that's my secret. And I share it with all of you today, because lots of you, if you haven't already, are likely to have similar feelings while in college. I want you to know that you aren't alone – this is a common experience. There might be times when you think you aren't academically prepared enough, or aren't smart enough, or don't belong, or don't deserve to be here. I am here to tell you that this is not true – each and every one of you deserve to be here and we at the College of St. Benedict are lucky to have you.

I am telling you my deepest, darkest secrets, so in the future – when after spending hours studying in the library, or working on a paper late into the night, or sitting in class listening to your classmates

say super clever things – when you feel like a fake, I want you to think back to convocation and remember that you aren't alone in your feelings. Know that you are surrounded by people at St Ben's and St John's who are rooting for your success. I want you to remember this moment, push forward on your own, or reach out for help.

As one of my dear friends said to me, sometimes you have to “fake it til you make it.” So as I faked it, as I pushed through my feelings of being an imposter, I tried to find something to share from my own philosophical field, epistemology. And, as I reflected, I realized, hey, I might actually have some useful words of wisdom.

Epistemology, which is a branch of philosophy, is the study of knowledge. Epistemologists ask questions like, what is knowledge? Who has it? Who makes it? How do we get it? Why do we want it? Thinking about epistemology can help you make sense of why you are in college in the first place. For some of you, you haven't thought much about this – college was always in the background, just expected that this is the next step on the road to adulthood. For others, getting here was a huge accomplishment in and of itself. But, no matter what your path to college, now that you are here, you have a chance to breathe a little, to step back and think about what it means that you are here.

One of the biggest shifts from high school to college involves developing a different relationship to knowledge and learning. Many people come to college understanding knowledge through the wrong metaphor. They believe that knowledge is a thing, an object. They think about knowledge as something that exists independently, out there in the world, that can be picked up, grabbed, passed on from one person to another. Sometimes knowledge is understood not as a solid object but as a liquid, flowing from one place to another. And if knowledge is a thing, either solid or liquid, then teaching can be thought to be like giving someone a gift or pouring liquid into a vessel.

You come to college, understandably expecting professors using fancy words like “epistemology,” to take all their hard-won knowledge and wisdom and hand it over. Preferably wrapped and bowed and ready to use. But, it turns out, knowledge is not like a well-wrapped present and learning isn't as easy as accepting a gift. And one of the ways this metaphor goes wrong is that knowledge is not a kind of thing in the world, like rocks and trees, that exists independently of human minds.

Rather, knowledge is constructed, that is, it is made and not found, and it is made by human beings, driven by human interests, and subject to human fallibilities. It's more like building a house than finding a buried treasure. And it is not done alone. Creating knowledge is a collective endeavor – it is made by human beings working together, in concert, toward a common purpose. And it's much harder to pass along than one might think. It can't, unfortunately, just be handed over.

It turns out that before you can pass a piece of information along, the recipient has to be ready to receive it. You know how when you learn a new word, you start seeing it everywhere? It's not that the word wasn't around you before – it was that you weren't prepared to recognize it. And so you didn't see it. This is what academia has to offer you – new conceptual frameworks, which, once built, will allow you to see the same world in completely new and surprising ways. Sometimes this will be uncomfortable, sometimes it can be scary, but often it is exhilarating.

Building knowledge takes a lifetime. And it takes more work than accepting a gift. College is a place where you learn how to read blueprints and you learn how to use certain tools. No one academic discipline can give you all the tools you'll need. This is why we have colleges, where academic experts in all kinds of fields – from more familiar subjects like English and mathematics to the less familiar like sociology and biochemistry – come together with the common purpose of working with you, the students, to give you the best education that we, the faculty, can muster.

My advice to you is to use college to pick up as many tools as you can and to learn how to use them. You do not know and cannot know what your future is going to look like or what tools you might need. So on this, the first day of classes, I encourage you to begin the year with an open mind, a willingness to be uncomfortable, and the recognition that acquiring knowledge is not fundamentally about mastering a set of facts – though that is important –but acquiring the tools that will allow you to keep building long after you've left.

Thank you.