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Sane at the Core

Convocation Address to the incoming students at CSB/SJU and SJU SOT / SEMINARY

Karen L. Erickson, Professor of French

August 26, 2013

On behalf of the faculty, it is my pleasure to welcome you to campus. The title of my talk, "Sane at the Core," comes from my mother's family. They had a number of eccentric great-aunts in the early 20th century, who did and said unusual and often amusing things. At one dinner party, my great-great aunt Lilian fell silent and sat at the table making contorted expressions on her face, furrowing her brow, wrinkling her nose, and pursing her lips. Finally someone said to her, "Lily, what are you doing?" She answered, "I've forgotten what Henry looks like. I'm trying to remember what he looks like." After telling one of these stories, my mother added, "Our family is sane at the core, and mad at the fringes." I love this expression. It's okay to be sane, if you're mad at the fringes. And it's okay to be mad at the fringes, if you're sane at the core. Lilian was eccentric, out of the center, on the fringe. She became one of the first published art photographers of her town. She saw things in a new way because she was looking from a different starting point. By the end of my address, I hope to complicate the idea that the core and the fringes are separable, but first let's look at another apparent contradiction.

1. There is in each of you something knowable and enduring: a combination of gifts, passions, skills, interests. You arrive here with complex identities, rich insights and impressive capabilities. This does not change with a change of context. Bring your whole self here. Trust and honor your past and the traditions that anchor you. It is our privilege to teach you and work with you, to advise you and listen to you, to help you connect with your deepest commitments and potential. Exercise methods now emphasize the importance of strengthening our core muscles to allow for greater range of motion without injury. Spiritual practices also emphasize the importance of being centered. Be sure to maintain your core strengths by including activities that help you thrive – exercise, time with friends, talks with family, time alone, spiritual practice, service, art, music – whatever it is for you. But remain open to learning something that works even better, or better here and now, which leads me to my second point:

2. You are always constantly changing. Everything is in evolution and interrelated. We aren't going to fill you up with knowledge – you aren't an empty vessel, and our education isn't static either. Be prepared to be surprised. This comes quite naturally to us when meeting new people – we form a first impression, and then adapt and update as we learn more about them, and hope that they do the same for us. If our view of another person is inflexible, the relationship can become inflexible and outdated. A change in one area often requires a change in another.

This dance of the known and the changeable is also a feature of the education you have begun today: elements of our curriculum go back 100 years, 150 years, to antiquity; we rely upon medieval European university traditions and ancient Benedictine monastery practice. The liberal arts education is time-tested, and sane, healthy, stable, and practical at the core. You will learn information, skills and methods that will serve you well. But there's an element of reaching beyond the obvious, as we explore what can

seem like the fringes of what we need to know. We share a conviction that multiple views and multiple methods of inquiry are instructive and creative. Faculty may all secretly think our methods and fields are the best, but we recognize that the shock of perspectives colliding can be valuable and necessary.

I was a French major in college, but I gave a senior piano recital. In preparing a Brahms intermezzo, I hit a snag. I practiced in all the ways I had learned to study piano, and nothing worked. Then I went out for my run, an assignment for a physical education class, and when my gait matched the tempo of the piece, which was running through my mind, I realized by the impact of my soles on the ground what Brahms was doing – the puzzle of a hemiola unlocked itself. I got back to the piano; I could play the passage. A new perspective jostled something loose in my habits of seeing and thinking and examining.

We will ask you to take courses in disciplines far away from your core interests. We will invite you to travel widely, to place yourself in entirely new contexts. You will likely experience a range of emotions in the coming weeks: excitement, puzzlement, fear, or even grief at having to set something aside for awhile; use these feelings as information that is pertinent to your education. Talk to your advisors and friends, or write it out, or bring it with you as you work out – pay attention. Welcome even failure as an important messenger. Sometimes it is our weaknesses that illuminate our most important strengths.

When I moved to France for my junior year, I joined a group from another university. I didn't know anyone, and no one knew me. I decided I was no longer going to be shy. I would get off the plane and be confident. Well, I was not immediately confident. I was still the same person. But over the course of my time in France, I did grow in confidence. I also grew in humility. I had thought confidence and humility were opposites, but as I became more confident I was capable of a greater humility, and as I became more humble, I developed a more flexible and resilient confidence, coming not from my perfectionism, but from genuine curiosity and enjoyment. These apparent opposites: sane/mad, core/fringe, confidence/humility – are complex features of a bigger whole that is richer for having both. As we grow in our ability to absorb new and conflicting information, to dwell without panic with complexity, to learn how to relish grappling with something we don't yet understand, we develop the ability to respond to multiple exigencies, less frightened of what looks like impasse.

I expect my life would have been easier if I hadn't learned French. I might have been a better musician. I would have read more in English and put down more roots in the U.S. Those of you who have just arrived from other countries know what I mean – there are costs to accepting the adventure of becoming educated in this multiple way. There is no going back: I knew after my junior year that no one language, no single idea or particular way of looking at things and solving problems can suffice. Since I cannot do it all from the perspectives and fields I have chosen, I must work in relationship to others. It is less disruptive to spend our time with people who think and act as we do, and easier to maintain our sense of what is right if we consider only a narrow bit of information. If what we want, though, is a substantive, transformative inquiry that moves us forward as a people and creates new knowledge, we need to listen and expand the scope of our examination.

Key elements of the arc of our professional and personal lives are not perceptible from here. We don't know if your chosen major or program will be fruitful and hold your interest over time. We don't know what the economy will do, or what will happen in world politics. The faculty don't even know if we'll figure out the five-day schedule! But we have the skills, strength of purpose, courage and resources to take on the challenge together of finding the sane and healthy core that is in constant evolution and in continual communication with the fringes.

Today in this convocation we commit our energy and time to the life of the mind, in the context of the whole person and within the grace of community; we commit to educate ourselves and one another in a multi-disciplinary fashion, offering to one another both stability and the gift of destabilizing when necessary. We enter a lively, rambunctious and ungovernable conversation, and we are not heading toward a static, known ending point. We do want you to get your degree at the end of your program! We have an excellent graduation rate! But this place – the ideas, contradictions, frustrations and joys you will meet along the way – this will change you, and you will change this place. If you are exactly the same at the end of your bachelor's or master's degree program, we will not fully have done our job. If we are the same at the end of your program, you won't have done yours.

Thank you, and again, welcome!