

Stephen Dunn

Stockton Commencement Speech

May 11, 2014

I want to honor President Saatkamp by mentioning him as I intended, though he is not here with us today.

Provost Kesselman, Board Members. Distinguished faculty, family (especially, today, mothers), and the graduating class of 2014,

I'm here this morning to speak about you, and your future, and I will try to do inexactly that – at least for a while – by speaking about myself. I was the first in my family to go to college, and had I not gotten a basketball scholarship, that might not have happened. I was one of those serious-minded students – you might recognize the type – who didn't know how to be a good student. The truth is that my first experience with good talk, really good talk, talk that was insightful and seemed to matter, was in overhearing coach Van Breda Kolff at Hofstra speak about basketball and the tendencies of teams and their players, talk that was highly observant and nuanced. It was information that could be immediately put to use. His was a

practical intelligence, which I would contrast with most of what I was getting from my classes, which was often beyond me, something to reach for, information that would accrue and become valuable over time. It took me quite a while before I could bring van Breda Kolff's careful discriminations to my history and English classes, not to mention my life itself. In other words, it took quite a while for my education to feel practical. But I must add that I think a good liberal education shouldn't strive to be practical. At its best, it should challenge our conventional thoughts, shake up what we hold dear. That is, impel us to consider by reconsidering. How intellectually sweet to find yourself returning to an idea that you brought with you, say, from home or high school, tested now, not blindly accepted, and finding that it holds up. Often, though, if we have served you well, it won't hold up under examination, and you'll find yourself in the sweeter intellectual condition where certainties yield to "I don't know," and the resulting confusion that leads to new considerations.

How did I become a poet? I truly don't know, but I do have several stories that approximate such a slippery phenomenon. One story, the serious one, has to do with my silence, my inability to speak in public, and so writing became a way of finding out and making sense of what I thought. That one is true enough, but equally plausible is that I was good at only two things: basketball and writing, and when my jumpshot started to fail, I was left with writing. Another, the less serious one, is that I discovered my writing little love poems to girls to get them to like me occasionally worked – I learned that poetry could be efficacious.

The great American poet Emily Dickinson said, you have to get at the truth *slant*. Her presumption is that it's very hard to say what you wish to say straight on. To say something true, in other words, is an achievement, a triumph, really, of precision over fuzzy thinking, and of knowing who we are over our tendencies toward self-deception. And by slant I think she also means, where and when to enter the story you're telling – and I think she'd agree that the middle isn't a bad place to begin. It permits you to expand in various directions. Which is my excuse for taking this talk in various directions.

But enough about me, the joke goes, what do *you* think about me? You're probably thinking, get on with it, Dunn. Tell us something our parents can feel good about, that can justify their investment in us. Well, I'll try, but I might tell it slant.

I'm aware that some of you are thinking of specific careers, though I imagine a good many of you are in the limbo world of What next? And, having taught at Stockton for over 35 years, I have no doubt that most of you are prepared for What Next, which means you are ready for the inevitable crooked path that awaits you. Our area of General Studies has anticipated this, has allowed, nay, insisted, that you take courses outside of your comfort zone.

How good, for example, that the person graduating with a business degree, might

have courses in the humanities and the sciences. Or the person graduating with a degree in art has had courses, say, in psychology and geology. A liberal education may not make you a liberal, but it will make you more empathetic to otherness, and it might not make you a conservative either, but it will teach you what is valuable to conserve. To become a judicious conservator of values should be one of the goals of a liberal education. Sockton has been one place where such truths become self-evident. You are ready, I'd wager, to perceive truths that will come at you slant. And no doubt you have some tools that will help you to manage the challenging confusions that lead to clarities.

Here's my poet's statement of full disclosure. I confess that I'm more interested in your souls than in your successes in the big, demanding world of money and commerce, though the state of your souls may be very much related to such success. I'm not thinking about soul in a religious way, but, if you will allow the distinction, more so in a spiritual way. Our souls, uncultivated, are always in jeopardy. Mine tends to sleep most of the day, and often waits too long for outside influences to startle it into wakefulness. So it's in danger of being a casualty of stasis, and therefore unrecognizable.

Most graduation speeches address the idea of character, of developing standards of behavior and presentation of self that will pay off socially as well as financially.

That's all to the good, but the soul is character's grid, its underpinning. It's useful to

keep in mind that the great story of Faust, which involves selling your soul in order to get ahead. To be a person of high character is no small thing, but what's at stake in the Faustian bargain is our souls. There's no doubt that during your lifetime you will be so tested. And speaking now for myself, one's failures can be as instructive as one's ability to hold the moral line. I won't go into specifics, but I will say that it's a struggle to live a coherent life, a life that measures up to scrutiny. My favorite writer/philosopher, Albert Camus, said, "I never said I was a good man. I only try to be one." Life will have its way of confounding your best intentions. A good education, like the one that's available at Stockton, helps prepare you for your stumblings as well as for your recoveries. When my students embark on revising their poems, I cite to them this Japanese proverb: "Fall down seven times, stand up eight." And I recommend it to all of you this morning who likely will be in the business of revising your lives during your lifetime.

Though the issue in the Faustian bargain is what precious aspect of yourself will you give up in order to get ahead, we should know there are many little ways that the soul can be injured before a big compromise takes place. Though technology has many benefits, I worry, for example, when I speak for the sake of speaking on my phone. Or when any of us might confuse texting, say, with intimacy, or a true connection.. Some of us with Facebook accounts act as if privacy is an old-fashioned virtue, and, beyond that, make no distinction between friend and acquaintance. These are among the hazards that get in the way of soul-building. It's difficult to define a soul, but

relatively easy to identify those who don't have one. We hear it in their voices – the sound of tin when they're speaking about gold. The paradox of good literature is that it says what apparently cannot be said. Chekhov adds, "Art exists to prepare the soul for tenderness," the same Chekhov who cautioned writers to see the world with a cold eye.

On a practical level, to say what cannot be said, or what others are afraid to say, will make you valuable to your future employer. Or, if you have a bad or insecure employer, you might get fired. But if that happens, trust me, you'll be admired by a few people who wish they behaved as you did. These are the colleagues that will end up being your lifelong friends. What's Next should involve taking a chance on navigating the crooked road. That is, to find out what you want as you go, and to confront and hurdle the inevitable obstacles along the way. Today, you begin your own legacy, which I trust will add to Stockton's. Good luck to you all. Fall down seven times, stand up eight.