

First Collection Speech

August 30, 2000

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Thank you, Al.

It is a privilege to welcome you tonight on behalf of the faculty.

I have to begin by telling you that in a purely statistical sense, I have very high hopes for the class of 2004. Surely two or three of you will babysit my kids. Another will fix my backhand. A third will bail me out as a research assistant.

But in those respects, of course, I can hardly expect to speak for the whole faculty. After all, we profs are in competition. Much as we busy ourselves with the stuff of community, at the end of the day it's about resource constraints. Either I'm going out to a movie this Friday or Lynne Molter from Engineering is. We can't both hire the same babysitter.

It's reasoning like this, undoubtedly, that moved Al, and Maurice Eldridge, to select me, an economist, to present to you the great hopes of the whole faculty.

But let me try. I won't pretend to speak in a detailed way for my colleagues – economists, poets, philosophers, mathematicians, sociologists, biologists, dancers, and literary critics. I still have too much to learn from them to make that leap. I want to tell you, instead, why I pinch myself most mornings when I ride my bike up the hill to Kohlberg.

Professor, I know why! I saw you this morning on that steep part of the hill. It's because you're too embarrassed to get off the bike and walk.

OK, maybe.

I first encountered Swarthmore in a sustained way in graduate school. At that time the MIT economics department was riding on top of the world. Swarthmore was the only liberal arts college represented in serious numbers there – and amazingly there were seven Swatties in the program during the time I was there. Harvard may have had seven, but no other school came close. So my initial impression was a simple one. Swarthmore = excellence.

Well, two of us from Oberlin had managed to squeak in the door. We gravitated towards Swarthmore friends. Bob gravitated big time, and before the end of our second year he

¹ Professor of Economics, Swarthmore College, Swarthmore PA 19081. The "First Collection" is a Swarthmore tradition in which the college's President, a member of the senior class, and a faculty member each welcome the incoming Freshman class, on one of the last evenings before the start of classes. The event takes place outdoors, in the Scott Amphitheatre, and is concluded by a lighting of candles.

was engaged to Betsy Jensen, Swarthmore '78. But by that time, both of us had come to think of Swarthmore as shorthand not just for a creative and critical quality of mind but, even more deeply, for an attitude towards life. If I can sum it up, it is this: the belief that the universal aspirations of humankind are the great subject of our daily existence. So let me ask you tonight, on behalf of the faculty – and now I do presume, so let me presume boldly: – let me ask you to make this the great subject of your study here. For you must find something to love. I ask that it be as wide as the world, and as worthy as humankind.

I pinch myself because I know this request is preposterous; and because I know it is out of line; but mainly because I know that whole Swarthmore community conspires with me to make it real. Most of all, I pinch myself because I know you will respond.

Ouch, you say. Very serious, very Swarthmore. Can the professor be a bit more specific, like: what courses should I take this semester if I want to be out of debt by the time I'm as old as he is?

In a minute I'll give you Steve's tips for a hot program. But I'm really talking here about your education as a whole. If you look a bit, you'll find that the same invitation hangs over the doorway of each class and seminar you take here. It says: come seek with me for what is universal. Come seek the physical world, with which we bargain in toil and sweat for ourselves and for our children. Come seek the human heart, across language, culture, and time. Come seek the roots of human conflict and the institutions that adjudicate our yearnings for dignity and freedom.

Come close to the world as it is, very close. Grasp and embrace its best hopes, with your being.

[pause]

OK, on to Steve's tips. I can sum them up as follows:

responsibility/quality first/science is for me/get away
responsibility/quality first/science is for me/get away [uh]
responsibility/quality first/science is for me/get away [oo]

Here's what I mean.

First, all of you will encounter more rigorous academic demands here than you did in high school. For some of you, however, this will be a totally new world. Take responsibility. I say this to you as a faculty member. If you are poorly prepared for my course, then work harder and longer than those who are well prepared. Attend regularly. Be aggressive in seeking my counsel. But embrace your challenge and apologize to nobody for it.

Second, choose quality over quantity. I mean this in two senses. First, do not over-specialize. An economics major in the course program is 8 credits. Don't take 12. Let us

tell you what constitutes a major in Economics. Complete it, and then go elsewhere and deepen your economics, as I have in my time at Swarthmore, in conversation with my colleagues in political science, in history, and in mathematics. Second, do not overload, particularly early on. Shoot for 4 credits a semester, or 4 ½ if you're doing a language. Your objective should be mastery at each level of study.

responsibility/quality first/science is for me/get away

Third, and this is really for the roughly three-quarters of you who will major in the humanities or in the social sciences. Ponder now, for a moment, the certainty that the advance of science and technology will fundamentally transform the world in your lifetime. As sociologists and philosophers you are already being invited into conversations – on bioengineering, climate change, epidemiology, cognitive science, and health care, to mention a few – that require a sophisticated command of quantitative reasoning and the scientific method. Don't limit yourself to three courses in the natural sciences – and here, of course, I'm including computer science, mathematics and engineering. Let's agree on a minimum of five, at least one of which should be in mathematics, that most universal of languages.

Finally, get away. I mean this again in two senses. First, get away within your curriculum. Build into your program at least one sustained exploration across the boundaries of your own cultural experience. If you don't have a second language already, consider the fact that there is no time in your life when it will be less costly for you to acquire one than it is now. Looking ahead, consider foreign study; and find a place that will truly widen your experience culturally and/or linguistically. For an American student, a few months in Ghana or in France is worth a year in England or Australia.

In the second sense, do get off campus every now and then. There are many worthy reasons to do so, but what I really mean is: for fun. Test the hypothesis that one night in Philadelphia may be worth, say, two in Upper Tarble.

Well, let me close by speaking again on behalf of the whole faculty. I've asked you to come close to the world, the better to embrace its best hopes. I believe you will. Nor will your embrace end in the classroom, and that's the whole point. What I loved about my Swarthmore friends was that they believed the world was theirs to make. And it is, here and now. So – as open and free as our dorm-hall debates have been in the past, they await your perspective, your indignation, and your fairminded probing, to yield what they can of real worth. As glorious as the college's commitments are to an environment of equal opportunity for students, for staff, and for faculty, they await your own insistence on a truly vibrant community of mutual respect. Even as lovely as this canopy is of tree and sky, surely it awaits your own meditation, some lonely night, to bring out the depth of beauty it truly has.

You are indeed welcome here.

Good night.