The Exhilaration of Understanding

Welcome, Tigers and future world-changers. I hope you know how excited we all are to have a new freshmen class. I know I can not only speak for myself, but also for the staff, fellow Honors students, HLC Community leaders, professors, and the entire student body of the Honors College, when I say that we all are looking forward to watching you grow, thrive, and conquer over these next four years of your life.

But before we look to the future or even talk in the present, I want to take you to the past; back to the morning after my high school graduation.

I woke up feeling empty and restless. There was little sense of the accomplishment and excitement I had expected. I lay in bed pondering, “What’s next? What now?” Like all of you I had been an achiever: I conquered the roles of editor-in-chief, valedictorian, and cross-country captain. My classmates had even voted me “Most Likely to Succeed.” But the post-graduation reality was revealed. Lying there I realized I had lived my life in the boxes of a calendar, checking off to-do’s and deadlines. I didn’t feel successful the days that followed. I had worked so hard for success, and now my time as “Richwoods High School Overachiever” had come to an abrupt end.

The emptiness only dissipated when I came to a realization of, what was for me, a revolutionary thought: My education isn’t about me, about getting the 4.0, being at the top of the class. It’s about putting what I know to work for the good of other people and striving to learn more so I can do that.

This isn’t to say we shouldn’t endeavor to be our best. We should. Rather, this is to ask ourselves why we want to. Is it for the recognition? Maybe. Who doesn’t like setting the curve for an exam? Is it for the sense of accomplishment? Like when a professor tells you, “That’s the best work I’ve seen in two and a half years.”

But that sense of accomplishment is fleeting, because there will always be more exams, more projects. And we keep pushing and pushing and pushing ourselves until, at one point, we fail. And then our world seems to be crashing around us.
We can lose our sense of perspective and of self. For a while I let myself be defined by my grades and academic performance. Typical honors student right?

No. That’s precisely what my time here as an MU Honors student has taught me. I am not just my grades or my GPA, though I still work hard and want to graduate summa cum laude. But at the very core of my experience are two intertwined ideas: realizing how big this world is and understanding how varied and similar, beautiful and broken, intelligent and silly, the people who inhabit it are.

Throughout my years here, I have taken every opportunity to stretch my understanding of the human condition, and it has opened doors of insight. And it comes from a rather unusual path and project.

As an English research assistant my freshman year I learned about the beauty of something others often find unsettling—postmortem photography. As a part of my research, I looked at death, up close, in the faces of still-born children, and I was struck by how these photos preserved the memory of someone who never really was and how much those memories meant to the families.

Looking back at those moments, I understand my dreams of changing the world aren’t really for the benefit of the whole world, although they are a part of it. If I made the sole focus of my college years my tangible success—grades, leadership positions, prominence on campus—I would lose out on a real, valuable education.

Time, people, politics—the forces that shape the Earth, will move on without me. It’s a sobering thought, thinking about and confronting our mortality. But one that motivates me to keep listening, talking and learning with others for as many days as I have left.

You can be a part of that. In fact, you already are. You’ve taken the first step to changing your life by being right here, and in the process you will change the lives of those around right now and those in the future. That is the essence of the Honors College’s education.

So what does this mean for you on a more practical level?
It means talk with your professors (they’re people too!). Approach them after class and you might have made a connection that will last many years, or at the very least open another door. Take classes that interest you; there’s nothing quite like leaving the classroom feeling the exhilaration of understanding why things work the way they do.

My mom always told me: “Smart people ask questions.” That one’s a no-brainer, right? You’d think so. I encourage you though, to ask for help and advice when you need it. Have the humility to realize that you’ll never stop learning, and every person you encounter can teach you something whether that’s an award-winning professor or someone you pass walking downtown.

I wish I could tell you I’ve followed every bit of that advice and that there are no days when I feel the emptiness that hit the morning after I graduated. But there are, and on those I have lost the focus of why I am here. I have shrunk my world to be about me. I forget that every class, every connection I build and every conversation I have is making some change in me, whether that’s on an intellectual, professional or emotional level.

I want to correct my opening paragraph a little. Welcome, Tigers and present world-changers. If you honestly engage with your heart and mind and keep thinking of how it might help someone or change a life then what you will learn, do and share here will change our community. And those lessons will stay with you as you run through the columns on your senior send-off to different corners of the state, country and world.