

Bruce Byland's Remarks at Lehman's 2007 Annual Convocation Ceremony

I have been asked to say a few words of welcome on behalf of the faculty of Lehman College. This honor has fallen to me because I had the good fortune and the signal honor of being selected as the 2007 Teacher of the Year by the faculty and students of the college.

I cannot convey how proud I am to be recognized today and to have this opportunity to speak to you on this great occasion.

In an act of evident hubris, I have chosen to talk about myself. How did I get to this point, this place and time? Why am I up here and not some one else. I know that there are many fine teachers here at Lehman. Many, to be sure, who are more worthy than I, well... at least some more worthy than I. But what led me to be chosen today? Let me start with a story.

Many years ago a Jewish rabbi was talking about being a teacher. He noted that one of the rewards of the profession was that a good teacher never stopped learning. A teacher starts by learning from his or her teachers. The best of them you will remember your whole life long. Later, he said, you will learn even more from your colleagues and co-workers. They too will make a permanent imprint on your life. Finally the rabbi said that a great teacher will learn the most from his or her students. There you will discover wisdom and insight. In them you will find innovation and originality. From your students you will learn what your own shortcomings are, and with much work, you can learn and improve in your own right.

This has been my route to this podium/lectern today. My path began a long time ago with my first teachers, beginning with my parents who read to me and taught me to read. Then came grade school teachers, junior high and high school teachers. Many of them I remember to this very day and I honor them. Next came college, the very experience that you are embroiled in now. While at Rice University some of my teachers let me in on a secret. Some of what I was learning was questionable, and some even wrong. My best teachers, including several in Anthropology, showed me that smart people could disagree about fundamental evidence and talk about why they disagreed. I began to understand that discovery was incremental and that it involved missteps and errors. What a gift that was. Learning depended not on discovery of "fact" or "truth," but on revision and change, on the correction of misunderstanding, on new observations and new theory, on reformulation of evidence and the search for better and better explanations.

When I graduated from college, I became, like so many of you, the first in my family to achieve that distinction. I later became the third to teach in a college, but I was the first to graduate from one. My great grandfather taught carpentry at the University of Illinois and my father, military science at the University of Houston.

And then it was off to graduate school at Penn State and another round of gifts from great teachers. Here, though, my teachers began to diversify. I found that I was learning as

much, or more, from fellow graduate students as I was from the faculty. I had great professors as an Anthropology graduate student, but I had even more great colleagues. They came from all over the world and brought with them new ideas, new approaches, and new questions.

Then came my opportunity to have students of my own. I began to find teaching jobs of my own. After wandering for a few years I settled here at Lehman and began my teaching career in earnest. I have had many wonderful students since coming here. What I can now say with most clarity is that teaching has made it possible for me to learn from some of the most inspiring and gifted students imaginable. Great students ask questions that challenge me to learn, they make mistakes that challenge me to improve my teaching so that they can understand. I am profoundly grateful to my students, from whom I have learned so much.

Still I also learn from colleagues and teachers. I may be a little biased, but Lehman has a remarkable Anthropology faculty from which much can be learned. Lehman also has an inspiring Writing Across the Curriculum group. My work with them has reinvigorated my teaching. I would recommend to each of you to seek out Writing Intensive courses whenever you can. You will thank yourselves in decades to come.

So, why am I up here greeting you, and not some other worthy member of the faculty? I do not know. Just lucky, I guess. Next year it will be someone else. The great thing is that the supply of dedicated, capable and inspired teachers here at Lehman College is inexhaustible. There will be no diminution in the range of remarkable teachers that you will have the opportunity to learn from ... and to teach ... in your years here. I envy you that experience. Welcome to the adventure.

Thank you.