

Chad Oliver Ward Acceptance Speech May 21, 2005

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This is a 5-minute speech in two parts. First, my thanks and then borrowed advice, from the Books of Dylan and Dangerfield.

I am happy that Melisa Gerecci referred two times to Homer's *Odyssey*.

I feel privileged to have taught in Plan II for the last dozen years. Plan II is where intellectual souls are *nourished*. So you graduates are true *alumni* and *alumnae*, the meaning of the Latin verb *alo*. It is also where humanities and sciences find shelter from the storms in our society, which looks and feels, to me, more and more like Hesiod's apocalyptic Age of Iron.

I have been in class now with about 180 Plan II students. I have felt like a babe in toy land.

We have explored the human condition, ancient and modern, in ways that would not have been possible in any other environment: how human beings respond to the horrors of war, how they come to terms with violence, how they justify using war and violence, how they relate to the divine sphere, what thoughts they have about morality, about human life, and death, and about where the world comes from and where it is going.

Each class has had students of varied intellectual and social backgrounds, students with imagination, students who work hard at seeing old and new things in new ways, students who work well together, most notably by tolerating their own big differences from one another.

I am glad I have deep feelings for blues and folk improvisation. Otherwise, teaching in Plan II would overwhelm me.

Paul Woodruff as director and assistant directors like Martha Newman and Doug Biow, and the wonderful staff, treat professors and students with reverence, the lost virtue that Paul has written about and that infuses his life and the life of the Plan II program.

Teaching in Plan II has been for me the equivalent of Odysseus' sojourn among the Phaeacians, only I didn't land up in Plan II academically shipwrecked, nor do I know of any equivalent of the land of the Cyclopes anywhere on UT's campus. For that we have to thank the underpaid hard work and energy of UT's collective faculty and staff, the leadership of administrators—and this is important—who are also teachers and scholars, like Dean Richard Lariviere, Associate Dean Neil Foley, and Jim Vick, our Vice President for Student Affairs who spoke earlier, and the inspiring curiosity of its students, including all those not in Plan II.

Now for two minutes of borrowed advice. Rodney Dangerfield, in his classic film "Back to School," in which he plays a wealthy middle-aged business man come to big State U to try to help his son out, gives this advice to graduates at commencement. "It's a jungle out there, so my advice to you is DON'T GO! DON'T GRADUATE! TAKE MORE COURSES! GO HOME AND LIVE WITH YOUR PARENTS!"

And he's right.

Life is hard and it doesn't get easier at any point. But the perspectives and intellectual tools and deep feelings for what humanity is that you acquired in Plan II will at least help you cope with what lies ahead, and to appreciate, as many Americans don't, the joys of the here and now and the simple pleasures in your own minds and hearts.

In 1997, Bob Dylan wrote with 56 years of wisdom:

My sense of humanity has gone down the drain
Behind every beautiful thing there's been some kind of pain

I've been down on the bottom of a world full of lies
Ain't lookin' for nothing in anyone's eyes.

That's from "It's Not Dark Yet, But It's Getting There."

If you haven't gotten there, just wait. You will. If you never get there, at least for a moment, you haven't lived—or rather you have lived life looking for the wrong things.

But Bob isn't only a doom-and-gloomer. He tells us how to cope with the world, offering sage advice like this, written as he approached age 50, on how to deal with the mind-crippling effects of television:

"It's all been designed", he said, "To make you lose your mind,
And when you go back to find it, there's nothing there to find."

"It will scramble up your head and drag your brain about,
Sometimes you gotta do like Elvis did and shoot the damn thing out."

Truer words were never sung.

Still at age 60, Bob could write, with a jolt of existential optimism:

Well, I got eight carburetors and boys, I'm using 'em all.

And

Well, you got something to say, speak now or hold your peace

Well, I did have something to say and I have said it and now I'll shut up, except to say once more, thank you for the Chad Oliver Award. One of the dearest people in my life had Professor Oliver as a teacher. To be associated with his name is, therefore, special for me.

Lastly, use all your carburetors, but I hope only six—despite what the White House says, there is an energy crisis and there is global warming.

Remember Bob's next line:

I'm short on gas, my motor's starting to stall.

And be prepared.