

The Least Dangerous Assumption

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Thank you, Dr. Lakso. Welcome, Class of 2014! I stand before you today and you see an accomplished professor of education. However, there is so much more to my story than this particular moment in time. In fact, we know this is true for everyone here today. We all have more to our story than most people can see.

But here's the thing about seeing. Our seeing comes with assumptions and those assumptions can lead us into dangerous territory. We have to be mindful of our own ignorance, bias, and preconceptions of others and ourselves. Yet, if we make the *least dangerous assumptions* about ourselves and others, we open up worlds of possibilities for learning about ourselves and others. In fact, when we make the most dangerous assumptions, we limit ourselves and often find our lives filled with missed opportunities and misunderstandings.

I know, because I've done that . . . more than once!

For example, in 1995, I was working on a research project in Boston, MA. I supervised reading interventions in a variety of Boston public schools. One school, Sarah Greenwood, was located in one of the most economically depressed neighborhoods in the city. The students at this elementary school were predominately African-American and Haitian. An armed guard was stationed at the locked entry to the school. Several weeks into the study, one of my reading intervention teachers at that school asked me to observe her reading group. The problem, you see, was a young African-American girl named Jasmine who simply would not cooperate with the teacher. After my observation of Jasmine's admittedly bad behavior, I asked Jasmine to speak with me privately. I described what I observed and discussed appropriate behavior with her. Jasmine stood before me with her head bowed looking at the floor. More than once, I asked her to "look me in the eye." I felt frustrated by what I assumed to be Jasmine's gesture of disrespect. When I discussed the situation with my African-American colleague, he explained that Jasmine's non-verbal behavior was in fact a demonstration of respect! If only I had recognized that, I know the encounter would have been so much more satisfying for both of us. I missed an opportunity to make a positive connection with a child because of my dangerous assumptions, which were based in ignorance of that little girl's cultural mores.

And as if that isn't proof that I made dangerous assumptions, let me tell you about another encounter I had at the same school. Parents had to sign permission for their children to be tested in order for the children to be accepted into the intervention study. The tests included those of intelligence and achievement. One mother refused. In fact, she asked for a meeting with the principal and me. I walked into that office, so secure in my altruistic desire to help struggling readers, so certain this Mom would realize how committed I was to her child's welfare. I was just sure she would love me, I mean, seriously, what's not to love?

Well, apparently there was plenty not to love about white do-gooders in this neighborhood. Before I could speak, this beautiful, well-dressed, articulate African-American woman looked at me with such anger and said, "I know you. I know your type. I know what you do. You come here, you test our kids and you report us to children's welfare. Nothing good ever happens when white people get involved in our business." I was speechless . . . imagine that!

Fortunately for that mom and me, the Hispanic principal was able to mediate the situation. I learned so much about myself from that encounter and eventually earned the trust and respect of this lovely, bright woman who was just protecting her daughter. We both made dangerous assumptions.

In the 1980s I made a trip to Taiwan. When I came home, I immediately called my sister, the world traveler, the PhD in international communication. She asked me how the trip went. I said, "Taiwan is an interesting country but the people there are not very friendly." She asked how in the world I had arrived at that conclusion. I said, "Every time I stepped on an elevator or smiled at someone, they lowered their eyes!"

Yet another dangerous assumption.

I am sure we have all had moments when we have made assumptions about traits, motives, and personalities of people or, in my case, entire countries. But you know what? As Bill Strickland, who will be speaking on this stage on September 9, said, there are times when we do allow our hopes and expectations to be shaped by circumstances and conventional wisdom.

I am confident that everyone here has faced someone's dangerous assumptions in one way or another. Often this can leave you with a lingering sense of self-doubt. Sometimes, it haunts you for life. Let me tell you a little more about me and the dangerous assumptions folks made about my family. I was born and raised in a place called Delmar Village, outside of Philadelphia. Not very far outside—in fact, several of the flight patterns for the Philadelphia Airport ran right over our roof. Delmar Village had a *baaaaad* reputation. Living there with my family and friends, I felt secure. There were so many good, hard-working people in my neighborhood, but when I heard other people talk about us we were the neighborhood that was known for the Pagan motorcycle gang, drugs, and violence. My boyfriend's

brother was murdered on the night of his high school graduation. The only time our town made national headlines was in 1963 when the National Guard was deployed to secure every entrance into our town until a riot could be brought under control.

That was the closest we ever came to living in a gated community!

Just ask my colleague Bob Reilly. He was raised near me but in a nicer area. Just last week Bob told me that he too was warned about those kids from Delmar Village!

Delmar Village is a blue-collar working class neighborhood. I am sure you can picture it...rows upon rows of red brick row houses that extended for blocks. We were an ethnic neighborhood, white Irish & Italian Catholics. So we experienced our share of alcoholism and infidelity. We had plenty of rosary beads and no divorces! My mother was a high school dropout who eventually earned her high school equivalency and went on to become a Licensed Practical Nurse. My father, who was number one in his class at Philadelphia's West Catholic High School, did not have the opportunity to go to college. He served in World War II as a Marine and then held several blue-collar jobs which revealed his problem-solving skills and what an excellent teacher he could have been. My father's parents were Irish immigrants who never owned a home. My maternal grandmother raised four children in a slum of South Philadelphia on an eighth grade education. Both of my grandmoms cleaned homes because of limited opportunities that were based on dangerous assumptions people made about Irish Immigrants and poor people in general. Few appreciated the wisdom and knowledge of these strong women in my life.

Like you, during my childhood and adolescence I received messages about my worth and my potential. Some were explicit. You know, like the countless times, as a teenager, when boys I met at dances would later call to tell me they were not "allowed" to date girls from Delmar Village. Others were more subtle, like teachers not expecting much from me or being surprised at what I could do academically. In general the message was clear: girls from Delmar Village were bad and they were going nowhere, certainly not to college. I am not exaggerating. When my mother told my affluent cousin that I was doing graduate work at Tufts University, that cousin said, "You must be confused. *The* Tufts University? There must be another Tufts someplace because, I mean, well, because . . . I mean . . .YOUR DAUGHTER?? "

By now you must be wondering how a little girl from Delmar Village evolved into an academic. Many of you today may be sitting here with assumptions about yourself and others. Maybe you think everyone in your class comes from an intact family, or is richer, smarter, more athletic, or sexier than you. Perhaps you believe you cannot possibly be as good as your classmates.

I want you to question those dangerous assumptions.

I did and I became the person I wanted to be: a teacher, psychologist, and researcher in language and the brain.

Why? Because of people who made the least dangerous assumptions about me. My parents instilled the values of education and hard work. They told us anything was possible. Several key teachers in high school embraced my potential, and my sister, brother, friends, and spouse encouraged me to believe in myself.

I am certain that every one of you has had moments like those I described. Perhaps there were times when teachers, peers, or even family members made dangerous assumptions about you, based on your personality, looks, academic performance, sexual orientation or ethnicity. I want you to consider for a moment the missed opportunities for you and others when choices and actions are based on dangerous assumptions.

As Bernard Baruch said, “Only as you do know yourself can your brain serve you as a sharp and efficient tool. Know your own failings, passions, and prejudices so that you can separate them from what you see.”

If you are willing to make the least dangerous assumptions about yourself and others, you open up a world of possibilities.

As you begin your first year of college, I challenge you to make the least dangerous assumptions, whether you are choosing classes, joining clubs, playing on an athletic team, or making friends. Believe in yourself and your classmates. Dare to make the least dangerous assumptions!