

It Gets Better

Michael Henderson

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Thank you President Kepple, Provost Lakso, colleagues, students, and parents. I am humbled by this opportunity to speak to you today. The convocation is always a very difficult audience to address, since for most of the students this is the first or perhaps the second time you have attended this event, whereas some of my colleagues have participated in this ceremony more than forty times. The question that's probably on their mind is, what can this French professor say that hasn't already been said? Let me begin by explaining the title of my talk. Some of you will recognize that I shamelessly borrowed it from the It Gets Better Project.

The It Gets Better Project was started in 2010 in response to an alarming number of high school and college students who took their own lives after having been bullied for being lesbian, gay, bisexual, or transgendered. The project's mission is to provide a platform for people around the world to upload videos in order to communicate to LGBT youth with personal stories that it does indeed get better. I chose to use this title for this talk as I was working earlier this semester with Luke Thompson, Nikki Halstead, and some other awesome members of the Juniata community to make our own video.

Of course, I want to use the expression now in its broader sense, to assure all of you that it does get better. I know that for a large number of you who will be graduating in just a little over a week from now, or next year, it might not seem like it. This is understandable. According to a survey published in *The Chronicle of Higher Education* just last week, nearly 32% of 2011 and 2012 college graduates are earning under \$25,000 a year.¹ Moreover, only just over half of recent graduates are actually working full-time in their field of study. Although it has been frustrating for many college graduates of the past five years to transition into a global economy that is recovering painfully slowly from the worst economic downturn since the Great Depression, you just have to believe that the investment you have made in Juniata will pay off, and that it will get better. I firmly believe that college is the gateway to leading a better a life. As evidence of why I believe that, if you will indulge me for just a couple minutes, I am going to try to do something that I am very bad at doing without being ironic. I am going to talk about myself.

I was born in a town about half the size of Huntingdon in Crawford County, Ohio, an economically depressed area in the corn belt of western Ohio. I am the second of four brothers. My parents married when they were seventeen. Neither of them finished high school. My mother died in a car

accident when I was seven years old. My father vowed to keep the family together, but he didn't realize how big a responsibility that was. He started drinking heavily and would disappear for several days at a time. I remember, when I was eleven or twelve, pooling the money that my brother Tony and I had earned delivering newspapers to buy food because Dad had forgotten to go to the grocery store before disappearing on one of his benders. When I was thirteen, we loaded everything we owned into a U-Haul trailer, which our father pulled all the way to Phoenix, Arizona, with his aging Plymouth Fury. I never knew exactly why our father chose Phoenix, but I assume that he thought it would get better there. But it didn't get better. Things pretty much just went on as before. It was just a lot hotter and drier.

At some point while I was in high school, a teacher told me that I should take something called the ACT, which would indicate my degree of readiness for college. Fortunately, the ACT indicated that I had a very good chance of getting into college and getting the financial aid to make it possible, so I applied to University of Arizona in Tucson, Arizona State University in Tempe, and Northern Arizona University in Flagstaff, because as far as I knew at the time, those were the only colleges there were. In my freshman year, I discovered the ineffable joy of studying foreign languages. Finally, it seemed to be getting better. In my second semester, I enrolled in French, Spanish, Italian, English, and Introduction to Biology. I made an A in Biology, by the way, but it just didn't speak to me in the same way as my language classes. French, obviously, became my passion. As I was struggling to perfect my ability to comprehend, to speak, to read, and to write in French, it seemed that I was acquiring more than just a new set of skills. It felt as if I were becoming somebody different, which I so desperately wanted to be. My brain itself seemed to be changing.

Recently published neurological and linguistic studies suggest that this is indeed what was happening to me. The bilingual brain does indeed work differently than the monolingual brain, and in most ways, it works better! Researchers have found that senior adults who are bilingual use their brains more efficiently and perform more quickly on cognitive flexibility tasks. Moreover, research indicates that bilinguals are less likely to develop dementia or Alzheimer's disease late in life. (Take that, monolinguals!)

Once I had reached advanced proficiency in French, reading philosophy and literature in the original version introduced me to completely new ways of thinking and understanding. I learned from the French existentialists that it is possible to make ethical choices without the vagaries of purely metaphysical concepts of "Good" and "Evil," and that the individual has a responsibility to make the world better for others. As Simone de Beauvoir so eloquently puts it in *The Second Sex*, "There is no justification for present existence other than its expansion into an indefinitely open future."² The works of modernists such as André Gide, Marcel Proust, and Eugène Ionesco taught me how to laugh at the tragicomedy of existence. I learned from poststructuralists such as Roland Barthes, Michel Foucault, and

Jacques Derrida that power is inseparable from discourse, which often masks what it really means, thus demanding continual and careful scrutiny. Reading French feminists such as Hélène Cixous, Monique Wittig, or Julia Kristeva made me re-think categorical modes of reasoning and re-evaluate my assumptions about the difference between the natural and the cultural. The French-speaking authors of the Caribbean, Africa, and North America introduced me to how to listen to the voices that had been relegated to the margins of civilization.

But let's back up to the advantages of the bilingual brain. Why is it better? One current hypothesis is that the bilingual speaker is constantly exercising the brain in order to resolve conflicts and to navigate the possible confusion that inevitably arrives between the words and structures of two languages.³ This is especially true for speakers of French and English, in which over half the vocabulary appears to be essentially the same. I sometimes jokingly tell my students that French is really just English spoken with a fancy accent. Confusion arrives, however, when the words appear the same on the surface, but have completely different meanings. For example, when I encounter or use the word "sensible" in English, I have to remember that when pronounced *sensible* in French, it means something completely different. And when I wish to tell somebody in French that I prefer food without preservatives, my brain has to remember not to use the false cognate *préservatifs*, which means "condoms."

For an example in which the meaning of a word overlaps from one language to the next, at the end of every academic year at Juniata, I start receiving announcements and reminders about commencement. Now, when I see or hear the word "commencement" in writing, the French side of my brain sees *commencement*, which simply means "beginning." And this reminds me that, contrary what it might seem, even though it comes at the end of the year, the graduation ceremony is not the celebration of an ending, but of a beginning. Those among you who will be receiving your diplomas on May 18 are heading toward your Beginning, whatever it might be. This year will mark my twenty-first attendance at a Juniata Beginning. Even two people on this stage who have had an indelible impact on the lives of all us who are lucky enough to be part of the Juniata community, President Kepple and Provost Lakso, are headed not for an end, but for their next commencement. We can hardly wait to see what their next incarnation will be.

For some of you, this beginning might seem a little rough at first, but that's okay. All of us will eventually encounter periods of disappointment or frustration in life where it seems that, to paraphrase one of the twentieth century's most famous bilingual writers, Samuel Beckett, we can't go on. But when that voice in our head says, in whatever language, "I can't go on," go on! It gets better.

NOTES

1. Allie Bidwell, “New Graduates Have Unrealistic Expectations for Pay, Survey Says,” *The Chronicle of Higher Education* website, May 3, 2013, <http://chronicle.com/article/New-Graduates-Have-Unrealistic/139071/>.
2. Simone de Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, trans. H. M. Parshley (New York: Vintage, 1989), p. xxxv.
3. Brian T. Gold, Chobok Kim, Nathan F. Johnson, Richard J. Kryscio, and Charles D. Smith, “Lifelong Bilingualism Maintains Neural Efficiency for Cognitive Control in Aging,” *Journal of Neuroscience*, 33 (2013): 387--396.