

Question Authority
(Except Mine)
Peter Goldstein

Hello, and welcome to Juniata College. Congratulations on surviving the first day! Dr. Kepple mentioned Juniata traditions; you've just experienced what may be the least valuable of Juniata traditions: the half-hour class on the opening day of Fall semester. But I shouldn't complain; the half-hour classes allow us to stage this convocation, which means I get to give a speech, which is my favorite thing in the world.

I'm going to talk to you today, briefly, about your job as students and our job as professors. Your job as students is a simple one: enjoy yourselves. I mean it. Enjoy yourselves. Take the classes you want; meet the people you like; get involved in the extracurricular activities that look like fun; go abroad; take advantage of all that Juniata has to offer. College is great – most of you will be on your own for the first time, with your own responsibilities, and unless you have a roommate who's a neat freak, it's a wonderful

Convocation Address, August 30, 2004, by the recipient of the Beachley Award for Distinguished Teaching

time. So again, take advantage. Enjoy yourselves.

I'll spend a bit more time talking about our job as faculty because there's a fact that's usually forgotten (although, to be sure, your parents will never forget it). It's this: you are paying us to serve you. We are here to serve you. Most of the time it's going to look like the other way around, because we'll constantly be demanding things of you. Write that paper, do that lab, take that exam, wash my car, paint my house, mow my lawn. (Actually, we don't ask you to do that other stuff, but if anyone wants to mow my lawn, come talk to me after the speech.) But although it looks like you're here to serve us, we're here to serve you.

Of course, that doesn't mean we're here to make your life easy – in fact, we're here to make it pretty difficult. And we do so by giving you what we call a liberal arts education.

What does that mean? Well, no two faculty members agree on what it means, and we could spend hours disputing the point. But most would agree that at the heart of a liberal arts education is critical thinking. Critical thinking means taking every issue, every text, every idea, and examining it thoroughly, individually, and objectively. You have to look at all sides, see the pros and cons, and ultimately decide for yourself to what extent it's true – or even whether there's no possibility of truth in the matter. And we're here to train you in that skill. To that end, we don't give you rote memorization, but hands-on problem-solving that requires individual thought; we don't drill you in the rigid rules of an academic discipline, but allow you a creative approach to the material; we don't talk down to you as from an oracle, but on a level with you as fellow members of an intellectual community. And I think on the whole we do a fairly good job of it.

But there's a problem. We faculty – all of us – have a problem. It's almost like an occupational disease. And this is my favorite part of the speech because it's the fashion show. You can see I'm all dressed up: I've got my mortarboard with the tassel, this nice fancy robe, and this odd sort of thing with the colors that we call the hood. The technical term for this outfit is "regalia." I'm wearing regalia.

Now the word "regalia" comes from the same root as the word "regal." And that means "royal." So if we wear regalia, we're royalty. We're kings and queens and empresses and emperors. Faculty are royalty – you didn't know that, did you? We knew it, of course.

And as I look around me, I seem to be the only person wearing regalia...so by my calculation, I'm king of the college! Great deal. As Mel Brooks said, "It's good to be the king."

But like I said, there's a problem. And here it is. This is the T-shirt. It's my favorite T-shirt in the world. We all wear it, all faculty wear it at some time. Can you read it from there? It says: "QUESTION AUTHORITY (except mine)."

Now we all know what questioning authority is. In fact, it's the quintessential act of the liberally educated person. Authority doesn't want you to think. Authority wants you to trust and obey. The political parties don't want you to think. George Bush doesn't want you to think. John Kerry doesn't want you to think. The government doesn't want you to think. Advertisers don't want you to think. Because when you think – when you think critically – you question their authority. You examine what they say thoroughly and objectively, from all sides, and decide for yourself. You don't just trust them. You're ready to disagree if necessary.

So questioning authority is essential. But look at the T-shirt, and I think you can see the problem. We faculty are out there telling you to question authority – but when we tell you that, we're acting as authority! And while we're very happy to tell you to question authority, we don't like it so much when it's our authority you question. We get a bit nervous. Trust me on this – it's no fun to have your authority questioned. It's a bit scary. It's good to be the king, but it's only good because everyone does exactly what you want them to. And so we wear this T-shirt: "question authority, except mine." But as long as we wear this T-shirt, we can't do our job completely. We can't give you the full liberal arts education.

So what do you do? How can you get us to change the writing on the T-shirt? Here's a suggestion. Take a couple of weeks to get acclimated, and then, on a regular basis, disagree with your professors. That's right, disagree with your professors. You can do it in class, or go see them during office hours. Challenge them. Say "I don't think your premises are right," or "your approach to the problem is wrong," or "your logic is wrong," or even "your facts are wrong."

Now this can be difficult. First of all, you have to be respectful, although I don't suppose that'll be a problem. And you can't just say "Hey, Professor, you're crazy!" or "Hey Professor, we shouldn't

have to take this exam because it makes my head hurt!” That won’t work. You see, in order to challenge your professor, in order to question his or her authority, you have to have thought about the problem. You have to have paid attention, to have read the text, to have cared about the material, to have given it your whole mind. You have to have done serious critical thinking. And that’s hard. But make no mistake about it: as part of this intellectual community (and Juniata is many other things as well; I’m talking about the intellectual side), the highest act you can perform is to challenge the professor.

Well, I admit it seems scary. And like I said, take a few weeks to get acclimated before you try it. But during that time, get some practice. Question my authority. Challenge me. I’ve just given you a speech. Some of it you may agree with; some of it you may disagree with; some of it may seem crazy. Hopefully, there’s been stuff worth thinking about. So think critically, and then come question me. Find me in my office, or e-mail me and set up an appointment, and we can get started.

So here’s the message. One, enjoy yourselves. Two, remember that we’re here to serve you. Three, challenge your professors. Question authority, including ours. Make us change the writing on the T-shirt.

And that’s it. Thanks, and welcome to Juniata College.

