

Art Can Light Your Way

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What a tremendous honor to return to Juniata College as the commencement speaker. When I walk around the beautiful Juniata campus, so many wonderful memories come back. A beautiful spring day, students wandering around the lawns, playing Frisbee; somebody is blasting Led Zeppelin's "Black Dog" from one of the dormitory windows. Somewhere amongst those memories, there were also two disciplinary probations and not the most memorable of academic records. I asked college President Jim Troha if the college had vetted me for this speech. He said not to worry.

Funny enough, but among those many memories, not one of them was the commencement speaker at my graduation in 1976. No memory exists in my mind whatsoever. I looked it up. The commencement speaker my year served as the head of the Brethren Church at the time. So that wasn't going to be a help. I asked around among my friends to see if they remembered their commencement speakers. Unless it was a United States president or a celebrity, nobody remembered. You get the idea. At first, that realization seems to take some of the pressure off of me. I am not a president or a celebrity, so this should be easy. But no, I actually find this to be a tremendous honor, and it's also pretty cool.

What could I say that would keep you somewhat interested and yet quickly get us down the homestretch of this ceremony?

Do I have advice? Yes, Travel. Travel as much as you can and as far as you can.

I could talk about my time here at Juniata, how important the concept of the Program of Emphasis was for me, the things I learned as a literature and film major. Nope.

Or I could narrate some of my other experiences here, like when I was the assistant manager of the movie theater in downtown Huntingdon for a year. That turned out to be a great experience; really, it was my first experience in the film business. I remember freezing in the middle of the winter on a ladder changing the letters on the marquee. I learned never, never to eat buttered popcorn in a theater. I had the opportunity to watch Robert Altman's *Nashville* about twenty-four times. I used to close off the balcony and reserve it just for me and my friends.

Alternatively, how about when I ran the weekend film program and applied for a Warner Brothers Observation Program Scholarship by writing an essay? My essay explained that I had no clue what

anyone in the credits to a film actually did. I won the scholarship and ended up in Hollywood for eight weeks during the summer of 1975 with five other students from around the country. I am still convinced we were the only six people who sent in essays.

Or there was the time I made my senior film project for my independent study. I really wanted a crane shot to drift down the front of a building with many porches and introduce the characters. Somehow, I managed to convince the local fire department to let me use their hook and ladder truck. Strapped to the end of the ladder, I got the shot —the shakiest crane shot of my career.

Or the time I had booked a filmmaker to visit Juniata College to speak and show a film. At the last minute, I got an apologetic phone call from the director on the pay phone in the hallway telling me that he could not attend. But, he said, that he would be in Huntingdon with his family visiting his mother-in-law later that month and would have lunch with me to make up for it. So, at the diner on Route 22, I had lunch with Robert Downey Sr. and his family, which included a ten-year-old Robert Downey Jr.

Still, stories aren't enough.

I asked President Troha why on earth I had been chosen to give this speech. He said the committee wanted someone from the arts.

Now I work in television, a world about which Hunter S. Thompson kindly said, "The TV business is uglier than most things. It is normally perceived as some kind of cruel and shallow money trench through the heart of the journalism industry, a long plastic hallway where thieves and pimps run free and good men die like dogs, for no good reason."¹ That is not my definition of art, so I'm not quite sure what I have to offer as a spokesperson for the arts. What I do in my job is to translate a script into images that successfully tell a story that you may or may not enjoy. Art? Maybe, maybe not, but maybe, if everything clicks, it works, and that storytelling becomes art. Sometimes not everything clicks, and that is putting it mildly.

You are all now in your twenties. A wonderful and amazing time of life: a time of discovery, setting the table for what is to come. I had so much fun in my twenties; living in New York City in the East Village left me with so many memories of a crazy time. Moving some stuff around in my garage recently, I came across my journals from my twenties. From them I learned that along with those great memories, there were some other interesting moods or questions I had. Now, there is a slim chance, very slim, that you may come across some of these same disappointments, heartbreaks, regrets, doubts, and, for lack of a better way to put it, just one giant question mark.

There may come a time when you feel like something is not quite right; something may feel a bit empty. This is where art comes in. By art I'm not only talking about Netflix; neither am I only talking about symphonies or Sinatra. Music is something most people recognize as important. However, there is also painting, sculpture, literature, architecture, film, theater, photography, dance, even cooking. When

things are feeling a little sketchy and you detect a sense of uncertainty about what you are doing or where you are going, try looking at or listening to art. That sounds like easy advice to follow in the twenty-first century, but it is not so easy today because the incredible glut of information that you have to deal with will try to demand your attention instead.

Search out art beyond the contemporary. Also find the classics. See an opera, stand inches away from a Van Gogh and feel the brushstrokes of man who was consumed by his art. Stand in front of a massive Mark Rothko painting and let it speak to you in ways that are not possible with just words. Watch any film by Kurosawa or Fellini. Be absolutely amazed by the incredible energy of a Bollywood film. Go observe a beautiful building. A mere 100 miles from here is Frank Lloyd Wright's Fallingwater, one of the world's greatest structures. Attend a symphony close enough to see how hard the musicians work, to observe the effort involved. Standing in front of Michelangelo's *David* remains an incredible experience centuries later, but so is seeing an earth sculpture by Robert Smithson in the Great Salt Lake or looking at Donald Judd's sculptures in Marfa, Texas. Experience all kinds of art even if you don't get it. Art isn't always about getting it. Art can give you another way to think or see, even if your reaction is "What the heck is this?" What I am trying to say is that art—great art—is transcendent, it is luminous, and it can light your way.

Support the arts in any way you can. Funding for the arts has not been a high priority in the United States for decades, but we can help. Let's all try to help. Go see art. Buy art. Support art. Don't let black and white film or subtitles scare you away. Instead, become willing to be surprised. Don't be afraid of art. And speaking of not being afraid . . .

Before I wrap this up, there is one more thing I would like to tell you. There may be one or two of you out there who may be a tad afraid, not sure about what you are going to do now that college is over, the work done, and the degree gotten. You are wrestling with the often scary "Now what?"

Ambition is a funny and mysterious thing. I have never felt particularly ambitious. When I look back, I feel as if I used Juniata College to shed any ambitions I came here with. I came to Juniata in the fall of 1972 as a premedical-track student. By the middle of my sophomore year that had all changed. The more I thought about the idea of the Program of Emphasis (POE), the more I thought about doing what I enjoyed. That was when I stopped thinking about what I would do with my degree. I went from the specific to the general. I realized Juniata gave me an opportunity. If I took the idea of career out of the equation, it came down to what I enjoyed doing. What I enjoyed were stories: written stories and filmed stories. The POE enabled me to shed the ambitions of medical school and to find that thing I enjoyed. I spent the last two years here at Juniata reading, writing papers, watching films, and making films. I think the school offered three film courses total the entire time I was here. I finagled independent studies for the rest of my classes. I was also very lucky: not once do I remember my parents asking me what I was going

to do with my degree, which was a good thing because I had no idea how I was going to use my degree. As I said earlier, the essay for the scholarship was about how I didn't know anything about the film business. I think my parents sensed from what I was telling them that I was looking for something in the best way. They trusted me, and that also made me fortunate.

I graduated, remembering nothing about my commencement or the speaker, and, being at the tail end of the hippies' era, I hopped in a van with two buddies and a dog and traveled across the country for a while. Then it was time. In New York City, I answered an ad in the *Village Voice* calling for people interested in working in the film business. I took that job and worked as a bicycle messenger to production companies. I dropped off the exact same résumé you now have with the offices of said companies. This got me in the door, hired to be a production assistant. Then I moved up to electrician and learned about lighting and became a best boy, which is more organizational, then a gaffer, which is a combination of those things and leadership, then a director of photography, and a director.

My point is that many of these speeches are about following your passion. I agree that's certainly worthwhile if you know your passion. But sometimes your passion finds you. It pulls you along and points the way. When I graduated, all I knew was that I wanted to be involved in making films, visual narratives, in any way I could, from delivering paperwork, or getting coffee for the director, to running a half-mile of cable in a gutter, devising a lighting plan, or coming up with a great shot. I have done all of those things and more, and I have enjoyed it every step of the way. Every step up in responsibility or craft was almost forced on me. I never asked to move up to the next position. I always was asked. Thirty years after graduating from college, I was invited to direct for the first time. I have loved and enjoyed every part of my career trajectory. So if you feel like you have not found that passion yet, or it has not found you, don't worry. Don't be concerned. I tried to find an *Iron Man* quote to come full circle with the Downey story, but it was Thor, not Downey's character Iron Man, who says, "Time for me to be who I am rather than who I'm supposed to be."² This is an incredible opportunity to be open and curious and to let that passion find you. Be curious, be passionate, be strong.

Congratulations to the graduates of the class of 2019. I wish you the very best and most fascinating lives. Above all, do your best to enjoy them.

NOTES

1. Hunter S. Thompson, *Gonzo Papers*, vol. 2, *Generation of Swine: Tales of Shame and Degradation in the 80's* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2003).
2. *Avengers: Endgame*, directed by Anthony Russo and Joe Russo, performances by Robert Downey Jr., Chris Evans, Mark Ruffalo, and Chris Hemsworth (Marvel Studios and Walt Disney Pictures, 2019).