

Boston University Philosophy Department

Alumni Commencement Address

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Good afternoon. I have a bit of a disclaimer that I neglected to mention to Professor Brinkmann. Though I graduated from Boston University 26 years ago with a Philosophy degree, I actually still have an incomplete in one of my courses, though not a Philosophy course. It was called "Death: Event, Ritual and Decision." It sounded interesting in the course catalogue, but in reality it was, pardon the pun, deadly boring. In the end, somehow I could never bring myself to complete Death!

Someone mentioned to me recently that it would be possible to have a University without the other colleges or schools that are part of BU, but it would not be possible to have the University without the College of Arts and Sciences. CAS is the essence and center of the University. But the essence and center of CAS is the Philosophy Department. It is, and should be, the crown jewel of CAS and the University. It's appropriate that the Philosophy Department is geographically at the physical center of the University, the Hub, as they say in Boston. Indeed the Department overlooks the University from the rarefied 5th floor of the building.

When you are asked "What was your major in college", and you reply "I studied Philosophy", more often than not, your answer will put an end to further questions. There's a curious intimidation factor to a Philosophy degree, even if it isn't warranted. In the very rare instances when you are asked a follow up question, it will usually be "Does it help you in your work?" Now, as an industrial real estate developer, I never know quite how to answer that question, because it's often socially awkward to answer it without sounding like an egghead or too condescending. What the questioner really means is "What use is philosophy in the everyday, work-a-day world?" The question is usually asked out of genuine curiosity.

In my case, what better preparation can there be for a real estate developer than studying philosophy? Isn't it important to know how to analyze complex issues, follow through on problems in a logical order, be persuasive in conveying ideas, know how to write well and know how deal with moral conflicts? Of course, these skills apply to any work. Indeed, they are life skills.

If when asked what you studied in college, try saying that you studied Thinking instead of Philosophy. Thinking is, after all, kind of a one word summary of Philosophy. When you hear the follow-up question "Does it help you in your work?", then you can reply, "Well, as a ...", fill in the blank...doctor, engineer, teacher, businessperson, lawyer... "thinking does come in handy sometimes in my work ...".

To those of you who don't go on to teach Philosophy, regrettably, you may forget much of the specific information that you've learned over the past four years. I'm sure your professors won't want to hear that, but nevertheless, it's the case. What you won't forget that you learned from them is how to think more clearly, how to ask questions, how to separate the logical from the illogical, and perhaps even how to separate what is true from what is specious.

I received a wonderful education at Boston University and in the Philosophy Department. As I look back on my years here, perhaps what is most memorable is not any specific class material, but the messages exemplified in the character of my professors: that life is to be lived with energy, engagement, curiosity, commitment and a sense of humor.

Some years ago, after learning one of life's hard lessons, I asked a wise old friend, who coincidentally graduated from BU Law school in the 1950's, why I hadn't understood that particular lesson years before and saved myself and others so much grief. His response was "because you weren't ready!" Well, there are a few things that I wish I had learned earlier, when I was still green out of college, had only I been ready:

- Persevere: Don't take 'no' for an answer. Never give up.
- Be passionate about your work. If you can't be, you're probably not in the right job, or at least, you're not yet ready for it.
- Be courteous to people. As an old client of my father used to say, in his thick Yiddish accent: "Courtesy doesn't cost a penny...you can afford to give it away.
- Your integrity is sacrosanct. It's much easier to keep it than to get it back.
- Keep writing, rewriting and editing. Writing well, and clearly, is very highly valued and appreciated, but oddly underemphasized in the everyday world.
- Remember to thank people who have made an impact on your life, be they your professors, your parents, your siblings, your colleagues or your friends. They and you will feel better for it.
- Keep in touch with people you come to know, be they fellow students and professors, colleagues at work or acquaintances you make anywhere else. Your friendships will provide you with a reservoir of serendipity.
- Lastly, stay in touch with the Boston University Philosophy Department. It has been your intellectual and, perhaps, your spiritual home for most or all of the last four years, and you will find, will remain so for many years to come.

Congratulations to you, your family and your professors! I wish you the best of luck in your future endeavors.