

How should we presume? And where do we begin?

Emory McDowell

It is in the spirit of world-changing that I anchor my Phi Beta Kappa oration in the verses “How should presume? And where do I begin?” lifted and somewhat paraphrased from T.S. Elliott’s “The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock.” The operative world-changing, here, lies in the fact that this, to my knowledge, may be the first speech in SMU history to revolve around two lines of existential, quintessentially modernist, and in context (which will remain unaddressed, because the work itself is fairly abstract and confusing) brazenly homoerotic poetry. But this is #mySMU, and you, my captive audience, are stuck with me, and with the PBK-adjacent implications of these should-be iconic verses, until the bitter end of my speech. Rest assured that if I do my job properly, our cage match with these verses, and with the personal narrative in which I situate them, will hopefully teach us something about the paradigm-shifting, world-changing presumptions and beginnings that the intensive study of the arts and sciences catalyzes.

By the time I started classes at SMU, my journey of presumptions and beginnings had produced a passionately intellectual but nonetheless troubled college freshman. Early in my childhood I suffered from severe social anxiety, refusing to physically speak with classmates and teachers and putting the recess in recess by holing up in my fortress of solitude underneath my preschool’s playground. Over the years I successfully deprogrammed many of the harmful external expressions of that anxiety. I eventually gained the courage, for example, to use my voice in casual and classroom conversation. However, many of the vestigial insecurities of this early frustration had actually festered over time. Like many teenagers, I simply struggled to define myself in a hyper-technologized, breakneck-metamorphosing culture, and I fought, and failed, to square my then-slippery sense of self with the imperatives of the social body around me. This identity crisis, which in hindsight likely conditioned my early struggles with speech, also produced suspicion and mild intolerance of lifestyles and perspectives that did not immediately resonate with my own values and experiences. Suffice it to say that, by the time I darkened the doors of Dallas Hall, presumptions and beginnings and I had had a rough go of it, at least in a social setting.

Fortunately for me, I also enrolled in SMU high on a lifelong love affair with the humanities. Books had long offered me solace and peace where human interaction did not, and English and History classrooms provided me with early theaters of stumbling but valuable class participation that ultimately infected me with the joys of literature and historical analysis. I therefore cheerfully enrolled in Dr. Joan Arbery’s freshman Honors writer seminar, full well understanding and embracing Dr. Arbery’s reputation as a vigorous grader and intense discourse czar. I rank this enrollment choice alongside my decision to attend SMU as one of my sharpest life decisions made hitherto. I had no way of anticipating, for all of my

mid-enrollment glee, the intellectual and personal transformation that my experience in this class would facilitate.

To set the stage briefly, freshman Honors seminars require students to engage with a range of literary, historical, and philosophical texts that outline the principal intellectual concerns of Western thought through the twentieth century. Honor's writer's battery of roundtable discussions, extensive nightly readings, timed and take-home essays, and intense final research papers and exams constitute the quintessential seminar experience. The comments that follow therefore exemplify the ideals not just of SMU Honors humanities seminars, but of a liberal education at large.

Challenging as this course proved, it also utterly reshaped my life and set the tone for the remainder of my time at university. One can only imagine the intimidation felt by an introverted English major sitting at a roundtable of bright-eyed, bushy-tailed, and deeply opinionated Honors students. My peers boasted valedictorian-ships and flexed backgrounds ranging from computer science to physics to finance to philosophy. Commanded by our towering intellectual-in-chief Dr. Arbery, we were a force to be reckoned with, tearing into our discussion texts, and oftentimes each other, with a ravenous craving for truth.

In learning to dialogue actively in this setting, I refined and defined my voice in critical and casual conversation. Never again, as the lengthiness of this speech may suggest, will anybody ever ask the question "Does Emory McDowell have anything to say?" Having bitterly defended the literary merits of Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* against the advances of my less nineteenth century novel-inclined peers, I felt and still feel equipped to hold my own, to presume and begin, in any discursive space. I accredit this process for helping me accumulate the patience, dynamism, charisma and courage of authentic self-representation that I would later need to work as an RA, to represent student academics to the board of trustees, to offer commentary in high-level Bush Center meetings regarding immigration policy, and to stand in front of a large group of people and bloviate about the merits of the humanities seminar.

Meanwhile, my engagement with the epistemological theories - that's academic jargonese for "ideas of or related to the acquisition and nature of knowledge" - surveyed in this course empowered me to better understand my own emergence as a knowing and self-knowing being. Of course, humanities seminars are not panaceas for the great flummoxes of human life, and I did not, alas, walk away from my first semester of college with a fully-stocked toolbox of centuries-deep intellectual solutions to whatever insecurities beleaguered me upon entry into the university. But this seminar did prepare to begin to presume, and to begin to begin, working on myself and locating myself in these centuries-deep conversations about power, free will, justice, and of course knowledge, particularly knowledge of the self. Through my time with Dr. Arbery, I developed a more secure identity as a lifelong thinker and learner anxious to embrace the delicious tensions of nuance that I had feared for so long. On the one hand, I felt

empowered by newly-sharpened apparatuses of critical thought and academic research to navigate life's 'big questions' with thoughtfulness, thoroughness, and appropriate gravitas. On the other hand, my new understanding of knowledge as a socially conditioned, and, to my then-surprise, socially accessed good gave me permission to finally pluralize my understanding of human experience. Over time, I learned to draw on the essential seminar structure of peer engagement to unlock, through conversation with other people, an enormous backlog of then unexplored demographic identities, historical and institutional realities, and complex ideological claims that I had not considered previously. I simply could not have given these deeply personal subjects, or the very real-world people that they concern, a good faith hearing without the skills that my first-year seminar granted to me. The relationships rendered possible by this 'breaking open of me,' so to speak, enrich my life daily.

Other less existential but not-so-miscellaneous benefits to my time in Dr. Arbery's class abound. No essay feedback has served me as well in my paper-writing, my job application composition, hell, even my email drafting, as the red-ink soaked bloodbath of a first paper that Dr. Arbery handed to me in our first essay conference. These skills have provided, moreover, with the rock upon which I have built my small army of resident and student athlete writer tutees to whom I can impart the guidance that Dr. Arbery so energetically conveyed. And few relationships in my college years have proven more spontaneous or lasting than the dear friendships accumulated over those three precious months of passionate conversation with my classmates, some of whom - Rankin, Ash, Eric, Amy - are here today. My relationships with these remarkable individuals, and with the countless friendships constructed through intimate humanities seminars in the semesters since, testify to the resonant power of the humanities seminar as a forger of deep intellectual intimacy.

Our time here, then, uplifts and dignifies an academic sphere often wrongfully dismissed in contemporary parlance as a bygone, self-sustaining carousel of Great Books discussions. The arts and sciences are anything but outdated or unnecessary. They infuse university life, and life itself, with the basic frameworks of meaning - the basic presumptions and beginnings - of a curious and fulfilled journey of reading, learning, and discourse that empowers us to access deeper, higher strata of ourselves.

I suggest, therefore, a number of concluding presumptions and beginnings for all of us as we celebrate the enormous accomplishment that is induction into Phi Beta Kappa.

To the faculty who have made today possible by, shall we say, opening your love affairs with the arts and sciences to the myriad students who have graced your classrooms over the years, I recommend only that you keep up the good work. Remember that the value of your work, like the liberal arts itself, necessitates only as much defense as the cynicism of illiberal culture might provoke, and rest assured that your instruction quite literally builds character and community just as it refines intellect.

To the administrators present today: I thank you, truly and earnestly, for overseeing an institution within which, in my case, the study of the arts and sciences compliments, rather than supplants or gets supplanted by, vocational training. In that vein, I want to suggest that the import of the arts and sciences augments, paradoxically, with shifting consumer demand for vocational degrees. The financiers, engineers, lawyers, and educational administrators that we send from the Hilltop into the workforce will need the intellectual acuity and flexibility, the social wherewithal, and the ethical depth afforded to them by supplementary study of the arts and sciences. SMU has blessed me, and blessed the people in this room, with access to these fruits of our liberal arts education. Let us gracefully develop the exciting and necessary expansionary projects that our university has rightfully undertaken with a mindfulness towards our core pedagogical identity as a liberal arts institution that might, in less surgical and professional hands, flounder in the absence of ongoing institutional and financial support. Indeed, let us extend our legacy of interdisciplinary excellence for future generations and watch mustangs gallop into the world fortified by the wisdom and intellectual substance that principally, if not only, a liberal education can bequeath.

Finally, I ask my peers to simply find time in the near future to reflect on the enrichment facilitated through our studies of the arts and sciences at SMU. Throughout my speech, I've highlighted these two deeply anxious verses "How should I presume and where do I begin?" because their anxiety resonates with the very questions that lie at the heart of a thoughtful, intentional life, particularly for those of us staring down the chaotic barrel of our early twenties. How should I presume and where do I begin to order my priorities and organize my daily life and professional aspirations accordingly? How should I presume and where do I begin to deepen and consecrate my relationships as my understanding of myself relative to other people changes in tandem with my personal growth? How should I presume and where do I begin to find, and when not found to seek, meaning in my life? These questions loom like specters over our unconscious, and at choice godforsaken moments, conscious minds. I think that the arts and sciences offer each of us some chisel with which to begin hacking away, albeit inexpertly, at these questions. Barely post-adolescent primates that we are, it seems that lifelong self-sculpting projects await.

I doubt that any of us racked up eighty-plus hours of arts and sciences credit just to qualify for Phi Beta Kappa membership. Somehow, somewhere along our respective academic journeys, each of us seized upon a snatch of prose, or an elegant chemistry equation, or a brilliant anthropology lecture, or a life-changing seminar that teased us along for yet one more lecture, one more reading, one more equation, one more semester, of this most rigorous arts and sciences work that we gather here to commemorate. Regardless of how we presume or where we begin, let's thank our lucky stars that we attend a university that made such presumptions and beginnings possible, and rejoice in the completeness of the incomplete self that our studies in the arts and sciences have provided for us.