

Drinking Milk Together

(Title based on a student presentation at SRD this morning)

April 6, 2018

Good Morning! As Ange mentioned, my name is TJ Rivard, and my particular scholarly bent is in the writing of fiction. I was always told that you should start a speech with a joke, so I found one that was particularly appropriate in this setting.

A statistician was trying to justify his existence, so he went to his boss with a PowerPoint filled with charts and bar graphs and said to her:

Did you know that there are 42 million alligator eggs laid every year? Of that number only 50% ever hatch. Of that number, 86% are killed before they are 36 days old. And Of that number only 5% make it to one year old.

Boss said: So what's the point?

And the statistician said: If it weren't for statistics, we would be up to our asses in baby alligators.

In some ways, this is a very difficult speech to give. What can one say about research and creative activity that hasn't already been said? It is the foundation of knowledge. The cornerstone of culture and understanding. These are all things we know, even though we may not believe them about our own scholarship. Too often, we believe that someone out there is doing that, and we're just playing at it. Pretending. But, where does knowledge, culture, and understanding begin and leave off? Start and stop?

Some of you may remember that I gave this speech last year (not THIS speech) but the keynote address. Last year I talked about the importance of research in an era of fake news, when even the most unassailable, replicated science was (and is) being questioned.

I didn't want to talk about that this year, although I could. It may even be more important to talk about it now than it was last year, now that we have become more comfortable, not only with the accusations of fake news, but fake news itself.

Last year, I also discussed the wonder of research and the burning questions and mysteries that many of us carry inside from the time that we are little. Why is the grass green, the sky blue, the universe so very large? Each of those questions hold multiple ways of exploring them: scientific, philosophic, and poetic to name three, but there are, of course, others as well. And that is what we're here to celebrate today – the variety of ways that you think about the world

we inhabit and the sliver that each of you have chosen to explore, because knowledge, culture, and understanding begin with each of us – within intellectual ambition through research and within imaginative ambition through creativity. One is not more important than the other, because they give us different things. And within each, that diversity of thought grows exponentially. No wonder so many great minds embrace diversity when it may be the only universal truth.

Whether it is the study of

- Schizophrenia as a social stigma,
- Ovarian cancer,
- Counterurbanization,
- Single sex schools and the effect on the LGBTQ community,
- The leadership of Eleanor of Aquitaine,
- The stigma of adoption,
- Surrealism in graphic novels,
- The development of a clinical setting manual,
- Biocultural discordance,
- Life in Puerto Rico,
- Being transgender in Richmond, Indiana,
- Communication practices,
- The sexualization of the media,
- The feminist, Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz,
- Attraction and repulsion,
- Moral decision making,
- The work of Antonia Di Benedetto,
- Student success in online learning,
- A carcinogen in fruit flies, or
- Online dating.

Or

- Indiana Poetry, which I do tremble at a little,
- The poetry of an army veteran who experienced combat in Desert Storm,
- The exploration of sex, politics, and poetry,
- The memoir of a mother whose three children served (or are serving) in the military, or
- Art inspired by slasher films;

they all create diverse ways of considering our world and, paradoxically perhaps, give us an insight into specific individuals in this very room. You have revealed yourself, because to engage in research and creativity (two aspects of all of these endeavors) is to make one's self vulnerable, to expose one's self to criticism, to praise, and to indifference – the reaction,

perhaps, that we fear the most. However, the feelings we have as a result of the criticism, praise, or apathy that is heaped upon us is short-lived.

When I published my first short story, I was working here, and I was proud of myself but I also felt disappointed. For one thing, the story still had problems; it certainly wasn't great, but that wasn't where my disappointment lay. I remember distinctly Mary Fell, who some of you know, coming into my office upstairs. I was staring at the cover of the journal that the story was published in, and she stood quietly for a moment next to me. Then she put her arm over my shoulder and said,

"Doesn't quite feel like you thought it would, huh?"

"No," I said.

She took a deep breath. "That's because," she said, "it's not about that." And she pointed to the journal where my story was published.

If it wasn't about that, what was it about? Many of you already know the answer to this question. It's about the journey and the challenge. It's about getting up in the morning and not only confronting our fear of being vulnerable but testing it.

- Physical vulnerability,
- cultural vulnerability,
- artistic vulnerability,
- spiritual vulnerability,
- psychological, and
- emotional vulnerability

This is the core of scholarship and creativity, and it is inherent in that four-year old's question: "Why is the sky blue?" because the first thing that any scholar or writer has to admit is that we don't know and be thrilled that we don't because it portends a journey that we know will give us few answers and more profound questions. And the masochists that we are will be thrilled that we found a place where our ignorance is even richer!

However, on another level, what I am describing seems like the epitome of egotism and cliché. It is the scientist working tirelessly in the lab on a cure for cancer with a lonely spouse at home and children running amok in the streets – the writer smoking and drinking toward oblivion as the next novel comes off the presses. Images that I have found to be rarely true. And we are not here to celebrate the egotistical sides of our natures.

Then, what are we here to celebrate? Well, I am not here to take away your personal accomplishment or your personal joy today. In fact, I hope that where I leave you is in a place where the impostor **who we all feel is our truest self at times** is put in his or her place a little bit so that your excitement and the honor that is being paid to you today becomes a little more poignant for you.

That leads us to another question though:

So let's take stock for a moment. Here is what I have posited so far:

Scholarship and creativity are about the journey, not the end product. They are about vulnerability, diversity, revealing part of who we are, and being fearless in the face of any question.

So, here is the question: What else could we possibly be here to celebrate?

As I thought about wanting to make this different from last year, I went back to the topics that interested you, to the topics that laid the foundation for today:

- Puerto Rico
- Feminism
- morality
- Cancer
- Communication
- Creative pieces about war, children, and Fear and Trembling in Indiana

Whether our (or any) scholarship is philosophic, sociological, behavioral, scientific, poetic, fictional, or biographical, I would like to posit that in most cases, compassion and community are at its foundation the vast majority of the time. When I look at this list and the celebration of your individual accomplishments, I see an inherent paradox. When we focus on other cultures, on perceptions of the world, on healthcare, communication, or the expression of our personal lives, we are also reaching out to connect to those around us, to create a community that better understands the world, and can find better ways to live together, knowing that we have to continue to adapt to new discoveries and shed outdated modes of thinking.

When confronted with the prospect that science may undermine Buddhist philosophy, the Dalai Lama, said in his book THE UNIVERSE IN A SINGLE ATOM:

My confidence in venturing into science lies in my basic belief that as in science so in Buddhism, understanding the nature of reality is pursued by means of critical investigation

<https://www.realclearscience.com/blog/2012/07/buddhism-demonstrates-ideal-intersection-of-science-religion.html>

He went on to say in a 2005 New York Times article, **"If science proves some belief of Buddhism wrong, then Buddhism will have to change."**

<https://www.nytimes.com/2005/11/12/opinion/our-faith-in-science.html>

We often fail at creating community and compassion, and we will continue to fail, but it is the scholars and the artists, the people in this room, who are on the frontlines in attempting to

create a better place for all of us and our descendants, embracing the irony that it is the exploration of the burning, individualized question that will bring us all closer.

My greatest fear at this point in time is that we live in an era when the focus is on who is right and who is wrong and painting legitimate scholars as fake, because ultimately it will divide us and turn us into mean-spirited human beings.

But this day and you and the questions that you are passionate about make a difference AND more importantly, your individual pursuits hold the promise to unite us as a compassionate community as long as we stay true to who we are as scholars.