

**The World is your Oyster  
or how not to write an essay**

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The official title of my little talk today is “the world is your oyster.” The unofficial, and perhaps more valuable, subtitle is “how not to write an essay,” or for that matter the address for an opening convocation. When the Dean asked me to speak at this assembly, my first thought was: “What on earth can I talk about?” I considered recycling one of the papers I’ve recently written for academic conferences, but I decided that you were likely not terribly interested in whether or not Eberlin von Günzburg’s *Wolfaria* was the first Protestant utopia. And probably the relationship between historical reflection and the creation of confessional identities in sixteenth-century Hutterite communities wouldn’t knock your socks off either. So, I came to the conclusion that I had to write something new for the occasion. But what could I talk about that would interest, maybe even inspire, Augustana Freshmen on their first day of classes? Suddenly I had a flash of brilliance. OK, I had an idea for a title that might work: “The World is Your Oyster.” I can see that you are hardly able to restrain your enthusiasm — obviously it’s a great title.

Given that enthusiasm, I’m sure you will be interested in knowing how I came up with this title. Many years ago, back in the Dark Ages when I was a senior at Valparaiso University, one of the history professors there commented to me that he would love to have the opportunity to give the address at some sort of convocation because he had the perfect title for his talk —

you guessed it: “The World is your Oyster.” I don’t know if Professor Berg ever had the opportunity to give his convocation address, and if he did, I have no idea what he talked about. But when the Dean asked me to speak today, I thought why not steal that title. If there are lessons to be derived from my ramblings this morning, perhaps the first of these is to aim high — try to achieve the sorts of things your professors dream of. Although, a word of caution is in order here. If you do manage to achieve the sorts of things we only dream of, don’t broadcast your success too loudly. We academics tend to have very fragile egos and the idea of being outdone by people younger than us, especially our students or former students, may be too much for us to handle.

So I had a title, but what could I do with it? What could I say about oysters that would be relevant to a group of young people embarking on their post-secondary educational careers. It seemed that the obvious place to start in solving this dilemma was to do a bit of research. So I set out to find out what exactly an oyster is, and I came up with the following description: “A bivalve mollusk, found in salt and brackish water; esp., a common edible species of Europe and America.” Now, that’s something. But really, a discussion of bivalve mollusks seemed more appropriate for a marine biologist than an historian of early modern Europe and what lessons can college Freshmen take from a bivalve mollusk anyway? That last question was meant to be rhetorical, in case you’re wondering. My hobbies include cooking (and eating), and I thought maybe there was something there that would suggest what I could say to you this morning. As I understand it, oysters are something of a delicacy and best if swallowed whole, and raw, right out of the shell. Unfortunately, I’m allergic to certain types of shellfish and, as a result, I tend to avoid the food group as a whole. Perhaps there are lessons for you in eating oysters — maybe,

you should swallow the college experience whole, and raw, just as one eats an oyster. But, to be perfectly honest, I don't have a clue what that might mean, and it sounds pretty corny to boot.

So I was back at the drawing board, again trying to think where to go with this title. I kept asking myself what else oysters are known for. Of course, pearls. Now here was a theme with some promise. Included in the Oxford English Dictionary definition of an oyster was the statement: "something regarded as containing all that one desires ([as in] the world is my oyster)." I could talk to you about the promises the future holds for you. I could point out to you that you are young and gifted and you have the rest of your lives before you. With hard work and determination, you could make the world your oyster. Perhaps this is what Professor Berg had in mind way back in the Dark Ages in Valparaiso, Indiana. Although at that time the steel industry in Indiana had run on hard times and employment options for graduates, particularly those with degrees in history, were not especially good. The world sure didn't seem to be my oyster then. If we can believe the reports, the economy is doing much better today than it was then and your employment options in four years should be pretty good. But there are no guarantees and no one knows what the future holds for you. Besides, to paint such a rosy picture runs against my natural inclination to pessimism and cynicism. So I didn't want to promise you a pearl. It seemed that I wasn't getting anywhere with "the world is your oyster."

So it's 11 o'clock the night before your research paper for Professor Hicks is due, and for some reason you can't get a grip on the topic gender, voice and the body in the post-colonial literature of Newfoundland's Avalon Peninsula. What do you do? Of course, change the topic. But since I didn't want all this research I'd done into oysters and pearls to go to waste, I thought it best to try a lateral move with the oyster theme rather than abandoning the topic altogether.

How about college is your oyster? Surely there was something I could do with that. But what? In a former life, when I taught at a large university, one of my teaching assistants once commented that teaching history to undergraduates was like casting false pearls before real swine. There may be some merit to that observation, but it didn't seem to be a good basis for my comments to you on your first day of classes. Nonetheless, I thought the idea of college as an oyster still might work. Maybe, like an oyster, college is tough to get into, but it's worth the effort. Naw, too cheesy.

I'm not a big fan of the television show *South Park* — as luck would have it I was born in Canada and I'm getting tired of being blamed for everything. But I do think that Trey Parker and Matt Stone got one thing right. In the show, Chef frequently comments that there is a time and place for everything, and it's called college. While this is likely not what Chef is referring to, I expect that over the next four years you will be provided with opportunities for personal, intellectual, spiritual and moral growth that you could not have anticipated before you entered college. And I hope that you will take advantage of as many of those opportunities as possible. But what does all of this have to do with oysters and pearls? Maybe I could suggest that these experiences and the lessons they will teach you are the pearls you will discover when you crack the tough shell of college. That might have worked, but it seemed to me that this made the activity of learning too passive.

So, despite the apparent promise of this approach, it seemed I needed another lateral move. How about treating the college as the oyster bed and the students as the oysters? According to this metaphor, the pearl is something you make rather than something you find, and I think that reflects much better the active nature of a person's intellectual, moral and spiritual

growth. There is no place for passive learning, if such a thing exists, in a good college education. Contrary to popular belief, your professors are not here to entertain you. They are here to push and prod you and to encourage you to learn. But the learning is your activity, and for the most part your success in learning is directly proportional to the effort you put into it. My teaching assistant famous for the false pearls and real swine comment also once described lecturing as the process by which information was transmitted from a professor to a student without passing through the mind of either person. If that's what your education here becomes, we have failed you, and you have failed yourself. Getting a good education is like making a pearl. Just as the pearl starts out as an irritating grain of sand, so some of the most important lessons you will learn will start out as minor, or not so minor, irritations. As you try to smooth out the rough edges of those irritations, you may not be successful right away. And as you continue working on these problems, the source of your irritation might continue to grow until, with any luck, you will have a pearl.

Finally, I had a metaphor I could work with. This could be the basis for a great; well, maybe a good; OK, a passable, opening convocation address. Unfortunately, though, I seem to be out of time. Just think of the things I could have done with this metaphor if only there were more time. But that's the way it is. I guess I'll have to be content with encouraging you to be an oyster. When you feel the irritation of that grain of sand, don't spit it out and slam your shell shut again. Instead, set to work on it and try to round out its rough corners. See where it leads you. Who knows, maybe you'll make a pearl. Oh, by the way, when you write your first essays this year, leave the title until the end.