

## **Muhlenberg College Last Lecture**

“Minding the Collective: On Rewiring Yourself to the World”

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*And there was a great buzzing all over this land, and the people were as murmurers.*

Tonight I want to talk about collective action, about recasting your identity as a participant in community, and about what James Surowiecki has called “the wisdom of crowds.” But before I get there I just want to first say something about honeybees.

Now as many of you no doubt realize, honeybees are social animals. They have elaborate social structures inside that hive: a few thousand male drone bees, a few thousand female worker bees, and a single queen. And it’s something of a kibbutz inside there: young worker bees building and cleaning the hive and feeding the young with royal jelly; older worker bees leaving the hive to gather nectar and pollen, and the male drones, well, just hanging out and waiting to fertilize the queen. Aside from these prescribed tasks and identities, a complex form of communication has also evolved among the honeybees – female workers perform what’s technically known among entomologists as the ‘waggle dance’ when food is very far away and the ‘round dance’ when food is nearby. This is a dance language that’s shared and understood by the entire worker fleet – you know, just head south on the New Jersey Turnpike, waggle waggle, there are some freakin’ amazing blackberry bushes by the Walt Whitman Rest Area, wiggle waggle, don’t follow the signs for Exit 4, make sure to jug-handle.

Since at least the time of the Egyptian Empire, humans have been exploiting bee labor to get honey – but also to pollinate and hence propagate a variety of crops including almonds, peaches, turnips, apples, watermelons, pumpkins, cocoa and vanilla. Now, I have come to understand that many of you think of food production as something that happens on the other side of the WaWa counter after you push the buttons on the screen for a ciabatta melt, but consider for example the impact on the availability of

chocolate, when I tell you that since 2006, honeybee colonies across the world are rapidly, dramatically, dying. In this so-called “colony collapse” epidemic, a beehive ceases to function because of the complete absence of worker bees. The US Department of Agriculture estimates that as many as 36% of the 2.4 million beehive colonies in the United States were lost to colony collapse last year – and the secondary effects on crop yields, of course, are equally staggering.

Now, there’s a lot of speculation about what might be causing this unprecedented system shut-down of honeybee hives: the build-up of environmental toxins, parasitic mites, malnutrition, overuse of antibiotics, electromagnetic radiation. But to be honest, the strongest evidence that something else might be occurring is that, after a colony dies, you never find dead worker bees in or around the hive: the young are there – the queen is there – but no workers; the bare skeleton of a former factory, silent. Recently, entomologists have proposed that the cause of colony collapse may actually be a virus – a virus that attacks the nervous system of the worker bee and changes its behavior so that it stops thinking of itself as a social animal, and starts thinking of itself as an individual.

Now I can just imagine this female bee, waking up and looking around the hive at the mapquest conga line going on in one room, the dronish clacking and whirring of the honeymaking machine in another, the bee pups screaming for more royal jelly in the nursery, and thinking to herself, “I’ve got to get out of here!”

And when I read about this virus theory of social change among the honeybees, it reminded me of our longtime national obsession with the television ‘elimination game show’ format: a group of people, on an island, in an amazing race, at Parsons School of Design, doing what they do, smiling to exhaustion, trying as hard as possible to stay in the game, so that they don’t get asked to leave. And one by one, after proving themselves sufficiently unfit for the work (or for television), they recede into the horizon with an armful of consolation prizes. And we at home live in some kind of nervy limbo, waiting to see which one

of the group will be so outstanding, so adept at the quick fire challenges, that they will be crowned the winner. In this format, the winner is understood to be the one individual who makes the work of the group totally unnecessary. In this format, the winner is singular and the losers are plural; success is the ability to leave the group behind and stand high, alone, on that rock of ego achievement. Congratulations, honeybee A5643, you are Top Bee! All other bees, I'm sorry, you're out; please pack your honeycomb and go. And of course the losers, judged unfit to stand alone, disappear into the back of the television tube, nameless and never known, the invisible hand, the faceless machine, three teeth in the great cog. Nobody wants to be a loser.

And I was so flattered when you asked me to deliver the Last Lecture. But then I started to worry: I don't know any life lessons, like, *buy a day-planner*. Thank goodness for online banking, or I'd never remember to pay my bills on time. And this has been such an exhausting year, overworked and undernourished, watching my daily yoga practice crumble into a few hurried oms and several gulps of coffee. What could I offer? But then so many people in higher education have been observing that the Class of 2009 is experiencing some significant anxiety on leaving the perceived stability of Academia. And to be honest, living as we do in an economic upheaval, I can see what they mean. Many of you have spoken to me in my office about your fears of joblessness, your sense that existing social structures will not be able to meet your needs, and the correct font size for your resume; you do not want to go back to Cherry Hill.

*And their anger was kindled. And the fire burned among them.*

You know, one of my favorite sections of the Hebrew Bible is Numbers – called *b'midbar*, or 'in the wilderness' in Hebrew, or really just *Real World: Sinai Peninsula*. In this Season, the Jews are wandering around in the desert, delivered out of Egyptian slavery by the hand of God, and of course, by Moses. The excitement of Season Two – the plagues, the revolt, the parting of the Red Sea, the escape to

freedom, Miriam dancing as the credits roll – has all been long forgotten. The slaves, now free but wondering when they'll get to inherit this supposed 'promised land' are tired of eating manna, which apparently is sickeningly sweet, like eating nothing but marshmallows. I mean, they're really starving and seemingly lost. By Episode 11, the group is really starting to whine to Moses. "Are we there yet? I'm hungry. I miss being in Egypt, where I could eat all the fish I wanted for nothing, and cucumbers and melons and leeks and hummus, besides. And now all we have is this stupid Costco-sized box of TastyKakes that no one wants anymore. Do you even know where we're going?"

And God sees all of this whining and gets angry. He says to Moses, "Do I have to pull this Earth over? Have I not brought these people out of Egypt and promised them bounty? Have I not wowed them with miracles and marshmallows?" And Moses: "Don't put me in the middle of this. I can't bear this whining either. But we are kind of starving." And so God says, "Fine. I'll provide the people with meat. And they'll not eat one day, nor two days, nor five days, nor ten days, nor twenty days, but a whole month, until it comes out of their nostrils and they become sick on it." (God's always getting pissy in Numbers.) And so, you know, a flock of quail flies in from the ocean, landing all over the wilderness, and the people run around gathering them all, greedily ripping up the sinews in their teeth.

And then God sees this and says, "You know what? These people are so annoying – and so unfit for the great lands I have promised them – I am going to kill them all and start over." And Moses, cleverly, appeals to God's ego and says, "This would be a really bad idea. When the Egyptians hear that you brought these people out of Egypt, freed them from bondage, promising them milk and honey, only to kill them in the middle of the desert because you were unable to manage their whining, they will say, 'This God does not know from personnel management and is quick to anger'. Don't you want to be remembered as a just and loving God?" And God thinks about this and then says, "OK, fine. I will work with these people. But please tell them, as I live, all of you who are twenty years old or more, you will die in this wilderness. You will wander in it the rest of your days. Only your children, or your children's

children, after forty long years, when the carcasses of all of you have been consumed by the wilderness, will see the Promised Land.”

Now, I’m taking a big risk here, telling you this story during the most significant economic collapse in United States history since the Great Depression, in addition to rising unemployment and global financial backpedaling, on the eve of your graduation, as you venture forth into the shining light of your adulthood, subsisting on *Easy Mac* and *Dunkaroos* and fistfuls of *Lucky Charms*. But I want to suggest to you a possible rationale for God’s anger in this story. The wandering people in the Hebrew Bible are not yet a nation. They are no longer slaves, nor are they yet Israelites. Instead they are only individuals, competing for resources, fighting against the odds, living and starving and dying alone. Everyone knows that at the end of *Survivor*, only one survivor survives. In this story, it’s only the children, who, being born in the wilderness, will see themselves as belonging to the group. They will be subjects with a capital S, of a new language, in a new nation, born of themselves, greater than the sum, a swarm in the desert.

*And they shall know the land that you have rejected.*

I know that this is an emotional time – I can see it in your faces. You are torn between committing to this community and beginning to mourn its loss; or opting out, leaving it now, you’re already rapidly receding into some future place, flying away. And you are excited, and you are in denial, and you are afraid. Let me gently suggest to you that this fear is not so much a fear of loss, but a fear of standing alone. And a persistent belief that any success you realize is the work of you alone – and any failure you encounter is yours alone, too (or possibly someone else’s problem). You have grown up in a culture in which individual actions are romanticized, but the wisdom and power of a group are ignored.

Indeed, you came into this community quite literally selling yourself:

- “Muhlenberg College affords me the opportunity to educate myself in a well-known and

esteemed pre-medical program.”

- “When I saw Muhlenberg, I knew it represented an opportunity from which I could not retreat.”
- “In high school I learned to use all of the energy I have to make everything I do the best that it can be.”
- “I do well in school, in sports, and I have an active social life.”
- “On Friday night, on the field, it all comes down to me.”
- “I have learned that true beauty and accomplishments are not only measured by what one has or what one looks like, but also by what one gives and gets from life.”
- “I hope you will assist me in making my dreams come true by granting me acceptance to your college.”

(Those extracts, by the way, were lifted out of eight of your Muhlenberg applications.)

I think we as faculty and staff, myself included, tend to reinforce these narratives in our advising sessions and evaluation schemes – and of course, we are all immersed in a culture in which the most powerful are understood to have the privilege to decide what sort of individual they would like to be, while the least powerful are seen as belonging to a group, having a set of traditions, and unable to escape these without consuming the correct products or literally changing their bodies.

Let’s, for a moment, recast these narratives of success as belonging to the work of a group or groups.

There is enormous power in thinking as a collective; indeed, we have always lived collectively, though not always healthfully nor with the willingness to recognize it. I strongly believe that a liberal arts education is essential for seeing how different groups – different discourses – interact, intersect, or stand in opposition to one another. In these ‘liberal arts moments’ our artificial alphabet of general academic requirements – A, D, H, L, P, R, and so on – seems false and individualist. Our measures of success (“You got an A!”) seem infantile and disconnected from the real work. Complex problems – economic

revitalization, sustaining the native ecosystem, racial inequality, nation building, mind and brain – do not occur within individual disciplines, nor will their solutions elegantly arrive if one very smart person sits in an attic for ten years and thinks very, very hard.

In fact, as James Surowiecki has argued, these problems are problems of cognition, coordination, and cooperation among groups. *Cognition* – because they require that different sorts of people begin to find common cognitive ground, and if necessary, invent new language, in which to even see the problem. *Coordination* – because they require different members of a group to figure out how to coordinate their behavior with one another, knowing that everyone else is trying to do the same. And *cooperation* – because they require the challenge of getting self-interested, distrustful people to work together, even when the forces of narrow self-interest seem to provide little incentive for participation.

In the last several years, we have watched as a nation as laws have been bent toward to will of self-appointed experts, guaranteeing maximum flexibility for the most powerful – banking on self-interest over the hard work of coordination and cooperation. You are now living in the flotsam and jetsam of the effects. Let me suggest to you that you have the tools to begin to live in a very different world, should you choose to use them, and that these tools were given to you by your liberal arts education. Let's start by acknowledging that we do belong to groups, and that success is not merely the end product of one person's labor. Let's make sure that everyone in a group, a nation, a set of disciplines, has an equal voice to do this work. Let's see the inherent value in diversity and a decentralized language in doing this work. And let's agree that negotiation and consensus-building is messy, difficult, but obligatory if our goal is to find common ground and change the system. You cannot jump into the world as an individual, owning the conversation before it's even begun – this is one definition of privilege. Instead, understanding what's yours – and what's someone else's – that most basic principle of identity – will check your privilege and move this country away from dogma and closer to democracy. And most importantly, let's say it clearly: a group will call you on your shit.

As you leave the collective that you have built at Muhlenberg College, do not be afraid to see; do not blind yourselves with the temptations of the individual. You know, I believe that activism and social change begin by first deciding to really and truly see a system; in this way, activism is a lot like comedy, which is only funny if it comments on what's real and incongruous for a community at a specific place and time. Notice that comedy, too, just doesn't work if it's only working for the individual who finds it funny. It seems to me that the only possible outcome of working as an individual is dislocation, wilderness, colony collapse. I do not teach neuroscience because I enjoy diagramming the nervous system on the chalkboard nor do I carry out neuroscience research because I love pipetting small amounts of clear fluid from one tube to another; I see myself as one part of this community, raising your awareness, challenging your easy answers, and fostering your critical intelligence and engagement as an ensemble, in the hope that you will not simply perpetuate the existing systems of the world, but really and truly own them, and move the work, the Great Work, forward. I have the great privilege of standing up here and seeing you now as a group – and this is the way that I will choose to remember you and honor the work that you have done these last four years.

You are not unique. You are not immune. You are not unto yourself alone. Nor are you immortal. But now there is a something for you where nothing existed before; or, at least, what was once opaque to you is now translucent, permeable. You see that consciousness is larger than you. It's like those first moments of the school year, shiny and fresh mown, when the syllabi are being handed out, and you've been invited to step into this small world with your sharp pink binder and pilot pen, learn its rules, make it yours. This is where you are, dwelling in the desert, adrift in narratives of the self. Begin by seeing the collective, and you shall know this land. The Promised Land is its body – and honey, its reward.