

Role Models and Meddlers

It is a tremendous pleasure to be here, and an even greater honor. For a classroom teacher such as myself, there is simply no greater honor than to be singled out to talk to a select group of students like you. And it's a double pleasure since I know so many of you, and have personally had the pleasure of teaching you.

But that said, let me offer a bit of a warning.

As those of you who know about such things know, little commencement addresses like this are supposed to be all ra-ra and inspiration and "great job well done," and all that.

Well, that's not my style.

You all are McNair Scholars, some of you are MAC scholars, some of you will be. You've therefore gotten all sorts of kudos, all sorts of pats on the back, all sorts of congratulations—and lots of money!

Hey, let's be real, right?

So I'm here tonight to kick you butts.

That's right.

I'm here tonight to remind you that there's no free lunch. To tell you, bluntly—and I don't mince words—that you've gotten the goodies, the scholarships, the special classes and the congratulations—and now it's time to pay.

Me, I'm like the tax man, here to tell you what you owe all of us who've put so much into you. And just to remind you of who we are and how much you owe us, just take a second to look around this room. Just around this room. Skip all the professors and other folks who aren't here tonight. Just look around this room and ask yourself how much poorer your life would be without the folks sitting with you here tonight.

Pay back time.

What do I mean?

I thought I would start with a story, a very personal story, because what I want to talk to you about is very personal, is literally about how I want you to lead your lives. And if that sounds like preaching, you're right: preaching and teaching are just different variants of the same profession.

My father died three years ago. In fact, almost exactly three years ago today I was addressing a memorial service for him. My father was an overwhelming presence in my life, and his final illness and death left me struggling to make sense of him, of his legacy to me, and of myself. As I tried to figure out what I would say about him at the memorial service, I first thought that I would talk about his accomplishments. And he was a remarkably accomplished man: a bomber pilot and then a test pilot in the Air Force; a brilliant chemist; a gifted teacher; a pretty good rock-and-roll bass player; a fine technical rock climber; as ornery an old coot as ever walked the face of the earth; and a father not only to my two blood brothers and me, but also to Tenagne and Mamo, my Ethiopian brother and sister, to Okasa Kamin-a-Kilau, Polina Kliemavizskaya, Julie Reddy, and many, many others who made his Thanksgiving table a raucous and joyous mini-UN.

But somehow such a rendition of my father's accomplishments didn't capture what he was all about. So I thought maybe I would talk about how he had shaped my life--and there is little about my life that does not show his influence, witness the fact that I've never been, and will surely never be, anything but a college professor.

But again, this approach seemed to miss the mark. To do justice to my father, I needed somehow to capture his spirit, his legacy, his lesson to all of us. And then I remembered an incident from when I was very young.

When I was a kid, we didn't have much money, so we went camping for our vacations. One of our favorite spots was small cabin on a low ridge over the Dead Diamond river in northern New Hampshire. One evening, when I was about ten, we were driving up the dirt road along the river and came upon a man stuck in the middle of a ford across the river. It was almost

dark. It was early summer and up there in northern New Hampshire the river was still running very cold. But my father spent close to two hours in and out of the river to get that guy's car out safely. When his car was back on the road and running again, this guy tried to pay my father for his help. My father refused. When pressed, he said simply: "Just pass the favor on someday."

Just pass the favor on.

It is such a simple admonition--and yet so hard to live up to. It was my father's greatest gift to me, and his greatest challenge:

- You will pass on more than you have received.
- You will give more than you take.
- Your measure will be how much better you leave things than you found them.

OK, you may be asking yourself—nice story, but what's Shafer's dead father got to do with me?

Everything. Absolutely everything.

Let me explain.

Collectively, the adults in this room, and lots of other professors like me who aren't here tonight, have invested a huge amount of time, and energy, and care in you. We did so because we—like my father—we believe in what we do. But we—like my father—were also passing a favor on. We are the people we are, we have achieved what we have achieved, not alone, on our own. We are who we are only because somewhere back there a teacher picked us out, made us appreciate our gifts, gave us hope—and gave us the courage to keep trying, and trying, and trying.

We admitted you to the McNair program, we will take some of you for the MAC program, not just to make you into successful researchers—though we do expect you to be successful researchers. We admitted you to make you into successful teachers.

That's right, teachers. Here you are not even graduated from Rutgers and I'm after you about being teachers—but, hey, that's what you become when you go to graduate school. Now, OK, perhaps some of you won't go on to teach, you'll end up in a lab somewhere or a court room. But that won't get you off the hook, because by my definition of teaching, you are still going to be teachers. That is, you are going to be teachers if you accept the challenge of passing on the favor we've passed on to you.

What I want to do for next few minutes is to tell you what we were to you and to tell you what we expect you to be.

So, what's a teacher? What is it we want you to be?

Well, whatever else they are, teachers are always **role models** and **meddlers**.

Role models and meddlers.

And that's what we want you to be.

What do I mean? Let me start with role models.

We want you to be role models in two very different senses of the word. The first one is easy. You've already heard all about it.

Look at your own hands. Your hands are your parents' hands, your grandparents' hands, your guardians' hands. And growing up, you looked to your parents and/or your grandparents and/or your guardians as role models—just like I looked to my father. You looked to them for strength and purpose and hope—just like I looked to my father.

How many of the professors you've had at Rutgers had hands like yours? I mean literally hands the color of yours?

You have been “in their hands” as the expression goes, since you came to Rutgers, and yet, and yet....

I don't mean to suggest that white folks like me can't be role models—if I did I certainly wouldn't be here. But let me tell you a little story that I think will help me make my point.

Professionally, I travel around the world, mostly in Africa and Asia. I have four Asian children. I think of myself as a liberal and as comfortable with race. Hell, I have spent literally months at a time as the only white within hundreds and hundreds of miles. So, I think of myself as cool.

Well, odd as it may seem, I am also the faculty adviser of Twese, the African Students Association at Rutgers. Every year Twese organizes an African fashion show, and every year I go. The story I want to tell you is about the first time I went.

I got all dressed up in my flashy best. I tooled over to the College Avenue gym. I was met at the door by a couple of my students—got big hugs and everything. Got a great front row seat. Got settled.

And realized I felt incredible out of place and incredibly uncomfortable.

It took me the longest time to realize why.

And when I realized why, I felt so stupid and so blind.

I felt out of place for a very simple reason. Here I was in this huge gym absolutely packed with people—and I was like the only white guy there.

But this wasn't Africa.

This wasn't Asia.

This was the College Avenue Gym.

This was MY university.

This was where I lived.

My place.

The next day I admitted all this to my partner at CASE, Yvette Murry. She just smiled and shook her head and said: “So, you finally got it.”

Better late than never.

So role model one is being there for other kids of color, like you, to give them, in the simplest, most visceral way possible, the assurance that they belong here and that they are in good hands here.

But while important, this isn't the whole role modeling story. We need you to go forth and be role models **to all the other students too.**

Think back to my story about the fashion show for a minute. What was “wrong” there? I mean, here were thousands of African and African-American and Latino students having a great time. Nothing wrong with them. What was wrong was what was inside **my** head.

Think now a bit about the world out there. What sorts of African-American and Latino role models are there for all of us to look to, folks like me and folks like you? Jackie Robinson, Michael Jordan, Tiger Woods. Hey, they're cool. Let's not take anything away from them.

But they're jocks—and to be perfectly honest, the message they send to the majority isn't, I think, one you and I would subscribe to.

No, we—you and I, all of us who are your teachers—we are looking for more real role models. More Toni Morrisons. More Colin Powells. More Wynton Marsalis's.

No, that's not quite right. We really looking for more Francine Es-sians. More Emmot Dennis's. More Cheryl Walls. More Pedro Cabans. More Walton Johnsons. More Abena Busia's. More Carmen Whalens. More Samuel Proctors. More Clem Prices. More Isabel Nazarios. More Earl Shaws. More Renee Larriers. And so on. And so on.

We are really looking for—no, we really mean to **train**—we mean to **create**—in you—the next generation of this sort of role models.

Role models not because they are black or latino.

Role models not just for kids of color.

Role models for all of us. Role models because in their professional lives and in their personal lives they embody the best of what it means to be truly human in the fullest sense of the word.

Sound tough? You bet!

Sound like we have high expectations of you? You bet.

But sorry, boys and girls, this was the easy part.

I mean, being a role model can be a pretty passive thing. In the simplest sense, you just succeed—and all of you have already amply demonstrated your capacity to succeed—you just succeed and then stand around while people admire you, right?

Not enough.

I—we—want much more from you. We want you—we need you—to be much more than that. We need you to be meddlers.

Meddling is, to be perfectly honest, why I'm a teacher. I love meddling. Oh, don't get me wrong. I can be—I even enjoy being—a total, hard-core research weeny. I actually like doing research. I like arguing about methodology and the logic of explanation. I like writing books.

But like I said, what I really like is meddling—and I think it's the most important thing I do. It's the laying on of hands part of teaching. It's where preaching and teaching really come together. It's about shaping lives.

And I need you to understand that **the** favor you have received from the people around this room is that they took the time to **see** you—to recognize your potential under all the late adolescent awfulness, under all that make up, under that cocky “fuck you, jack” cool.

Don't be offended—I did say that we recognized the potential.

Back to my father for a minute.

My father wasn't thrilled about my becoming a professor. I was pretty naïve about the realities of university life, and he was a graying soldier in the bureaucratic wars waged constantly in academia.

But when I finally convinced him that I really did want to be a professor, he gave me the single best piece of advice I have ever gotten: He said, "Michael, never forget that every kid in your class thinks he or she is special."

And they do.

And they are.

But oh, God, the distance between potential and performance can be so big.

That's where you come in.

Your job isn't simply to stand up there and make nice lectures. Assign lots of readings and papers, and then sit back and let 'em sink or swim. That's the way a lot of so-called professors act, but that's not how a teacher acts. That's not how we've been with you. That's not how we want you to be with your students.

"To teach" is an active verb. And teachers teach not just facts and figures. They teach the whole student.

Let me be blunt. Let's just talk about you.

Look around this room—there's not a dumbie here. Every one of you is wired right. You've got all the required brain circuitry to succeed. But let's be honest, you're also here because you were born on the wrong side of the tracks. That's what it takes to get a McNair. This is not a rich boys' club. We only let nobodies with promise in.

What's that mean?

It means that many of you grew up in households where English wasn't your first language.

It means that many of you grew up in households where no one else had ever been to college before.

It means you grew up in neighborhoods and went to schools where being a nerd wasn't a highly respected life style option.

It means you grew up probably not knowing which fork to use first or which bread plate was yours.

It means you grew up always doubting yourself, always afraid that someone would find you out, that you'd say something stupid or do something really dumb and the cool kids—or that teacher you admired—would mock you.

So how did you get here, to the top of the pile, well on your way not only to graduating from college but going to graduate school?

Someone meddled in your life. Someone saw you, recognized you, gave you the skills to make it and the courage to try. Someone kept raising the bar—every time you got over it, they patted you on the back and raised it a few more inches. Probably even convinced you they were doing you a favor as they kicked your butt.

And they were.

My daddy always said truth comes in blows. Boy was he right.

So where's this leave us, this long, rambling story about a crochety old organic chemist, my father?

Well, we—my father and I, and by extension all the other teachers in this room who have put so much of our time and our energy and our hope into you—we want you to join us in carrying the burden. Time to stop just being students; time to be teachers.

Now it is up to you:

- To pass on more than you have received; and
- To give more than you take.
- For your measure will be how much better you leave things than you found them.

Please, just pass the favor on.

Thank you.

D. Michael Shafer
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