The Social Contract Between Teachers and Students. (*Or what should you ask of your professors? What should your professors ask of you?*)

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Convocation speech to the incoming students at the Elizabethtown College, Pennsylvania, USA.

The beginning of the school year challenges us to ask though questions: What do I expect in the next ten months or so? For you don't have to be here, and it's costing plenty of money for you to stay here. Not only so, but a college like Elizabethtown takes teaching seriously and is not an expensive baby-sitting operation. Your families have sent you here, and your college and its professors have received you here, because they, and you, must agree it is the most important thing you can do with your life this year. You should therefore ask why. Given all of the many things you can do with your time and money, why should you turn your back on everything else in the world and spend the next ten months here, in these classrooms and laboratories and library, and with these professors? Only if the answer is, because there is nothing more important, should you stay here. Any why should that be so? Because you're going to learn things here that matter and that you cannot learn in any other place or circumstance. What that means has nothing to do with acquiring information; you can learn more from an encyclopedia than you can from me or any other professor. What it means is that you're going to learn in a way in which you can only learn here and nowhere else: that is the *social contract* of the college classroom; it is what we promise you, and what you must demand of us.

Since everybody knows we learn all the time and everywhere, that is a considerable claim in behalf of Elizabethtown College, or University of South Florida, where I teach, or any of the other thousands of colleges and universities in this country, public and private, religious and secular, famous and homely, where, this morning, a year of studies starts. Why do I think you've made the right decision to come here: why is this the most important thing you can do with your life this year, this month, this minute? The answer is, because here, if your teachers teach and if you learn, you will learn a new way of learning, one that will guide your for all time to come. That's the one point I want to leave with you: demand of your teachers and yourself not merely information but a way to learning that you an use every day for the rest of your life. It is what we professors promise, and sometimes even deliver: the secret of how to learn by discovering things on your own — *learn not by asking but by finding out on your own.*

It is the particularly American way of learning, which is, by discovering things for yourself. We American professors at our best aim at teaching by helping students learn on their own. Our theory of teaching is to tell students, "Don't ask, discover!" The more we tell you, the less you learn. The more you learn, the more we teach, And learning takes place, in a country as practical and as rich in innovation as this country, when you find out for yourself. *Professors are there to guide, to help, to goad, to irritate, to stimulate. Students are there to explore, to inquire, to ask questions, to experiment, to negotiate knowledge.* The ideal teachers, for our students therefore are people like Socrates, Jesus, and Hillel, and what you have to ask of your professors here at Elizabethtown is that they measure themselves by the model of Socrates, Jesus, and Hillel.....

Great teachers don't teach. They help students learn. Students teach themselves. Three of the all time great — Socrates, Jesus, and his Jewish contemporary the sage Hillel — share a dislike of heavyweight speeches. They spoke briefly, painting pictures and telling tales ("parables"), and always raised more questions than they settled.

Socrates was the greatest philosopher of all time, and all he did was walk around the streets and ask people irritating questions. Jesus was certainly the most influential teacher in history, and his longest "lecture" — for instance, the Sermon on the Mount — cannot have filled up an hour of classroom time or a page in a notebook. And Hillel's greatest lesson, in answer to someone who told him to teach the entire Torah while standing on one foot — "What is hateful to yourself, don't do to someone else. That's the whole Torah, all the rest is commentary. Now go study" — directed people to go off and learn on their own.

The great teacher makes a few simple points. The powerful teacher leaves one or two fundamental truths. And the memorable teacher makes the point not by telling but by helping the students discover on their own. Learning takes place through discovery, not when you're told something but when you figure it out for yourself. All a really fine teacher does is make suggestions, point out problems, above all, ask questions, and more questions, and more questions...

Our teaching encourages not only discovery but initiative. Good teaching in our schools leads to risk-taking; good teaching in theirs [the Germans'], to note-taking. Successful professors in our system present learning as answers to important questions; successful professors in their system go over familiar facts and pass their opinion on this and that. They tell people things. We want people to make their own discoveries...

All Socrates did was asking questions; he never really gave any answers, nothing you could memorize and say back on an exam. And, with all due respect, Jesus did not dictate long lectures, so the students could carry home thick notebooks. And Hillel would have lasted about a minute an a half — "Now, go study" — indeed! Our kids would have given Socrates a good time, and I think they would have patience for a teacher who just told them stories, like Jesus, or who advised them that everything he could teach he could tell them by standing on one foot, like Hillel. Now, there's real teaching; taking the risk of telling people what you really think, and why you think it, and what difference it makes.

In this country, with its tradition of pragmatism and experiment, we aim at helping students teach themselves, asking questions to stimulate their own inquiry. We do not indoctrinate; we stimulate. We do not just tell people things; we try to make knowledge important because knowing helps answer urgent questions. The best classes state the problem, for students to find the answer.

It's no accident that in America, many of us teachers demand of our students, "Don't ask, discover!" We have an educational tradition that serves the needs of a society in process, a nation never fully finished, a country in quest, a people of peoples in perpetual search. That is why entire fields of learning are founded here — social science as we know it now, for instance. That explains why new ideas, new sciences, find in this country a ready hearing, a warm welcome.

True, we pay a price for this intellectual restlessness of ours: our kids are better at process than at propositions. They seem to know less; when they need to know, they go and learn. So they spend more time in the laboratory, work harder at writing their own thoughts, do research on their own. But then they spend less time learning what we know, work less hard at fully understanding other people's thoughts, sometimes do research aimed at reinventing the wheel. We've made our choices. For an open society, an always changing economy, a responsible politics of participation and endless negotiation, we need an alert, inventive citizen.

What should you ask of your professors? (1) Don't tell me things; let me find out for myself. (2) But when I need help, give it to me. (3) And when my work is poor, don't tell me it's good. Many professors would rather be liked than be understood; not a few find it easier to indulge the students than teach them. Don't accept from professors compliments when they owe you criticism. And love them when they're tough. Proverbs says, "Rebuke a wise person, and you'll be loved, rebuke a fool and you'll be hated." Show yourselves wise, and you'll get professors who care about what you know.

What should your professors ask of you? (1) Don't ask me to sell you my subject; let me explain it to you. Once you're in the classroom, relevance is a settled question: this is what you want to know; now let me teach it. (2) Don't stop work in the middle of the semester. It's easy to start with enthusiasm, and it's easy to end with commitment. But in the middle of a course, it's hard to sustain your work; the beginning is out of sight, the end and goal and purpose of the course not yet on the horizon. Do your best when the weather looks bleak. (3) Don't sit back and wait to be told things; stay with me and allow the logic of the course to guide us both; join me, think with me. The most remarkable student I've ever taught was a late middle-aged woman who audited a course of mine; after five minutes in each class session of three hours, she would say, "Oh, is this what you mean?" And she would proceed to lay out for me the entire argument that I was beginning to develop. Yes, a remarkable student, but I never walked into class without fearing that I would run out of things to tell people in the first ten minutes. You own your teachers that moment of *trepidation*: make them afraid they'll run out of things to tell you. They won't, of course, but you'll make them work and give them life. The challenge is not in disagreeing or agreeing but in understanding: uncovering the logic and accepting its dictates. That you owe your teachers.

Your imagination is our richest national resource; an open and active mind, our most precious intangible treasure. That's what we try to do at our universities and colleges in this country: teach people to teach themselves, which is what life is all about — during the coming year, and during all the years of your lives and mine.