

Learning to Cast a Shadow in the World

(ICCTA Note: College of DuPage graduate/trustee Dr. Maureen Dunne was the first community college student to earn a Rhodes Scholarship to the University of Oxford.)

I distinctly recall how a College of DuPage professor (whose full name escapes memory) asked us as students to complete a lesson that I will never forget. As quickly as possible and without overthinking the exercise, we were to write down at least one word or phrase that best represented something each of us was NOT.

My first instinct was to scribble the null sign “U+2205 ∅ EMPTY SET”.

I had much inside me that demanded self-expression, but I was still learning how to communicate as I evolved as a person and to do so in a self-disciplined manner. As I would later better come to understand through pursuing humanitarian work abroad, it is nearly impossible to genuinely connect as a ‘we’ without mutual respect and understanding of the uniqueness and diversity of individuals that encompass that shared ‘we’.

The starting point was to venture under the hood, both in terms of self-understanding and empathy for others. COD speech team coaches Marco Benassi and Steve Schroeder (who, sadly, passed away unexpectedly last year but whose teaching style undoubtedly permanently altered the fabric of many lives, including my own), along with honors poetry professor Freda Libman and philosophy professor John Modschiedler, helped me see clearly how effective communication not only entailed precision of language grounded in self-awareness but a commitment to listen acutely with the humility to remain open enough to acknowledge that our first assumptions about “the other” are often wrong.

In the end, my community college journey was about learning how to “show up” – to cast a shadow in the world.

Interestingly, it was often seemingly small acts of encouragement by faculty – words most likely long forgotten by my faculty mentors – that I still remember most vividly. Sometimes it came in the form of a spontaneous comment or two at just the right time. Professors Alice Giordano and Barbara Lemme both commented how my detailed research observations were “like a camera,” and then-Honors Program Coordinator Alice Snelgrove told me the third time we met that I should apply to highly selective universities that value women in science, including Cornell, University of Chicago, and Harvard. When I did not respond immediately as anticipated, she quickly added, “Well, why not you? You got what it takes.”

I learned as much about academic topics as I did about how to unlearn my own preconceived assumptions and implicit biases about myself and about the world. I uncovered ways to be included at the table by taking concrete action steps – however small as a start. And I figured out that the loudest voice in the room is often not the most effective one in the long run. What was essential was the capacity for intellectual honesty – to own one’s decisions, including mistakes, with an unwavering commitment to learning how to become better today than yesterday.

This personal journey continued and deepened as a student at the University of Chicago and beyond, but the seeds were planted during my time at College of DuPage.

Professor Richard Voss's influence on my future became remarkably clear as he invested an extraordinary amount of his time in mentoring me on independent study research projects and clinical internships (I credit his diligent mentorship in sparking my enthusiasm for independent research and with being awarded the Allyn and Bacon Research Award).

Professor Barbara Lemme first inspired my deep passion for developmental psychology and its applications to promoting social good, paving the way for much of my later work.

And Phi Theta Kappa Advisor and Professor John Modschiedler had an indelible impact on me as he believed in me so fervently that it made it nearly impossible to not believe in myself. A University of Chicago alum, he also had a profound influence in my decision to ultimately choose to attend U. of C. myself. I recall feeling an unusual connection to the University of Chicago before I was ever a student there, in part, because of its history in birthing the community college concept. William Rainey Harper, University of Chicago's first President, was instrumental in pioneering a movement that led to the establishment of the first community college in 1901 in the form of Joliet Junior College.

Dan Freedman, a professor at University of Chicago who studied under Abraham Maslow and Gregory Bateson, would later write me a letter of recommendation for the Rhodes Scholarship and implied that I obliterated his own inaccurate assumptions about community college transfer students. He wrote in his letter that my "self-abnegating exterior was misleading" and asked the reader to not confuse my humility for anything other than "a force that would be heard from." While I still cannot articulate precisely what he saw in me that motivated him to write those words, the words themselves remain wedged in my mind as I try to figure it out.

Yet, it was Distinguished Education Professor, Philip W. Jackson, who first suggested I apply for the Rhodes Scholarship. It is unlikely it would have occurred to me otherwise. A community college student himself who later earned a PhD from Columbia University's Teachers College, Professor Jackson told me he was going to be "particularly hard" on me to force my creative expression into a form of disciplined thinking (a learning process that would subsequently continue as a student at Oxford but whose beginnings could be traced back to faculty mentorship at College of DuPage). He took it so seriously that he would often ask me to volunteer to rewrite term papers I had already received an "A+" on in his prior classes. We would later spend many hours together teasing apart every word of those revised essays in conversation over coffee at The Medici.

The best teachers -- whether at College of DuPage, University of Chicago, or Oxford -- were always the ones that forced me to venture outside of my comfort zone and fundamentally question who I was.

It is an exercise that I would return to repeatedly at key life junctures, as the foundational lessons I thought I had already mastered would be challenged and tested again and again with periods of extraordinary adversity (including losing four close family members within a four-year period). At times, I lost my way, only to seemingly arrive back at the same starting and ending points, but without the structures and supports that helped me arrive there in the first place. It was painstakingly hard. There are few things more humbling than repeatedly losing or nearly losing everything you cherish in the world, necessitating a return to "U+2205 ∅ EMPTY SET" to sketch back new pieces of meaningful investment.

With each new loss that redefined reality as I knew it, my capacity for empathy and understanding also intensified to broaden my own perception of “we” to transcend beyond discrete groups and something more akin to what my former professor, Martin E. Marty (Fairfax M. Cone Distinguished Service Professor Emeritus, University of Chicago Divinity School) taught me to conceptualize as an “association of associations.” A simple conversation, grounded in intellectual honesty and vulnerability, had the power to transverse the “they” into a “we.” I was simultaneously learning to fall in love with the very nature of innovation itself and developed a fascination with building something from nothing, inevitably driving me toward technology and entrepreneurship.

In important respects, I would repeatedly become, over and over again, that same student at College of DuPage, but equipped with new tools and a deepening conviction that the only path toward truly becoming NOT “U+2205 ∅ EMPTY SET” was the capacity to invest meaningfully in activities and people outside of myself.

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