

The Undergraduate Genius

A keynote address by Dr. Leonard Ray Teel to the
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First of all, let me just say for the record that It is truly an honor to be here with this great class of undergraduates and the abundant evidence of your outstanding academic scholarship. As I traveled among all these posters in the exhibition, I knew sadly that I and my colleagues at this University could *not* take full credit for all this intellectual output. *Some* of it will have to go you. The truth is, the most credit we could take is that we conducted, sort of like a conductor among musicians. You were the ones who, in the end, produced the music.

Now my talk today is titled "The Undergraduate Genius," and I will get around to that. But let me say, also for the record, I am here today because of my students. They have responded splendidly to my conducting. So many have written excellent history, presented their work at conferences around the country and overseas, published in a referred journal, and returned to the my classroom to help mentor the next classes of scholars. They are lifetime members of the association we founded, The Journalism History Society. I couldn't be prouder of them. And I do believe we succeeded mainly because we were able, together, to awaken the qualities of genius.

Definitions and descriptions of genius vary greatly, but there is some agreement on at least two identifiable qualities. One quality is a greater aptitude for *patience* and perseverance. "Genius does what it must," wrote an English dramatist. And there is agreement that genius sees things in an *unhabitual* way: The American poet Ezra Pound asserted that genius envisions 10 ideas when the merely talented person sees two and the ordinary person only one. The great American philosopher, Ralph Waldo Emerson, characterized genius by yet another trait, that of *self-reliance*.

Like almost everything in life, this awakening process starts slowly, one step at a time. On the first day of class we want to know what you hope to learn and what you want to do for a living. Those are fairly important questions to ask in *any* course. In teaching the History of News Media, my sincerest hope is to awaken the genius in each student by appealing to two functions: First, I want the brain to recognize that human history is related to memory. In ancient times, the Greeks related memory in a blood line to history. Among the Greek Gods, Zeus and Mnemosyne [Her name means Memory] were the *parents* of the muse of History. Her name was Clio [pronounced Clyo or Cleeo], and today she is *still* our muse, and you can see her -- a rendering of her here today -- on the cover of our academic journal, the *Atlanta Review of Journalism History*.

Then, secondly, I seek to connect that relationship of memory and history to some personal interest of the student, one that is heartfelt. In this way, scholar and subject meet. When we're successful, we have taken steps toward having a synergy of mind and heart. On this subject, one of the great American historians we read for inspiration is Barbara Tuchman. In

her Phi Beta Kappa address to Radcliffe College students 45 years ago, she stated that, "It is this quality of being in love with your subject that is indispensable for writing good history."

Now, finding the meeting place between mind and heart *does* take time. How much time? It depends on a lot of factors. But I have witnessed that certain teaching techniques can speed up this process.

One accelerator is for the teacher to provide a foundation and structure for serious scholarship. This is unlike high school where the teacher of history was usually specialized in some sport, and his or her first name was usually "Coach." Many of my students still remember their history coaches. Actually the coaches were often quite good at storytelling. My own history teacher, Chuck Wychunas. He coached basketball. I *may have* learned a lot in that class, but the main thing I remember is his spellbinding narrative. In World War II, he survived one of the most deadly prisoner of war experiences. Early in the war he was among the soldiers captured by the Japanese Army in the Philippine Islands. They were forced to walk mile after mile on what became known as the Bataan Death March. Coach Wychunas was not trained to teach history; but he WAS history. He was what historians sometimes "walking history" or "history on the hoof."

In helping undergraduates conceptualize historical research, we find it helpful to use comparisons with other professions: detective work and archaeology. Any undergraduate understands what a detective does, and the historian is very much a detective. There are clues to follow and sources to find and discoveries to make and cases to solve. Then, also, historians digging into the past are likewise related metaphorically to archaeologists. It is inspiring to keep in mind Heinrich Schliemann, who in 1873 dug at the right spot and made one of the most famous archaeological discoveries – the ancient city of Troy. There is one other tantalizing metaphor that applies to historical studies. In all this detective work and digging, there is the likelihood of becoming so immersed in the subject that one has the sensation, if not the reality, of traveling back in time. Novelists and Hollywood have made time travel seem totally fictional, as in "The Time Machine" and "Back to the Future." But our students who have spent hours reading archival newspapers just as they were read by others long ago have testified that in reading them they lost track of time, not just minutes, but hours.

In writing history, we require such study and always hope to find something new. Discovery of new sources in the distant past assures that the historian is not simply telling us what we already know, but is contributing something new to consider.

I didn't always know the secret to achieving originality. In fact it bothered me a lot when I was just beginning my formal studies as a youngster in the first grade. Our first grade class was joined together the advanced second graders whenever the traveling art teacher came to our school. She instructed us to try to be "original." I was six years old. What's *original*? And, how do you *try* to be original?

In those art classes, I remember developing a habit of checking out what the more advanced second graders were doing to see how *they* were being original, or trying to be. I didn't know it then but I know now, that I was actually on the right track. Today, in the academy here, we call that process checking out of what has already been written "a review of the literature." In the writing of history we normally study what has already been written so we know when we are discovering something that is truly original.

This is one way the qualities of genius appear in academic work. Our students time and time again discover, if not Troy, something else original, either new “hot facts” or a new way of perceiving the past. Sometimes their detective work uncovers fascinating stories previously overlooked in old newspapers. Their studies of American journalism have taken them back frequently to revive the events and issues that excited and troubled people in the last two hundred years.

One prize-winning essay was written by Ron Moses, who was fascinated with politics and the fact that, in 1920, the American Socialist Party candidate for president, Eugene V. Debs, campaigned from his prison cell in the U.S. Penitentiary in Atlanta. Ron titled his paper "The Convict Candidate" and presented it at a symposium of the American Journalism Historians Association.

Katie Hawkins demonstrated the same qualities in her study of crime and punishment. She took an interest in one of the 20th century's most sensational murder trials and how journalists reported it week after week to their eager readers. It was “The Crime of the Century” -- the murder of the infant son of the popular hero Charles Lindbergh, the first aviator to make a solo flight across the Atlantic Ocean to France. On trial was a German immigrant named Bruno Hauptmann. Katie's research revealed a press bias against the defendant.

Kimberly G. Walker focused on the anti-slavery movement. She reexamined how the most famous black abolitionist, the escaped slave Frederick Douglass, used his newspapers, speeches, and religion in the cause of freedom for African-Americans. She titled her paper: "Broken Shackles." Kimberly's scholarship was grounded in that combination of passion and professionalism; her research was sound and her writing was fluent. At the annual symposium on the 19th century press, held at the University of Tennessee in Chattanooga, Kimberly was surprised to find herself on the same program with faculty and graduate students at the M.A. and Ph.D. levels. She was even more surprised to win the prize for "Top Student Paper." [You can find her essay here in Volume 5 of the *Atlanta Review of Journalism History*.]

One more exemplar of undergraduate achievement is Lisa Varisco Daigle. Lisa became interested in the Civil War, then narrowed her focus to the Confederacy and finally to one newspaper reporter, Samuel Chester Reid Jr. She followed Mr. Reid's paper trail as he wrote stories throughout the whole war, swinging from one Southern newspaper to another, to seven in all. You can read her piece in our *Atlanta Review*, volume 2. But Lisa's undergraduate career does not end there. That year she was the student who helped found -- and name -- our Journalism History Society and she served as its first president and was involved with launching our *Atlanta Review*. Like some others, she went on to graduate studies in history. The Department of Communication awarded her a graduate fellowship and she earned her Master's Degree, writing her thesis about the ethics of press coverage of women accused of murder. Then Lisa went on to study for her Ph.D. at the University of Alabama with one of the nation's leading media historians, Wm. David Sloan.

These were undergraduates who helped me confirm the effectiveness of some innovations in teaching. My hypothesis was then -- and still is -- that the qualities of genius are many and universal and that the objective is to bring them out, or coax them out into the light. After more than a dozen years and hundreds of examples, we have sufficient evidence that the emergence of genius can be induced. *That it does happen*. And even more remarkable: Once

the students discover the qualities of genius within, they cannot forget them. Genius can be ignored, and it can be sidetracked, and it can be distracted, and it can be beguiled, but it cannot be forgotten. It stays with you. It is a memory that lasts.

Over time, we developed a step by step process for coaxing out genius to help make the writing of an historical essay seem easier. The first step is so gentle, it almost seems like no trouble at all. By the fifth step the student can be finished and turning in a 25-page paper that is surprising for its research, content, and clarity.

That first critical step is the choosing of a topic within the first two weeks. I require this because I can recall my own sad experience with topic choosing. In the spring of my senior year, in a course on modern European history, I was allowed to procrastinate so long that I had only a week to write a term paper. For some reason now forgotten I decided to focus on the political struggles in Greece at the end of World War II. An iron rule is that the muse of history, Clio, will not be rushed; Genius, too, does not respond so well to frenzy. No matter what I could do in one week, the paper was destined to be uneven. Its evidence was biased. Its conclusions off-balance. Because I didn't check the political agendas of my sources, the politics were, unintentionally, tilted to the radical left. I remember the professor's puzzled curiosity, and his direct question, "Why did you quote only Communists?" So, now, here at Georgia State my students take the first step of choosing a topic by the second week of class so we can take the next step of working with the librarians to identify sources – especially primary sources -- which are newspapers, magazines, diaries, letters and other documents from the chosen time period.

Now begins the writing. By mid-semester, the third step is a six-page sample; the fourth step is the rough draft; and the fifth is the final paper. At each point, we help shape the paper with critiques and mentoring. The mentoring comes also from students who have excelled in the course in previous semesters and now, as lifetime members of the Journalism History Society, come back to help the new group of scholars. Along the way, we hope to see the emergence of genius.

When we think of genius, it is natural to relate it to specific persons, to gifted ones, or to the famous. But in the democratic spirit of America, it was also natural that some of our deeper minds came to believe that the qualities of genius were not scarce, but plentiful, not exclusive to the Shakespeares and the Einsteins, but innate, waiting to be awakened and trained, frequently depending on certain conditions.

In closing, I will leave you with another thought from the philosopher, Ralph Waldo Emerson, who asserted the close relationship between genius and self-reliance. He noted that men without self-reliance repeatedly discounted the value of their own ideas until they heard others expressing them. His genius would have self-reliance "to believe in your own thought, to believe what is true for you in your private heart, is true for all men."

Thank you.