

Alpha Sigma Nu Induction
Dave Crawford
Sunday, October 25, 2009

Thank you all for inviting me to talk today. It is a great honor to be here, a genuinely humbling invitation. There are so many excellent teachers at Fairfield University, so many colleagues of mine have creative ways of conveying so many subjects, that to be chosen as your Alpha Sigma Nu "Teacher of the Year" is more than a little weird. As a social scientist, I have to question your methods. Evidently you have some idea of what good teaching is or should be, and somehow I have accidentally stumbled upon it. I know many of you have been in classes with me, and as I look out on your bemused faces I know that you are thinking what I am: how in the world did this happen? How did Crawford, of all people, end up making a speech like this? It is a mysterious world, my young friends, and I hope to deepen and complicate that mystery in my remarks today, but not so much that makes your parents regret paying your tuition.

I want to start by saying that I love teaching. It is the best job in the world, better than bartending in a tropical paradise, better than surfing professionally. It's better than hot fudge Sundays, my little girl singing in the Christmas pageant, better than my team winning the basketball championships (which I expect again this year). Teaching is better than *beer*, I think, and those of you who know me realize what a profound admission this is. I love teaching. I would do it for nothing, just for the fun of it. The fact that Father Von Arx sends me a paycheck every two weeks is a lucky bonus, though my wife suggested that here I insert a line to say that my family really appreciates the checks no matter how much fun I have when I am supposed to be "at work." If I were not teaching I'm sure I would be in prison, or maybe an asylum. Fairfield is so much better an institution than those sorts of places that I can't tell you how blessed I feel to be here rather than there.

How did I come to this profession, to this place, you may ask? What sort of intellectual and spiritual journey leads one to become a teacher? Well, it all starts with a warm and supportive family. When I was seventeen and beginning to take college classes, my mother, like your mothers, probably, asked what I wanted to "do" with my education. I had no idea that an education was anything one would "do" something with, so as I looked back blankly at her she leapt in with the advice, "For God's sake don't be a teacher." If this seems harsh, you should understand that my father's side of the family is replete with teachers and my mother hates all of them. In truth, some of

them are pretty reprehensible people and I can't really blame my mother for associating teaching with pathological behavior. I'm sure she sensed the seeds of pathology in me (indeed, at that age they were sprouting from every pore) and in her heart I think she believed that somehow teaching would only make things worse.

So, I took her advice and pursued many other promising careers that befit a young man of my intelligence and ambition. I started with the basics, as a hunter-gatherer, just like our ancestors many thousands of years ago. I had a spear gun and a pair of shorts and a tent that I set up in the jungle on a Caribbean island. I would spend eight hours a day swimming around a beautiful bay shooting anything that moved underwater. I did not even know what some of these creatures were, but at the end of the day I would string them up and present them to the locals. They would pick out the edible specimens, and trade me rice and bananas for them. It was a wonderful life, but I lost a lot of weight. Sea creatures are slimming. Eventually I had no more calories to bargain away and I was practically called to change careers.

As you might guess, I next tried milking cows in Quebec. As natural as this seems, it was really mostly because the only ticket I could find to the continent of North America happened to land in Montreal. Milking cows is not as much fun as it looks, and certainly not as fun as shooting lobsters and fish. Cows are milked early in the morning, earlier than fish are even awake. Sometimes the cows don't stand still to be milked and they really are much larger than they appear on TV.

I branched out from milking cows to gelding cattle, and for those of you who have spent your lives in suburbia, "gelding" means depriving the boy cattle of the means to be daddies. This is gruesome business, and though I did display some aptitude for catching the little guys and pinning them against the fence, I was not emotionally robust enough for this line of work. I tended to feel really sorry for my dewy eyed victims, too, and I will never forget the sad "moo" that they would emit when we managed to get the iron emasculating contraption around their tender little bull-bits. I was a vegetarian for a long time after this job.

So, having saved some of the \$50 a week (Canadian) that I made on the farm, I bought a VW bus for \$200 and drove it to California, where I moved on to the porch of my brother's single-wide mobile home parked next to a sewage treatment plant. Appropriately enough, I became a broker, which in my case meant that I bought a tie to wear to work and sold money to banks. A few years ago you might have thought that selling money to banks could not possibly be a job, but if the present economic crisis has taught us anything, it's

that capitalists are endlessly creative. We can make a job out of just about anything. My particular specialty was Texas banks, and I would get on the phone, feign a Texas accent, and try to get Big Jim Holler up in Waco to accept five million dollars in \$100,000 chunks and then re-invest a million of it in dubious ten year certificates of deposit that would pay my company vast dividends.

Yes, I am personally responsible for the Savings and Loan Crisis that preceded the present economic meltdown. My only excuse is that I had no idea that what we were doing should have been illegal. It was all above-board thanks to generous Reagan-era deregulation, and I thank that administration for teaching me the difference between legal and ethical behavior. I had a good long stint at this –nine weeks, I think—and then I retired to pursue what I understood as my true calling: poetry.

I'm sure many of you want to be professional poets, and I wish you good luck. For me this career was short lived, but intense. It led me to Paris (where else would a poet go?) where I walked through fountains at midnight with beautiful women and felt lots of angst and wrote about it. This eventually left me broke and scrounging for leftover croissants in trash of the Marrakech airport, but I can't go into all the details of this transition. At age 24 and broke again I had to go back on the job market, and back to the porch of my brother's single-wide mobile home. Along the way I was rejected for a job in a car wash. This prompted some really serious inward reflection about having a "career" and the significance of finding a calling that feels right.

Naturally, these deep inward reflections, and my resume of experiences, lead me to a position dressing up as a 19th century sailor. I was employed to say things like "avast" and "argh" on a replica of the brig Richard Henry Dana sailed upon in his famous "Two Years Before the Mast." The gelding of cattle and bilking of taxpayers prepares you for little else, as I'm sure you would agree. The program was kind of interesting. Schoolchildren, usually fifth-graders, would come down and mill about the parking lot where the good brig Pilgrim was moored. A putative "first mate" would muster them, bring them aboard, and for the next 18 hours we would all pretend that it was the early 19th century. There were four characters: a kindly but stern captain, a psychopathic first mate, a jolly cook, and an alcoholic miscreant of a second mate, who the first mate would ruthlessly abuse as a lesson to the little sailors. I played all the roles, but was better at some than others. You can guess which ones. I once puked and dropped unconscious in the middle of a program in what stands today as the most authentic second mate performance in the program's history. I was "second mate" of the year.

So, you see, I ended up teaching. I did not realize I was teaching there on the brig Pilgrim, but I was. Our goal was to recreate the 19th century, to bring history alive, to make it visceral. And I *loved* that job. While my previous record for employment had been nine weeks (and then only because I was making ridiculous amounts of money for talking like John Wayne), I stayed on talking pirate with the Pilgrim program for four long years. That's a long time to play dress up. I learned that the most satisfying thing for me, that my calling, if you want to call it that, is to try and bring alternative realities alive, to try and make other ways of being sensible to an audience. Practically, however, this educational institution, like too many educational institutions, was run by PhDs. I have a deeply irrational aversion to being told what to do by PhDs and the only way to avoid this if you are in the education business is to get a PhD to fight back. It is probably perverse to get a PhD because you hate PhDs, but that's what I did next. I went to graduate school.

I chose anthropology by a process of elimination. I had definitively proven that I was bad at a virtually every other discipline. I could not remember the dates for history, could not write grammatically proper sentences for English, could not do the statistics for sociology. Since I had never taken a single course in anthropology, I had never failed at it. It was beautifully unknown, entirely subject to my imagining what it was all about. From what I gleaned in a few trips to the public library, cultural anthropology meant traveling to unusual places (I was good at that) and talking to unusual people (I was good at that too). I read a book that said, "When the going gets weird, the weird turn pro." I had found my profession. I would turn pro.

So there I was at the University of California, taking my first anthropology course as a 29 year-old. As it happened, I was also teaching this class. I had prepared by taking a cocker spaniel and a French woman to the tip of Baja California, Mexico, in a Honda Civic. Waldo, Evelyn and I spent months camped on the beach, surfing and reading books about anthropology, so upon return I was well prepared to give lectures on cross cousin marriage and matrilineal kinship systems, swidden agriculture and the difference between structuralism, functionalism, and structural functionalism. I know many of you have deeply enjoyed my lectures on these subjects.

What does this all mean for you? I realize that I may be frightening your parents with all this seeming aimlessness, and an important role of this talk is to inspire you. Potentially there are some in this audience who are not yet inspired by my personal story, my tortuous revelation of self-understanding and the final discovery of what I now am sure is my calling. I will end by being explicit about what lessons might be drawn from my weird life so far.

First, do not let anybody tell you that teaching is not a worthwhile profession, even your mother. Teaching is the best. Grading is as much fun as picking asparagus, but teaching is wonderful and while I teach every day I only grade sometimes. Because I am a teacher, I am blessed to talk to bright young people every day. Every day I learn things from them, and each year I am made young again by a new group of students who bring the contemporary world into my classroom and into my life. I am not a big fan of the contemporary world in general, and without you students I would be growing old significantly faster than I already am. If you feel called to be a teacher, I would urge you to follow that calling

Second, be patient. I know the economy is bad. I know that you are all burning with desire to make your mark on the world, to put your education to work to make the world a better place. This is great. But it also takes time. While you push yourselves –and I know that you push yourselves, I have had you in class—I would urge you to look around. This may involve smelling the roses along the way, or it may involve taking some pretty substantial detours to your final destination. Life is long and you are young. Do what seems right and be open and ready for the next right thing. It may take you in another direction. There might be many twists and turns along the way, but you should never assume that getting lost is a waste of time. As Tom Robbins once wrote, “unusual travel suggestions are dancing lessons from God.” You should all be listening for the music to your own particular dance, and you should never worry if your dance looks a bit silly to the rest of the world.

Finally, there are as many right ways to be and teach as there are people and teachers in the world. I am very thankful that you’ve brought me here today, but I would ask that you spread the wealth. I still write notes to my third grade teacher, Ms. Yapple, and if I could find Mr. Boxx, from seventh grade, I would write him too. (He taught us that the only sure sign of intelligence is a sense of humor.) I still keep in contact with the undergraduate professors who helped me become who I am, professors who pushed me to work hard, who questioned what I thought was right and obvious, and who taught me to question myself and the world around me. I still have the essays I wrote in their classes, and I still read them over every once in a while. There is a certain A- that I have been contesting for twenty-two years.

You should never be embarrassed to tell someone that she or he made a difference in your life –even, or perhaps especially—your parents, your siblings, the people closest to you. My mother –the one who told me not to be

a teacher—also told me that if she had her life to do over, she would be an anthropologist. And so I am.

Ultimately, we are all teachers. We humans distinguish ourselves as a species in the way we pass knowledge across generations. We do not have to make mistakes again and again, like wombats or wildebeests. We teach each other, protect our young, invest them with culture and language and send them off to teach their own young. We each contribute to a great chain of human being, a vast enterprise stretching across millennia where we each try and improve the human condition a little bit in our own special way. I hope that we at Fairfield University have played a role in this, have helped you to discover how you are special and how your particular gifts can contribute to this great human enterprise. The future is yours. It does not look unproblematic, or even very positive. But I slouch towards my own demise confident that your generation, the young people in this room, will meet the profound challenges of the 21st century. Good luck. And thank you for taking on the job.