

KEYNOTE ADDRESS FROM THE NEW STUDENT CONVOCATION  
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On behalf of the faculty I welcome you to the University of Toledo. I have been asked to say a few words about what the faculty will expect of you as new college students, but first I would like to mention a few things you can expect of the faculty.

Let me introduce us to you with a moment of mind-numbing pedantry. We are educators. The word's root is the Latin "ducere"—to lead—the same root we find in "seduce"—lead astray—"reduce"—lead back—and "induce"—lead into. The "e" in education means "out of." As educators, we lead away from or "out of." We're not leading you towards anything; rather we hope to lead you away from preconceptions, unexamined premises, from, in traditional terms, the mists and fogs of ignorance. Often you will find that we educators don't quite know where we're headed, either, at least in terms of simple answers to life's hardest questions. It's the process that counts.

This, of course, doesn't mean that we don't know what we're doing. We're smart and we know our stuff. You may have read about the problem of "brain drain" in Ohio and in our region in particular. The University of Toledo is a powerful force reversing this impetus. Your faculty is drawn here from all over the world, with the best training, stellar qualifications, and intense dedication to our profession.

You can expect us, then, to be thoroughly professional in our interactions with you and with one another. "Dignity" and "respect" are themes that you have heard widely emphasized during your orientation experience, and are values that we all uphold and endorse.

You can expect transparent and straightforward communication with us. In almost every course you take, you'll be presented with a syllabus that outlines the requirements and schedule for the class. It will make plain the course objectives, required readings, grading methods and procedures.

Don't lose it. Many faculty members, like me, will post the syllabus on the course's website, so you can't lose it. Some of my colleagues actually give quizzes on the contents of the syllabus, so make sure you know it well.

You can expect us to be available for your questions and concerns. We all have regularly scheduled office hours when you can meet with us outside of class, and we are pledged to keep those hours available for you and to schedule meetings with you outside those hours when it's mutually convenient.

You can expect us to want you to succeed. It gives us no pleasure to fail students, so don't imagine that it does. If you're struggling, we're there to help. Don't be afraid to seek us out. If your problems overwhelm your academic life, the University has resources, like the Counseling Center, ready to help.

What do we expect of you? Again, the themes of "dignity" and "respect" resound. We want you to take our mutual enterprise as seriously as we do.

That means: Do your work the best you can. Don't cheat. Go to class. Whether you are taking a class in a traditional classroom setting or online or through some combination of the two, the easiest way for you to fall by the wayside is to miss classes, and, conversely, the easiest way for you to succeed is to be always present, always prepared, always engaged.

Now that I have played the advisor, I want to spend the rest of my time doing what I like doing: talking about literature.

There's a critical moment in Ron Currie, Jr.'s novel, *Everything Matters*, right near the end of Part One. Junior Thibodeaux, the central character, decides to tell his girlfriend Amy what he knows. He hopes that sharing this information with her will help her to understand the moments when, as he says, he goes "all cockeyed . . . just standing there like Lot's wife" and embarrasses her in public. "On June 15, 2010, at 3:44 PM Eastern Standard Time. A comet from the Kuiper Belt will hit the Earth with the explosive energy of 283,824,000 Hiroshima bombs. Which will be important for a number of reasons, including that here in New England it will be ruining a postcard summer day" (p. 89). This information does not come as a surprise to the reader, who learned it on page 8 from the voices that Junior has begun hearing even while in the womb. Amy takes this badly, of course, and when Junior explains to her that he is not crazy she wisely observes, "I'm sure it's very real to you. Which is the part that makes you crazy, see?"

There's a critical moment in the middle of the third act of Shakespeare's play, *Hamlet*, when Hamlet is confronting his mother with his special knowledge of the circumstances of his father's death. He gets carried away, threatens her with violence, and stabs his girlfriend's father, Polonius, through a wall-hanging. His special source of information, a ghost in the form of his late father, appears and urges him to calm down. Gertrude, his

mother, cannot see this spirit guide—"Alas, he's mad," she mutters to herself as Hamlet interrupts his tirade. "How is't with you, lady?" Hamlet asks with a kind of comic politeness; "Alas, how is't with you?" she cries.

*Everything Matters* and *Hamlet* remind me of each other because in each case the young male protagonist receives a terrible secret from a mysterious source: in Junior's case, the voices appear to be extraterrestrial and in Hamlet's the Ghost emerges from the supernatural. (It is probably unnecessary to point out that in the 16<sup>th</sup> century when *Hamlet* was written extraterrestrial and supernatural would have been pretty much the same.) In both cases, it is the hero's secret that causes his loved ones to think he is insane, either because he conveys the secret, as Junior does, or because he cannot, like Hamlet.

The problem for Junior is complicated in that Amy challenges him to reveal a secret about herself that he can only know if he is not insane and if the voices who tell him secrets are in fact not delusions. He knows what her secret is, but it is a secret so devastating that he simply cannot utter it. She breaks up with him, and his life sinks to a low point as he wallows in booze and drugs in his brother's fancy apartment in Chicago (his brother is a Chicago Cub).

Entrusted with terrible knowledge, Junior and Hamlet both have to engage the same big issue: "Does anything I do matter?" as the voices put it while Junior is still an infant. Hamlet puts the question differently, and famously, as "To be or not to be." Each work offers an answer that is at once profound and banal: *Everything Matters* in its title, Hamlet intoning "Let be" just before the fatal duel.

Now, bearing in mind that *Everything Matters* is the book that you all will have read for "First Read," and that your grasp of *Hamlet* may be sketchy at best, I'm going to focus on some of the issues raised by Currie's novel. The chief irony of the work is that the apocalyptic truth that Junior knows is of course not true at all: more properly, it's counter-factual. We all know that a comet did not collide with the Earth on June 15, 2010. So Junior's truth is not a historical truth. What complicates the issue, and makes the novel counter-factual rather than just fiction, is the abundance throughout of historical detail. The voices, for example, refer to the comet as the "Destroyer of Worlds." The phrase reaches out from the novel to Robert Oppenheimer's famous remarks after the successful test of the atomic bomb. "We knew the world would not be the same." Oppenheimer said in a documentary entitled "The Decision to Drop the Bomb" (1965). "Few people laughed, few people cried, most people were silent. I remembered the line from the Hindu scripture, the *Bhagavad-Gita*. Vishnu is trying to persuade the Prince that he should do his duty and to impress him takes on his multi-armed form and says, "Now I am become Death, the destroyer of worlds." I suppose we all thought that, one way or another." Surfing the

channels of the cable TV, Junior as a little boy stumbles upon “stock footage of nuclear weapons tests in Nevada more than thirty years ago incorporated into a feature on the French seer Nostradamus.” “You recognize this as the Destroyer of Worlds, which until now you understood only in the abstract. Here it is made concrete,” say the voices (p 32). Junior collapses, Rodney almost asphyxiates himself choking on gum, and both boys are rushed to the emergency room, where the interns diagnose Rodney’s cocaine addiction but with regard to Junior their “tests disclose nothing, because no test has yet been invented that can reveal a patient is suffering from the soul-dread caused by the knowledge of the impending end of all existence.”

It’s not just the reference to Oppenheimer that grounds Currie’s novel in history. Ted Williams shows up to give Rodney batting tips, and Junior’s father, John Senior, gets into a fistfight with Chicago Cubs manager Dallas Green. Junior and Amy’s teacher, in their special gifted and talented class, not only dreams of being the first teacher in space but actually competes with Christa McAuliffe, who historically did win that competition. When the class watches the Challenger disaster unfold on a little television at the school, Mrs. Harris, the teacher, thinks, “*That should have been me.*”

With biblical images of devastation and destruction—remember Junior describes himself as standing like “Lot’s wife”—who was turned into a pillar of salt when she gazed at the flaming ruins of Sodom and Gomorrah—and with historical references to the atomic bomb tests, to Hiroshima, and to napalm and Vietnam and to the Challenger, the novel engulfs Junior in “soul-dread.” At his lowest point, though—after he has helped a disabled psychopath blow himself up in the Social Security Administration building in Chicago—another counter-factual reality sets in.

A mysterious cadre of government officials who apparently also know about the approaching comet kidnap Junior, run him through rigorous rehab, and set him to work on an Alcubierre drive to save the population of the planet. An Alcubierre drive is a mathematical model of a warp drive, a machine that could, possibly, go faster than the speed of light. It is a staple of science fiction, the principle, for example, behind the warp drive of the Starship Enterprise. The plan is to emigrate people to a safe planet before the comet strikes. Junior works on this plan—clearly choosing to do something constructive with his special knowledge now, rather than to drink himself to oblivion. He learns that his father is dying of cancer, and, again, highly motivated, Junior almost kills himself working in the lab to find a cure for cancer. The two projects are symmetrical: a plan to save not all of humanity but at least some; a cure for cancer, not all cancers, but at least the particular kind his father suffers.

When neither plan works out quite as Junior had hoped, the novel takes on odd turn. The voices have been counting down to the final impact of the

comet, beginning at 97, before Junior is born, to 9, when Junior awaits the blast atop Mount Katahdin in Maine. At this moment, the voices suddenly declare what science fiction readers will immediately recognize as Hugh Everett's "Many Worlds Theory." "Which to put it very simply," the voices say, "means that an infinite number of variations on this world exist concurrently, complete with an infinite number of variations of you. Right now, for example, at a distance of 26 to the 244<sup>th</sup> power meters away from you, there is another you. .... And so on, ad infinitum." "Pick a self," say the voices, and they restart the countdown at 55.

I'm not going to give the ending away because there really isn't an ending. Yes, we finally get to One, but both the counter-factual premise and the Many Worlds Theory undercut any notion of finality to that One. What remains is a problem for us, the readers. Junior may be given the unique opportunity to "pick a self"; the novel forces us to pick a Junior and, in consequence, to choose the kind of universe in which Junior will live and die. The creakiness of the sci-fi devices—the Alcubierre drive, the Many Worlds Theory—and the multiple narrative voices emphasize how fragmented and provisional the whole enterprise is. By contrast, Hamlet has only one universe to contend with; it's a complicated and mysterious one, but, as he says, "There's a divinity that shapes our ends, rough-hew 'em how we will."

What has all this to do with my advising preamble and my pedantic exploration of the word "educator"? Surely some of you will have noticed that the voices in *Everything Matters* function like educators, asking Junior tough questions, offering and withholding guidance, allowing him to make his own mistakes. It's a model of process, a process of leading out: towards what? Pick a self: but while you're doing that, go to class.