

A Lesson from a Cane Rat – *Delivered by Jack Jensen Award Winner
Harvey Pine, Assistant Professor of Environmental Studies at Colby-Sawyer
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Trustees, distinguished guests, President Galligan, colleagues and graduates. It is an honor to stand before you and to share some thoughts and reflections with you all on this important day. In a few moments you, the graduates, will cross the stage and receive your hard-earned degrees and begin the next phase of your lives. This is a time to relish in your achievements and hopes, as well as a time to reflect on your time here at Colby-Sawyer College. As you are set to embark on a new journey, I would like to share with you some parting words.

The basis for these words, or speech, actually started out as part of a science seminar I gave a few years ago. Some of you may have been there. What I tried to accomplish during that seminar was to offer a glimpse into the Awe of Science. To explain that science is awesome because, at its core, science is simple and effective. It simply builds knowledge through observation, experience and/or experimentation, then repeats. A process is built upon the theories of knowledge developed and debated by philosophers throughout time. This includes Persian philosopher Avicenna, who is attributed with the following statements: “The human intellect at birth is rather like a *tabula rasa* (a blank slate), a pure potentiality that is actualized through education.” He continues, “Knowledge is attained through empirical familiarity with objects in this world from which one abstracts universal concepts.” Essentially, that we acquire knowledge through our experiences. Indeed this has been the case for many of our revered scientists: Charles Darwin, Marie Curie, Alfred Wegener ... but in reality, it is no different for you or I in our daily lives.

Empirical familiarity, empiricism and experimentation are not exclusive to science and philosophy, they are universal. Each and every one of you is a testament to this. From the time of your convocation through to this very moment, you have acquired knowledge through your experiences, interactions and observations here at Colby-Sawyer. Knowledge you have

gained not only in the classroom, but also through your experiences living within the Colby-Sawyer community.

Now, you have been a part of the Colby-Sawyer community for four years, some more, some less. Regardless of when you came, you all have become a part of this community, and I have no doubt that you have learned a lot about yourself, your peers, the faculty, staff and administration throughout your time. A lot of what you have learned has come from these interactions. I will recall a few examples.

I will start with a situation I believe many of you can relate to, and it begins with an interaction with one of you sitting before me now. This past fall after Thanksgiving break, I was greeted by a dear student in my geology class, in typical informal manner (I think there was a “Yo” in the greeting somewhere). The student went on to tell me about his buddies who were taking similar geology classes at other institutions and how they were considered easy or “joke” classes – they rarely needed to attend in order to succeed. The student was essentially disappointed that this was not the case in our geology class and other classes on campus. While I didn’t have time to engage in a conversation about this at the time, I thought about it. Since I wasn’t able to share my thoughts with the student at that moment, I will share them with you now.

My main thought was that you should be happy that your classes here are not a joke. Appreciate the fact that your absence goes noticed and that your efforts are rewarded, or that a lack of effort is paired with consequences. Be happy that rigor is the norm in your classes and that merely showing up from time to time was not acceptable. Appreciate the fact that with this comes understanding and caring for each student and their learning. And know that the outcome of this is a greater acquisition of knowledge and further preparation for life outside of college.

I believe many of you can relate to this student’s remarks and sentiments. While some of your peers may have hid in large lecture halls or taken classes that may have lacked rigor, you could not hide. You knew that when

you came into class you were expected to be prepared and engaged; not doing so had consequences not only for your grade, but your learning as well. Don't begrudge this, but take pride in this. Though it was tough, know that you worked through your classes, earned your grade and learned a great deal. Part of this is what makes the person you looked at in the mirror this morning different than the one that stepped onto campus years ago.

Now, it should not be surprising that you learned something in the classroom, in fact you and your parents have demanded it. So let us look outside of the classroom. Let us look at campus life. Campus life is full of fun and provides for a rich social life. It is part of the college experience. No doubt I still recall my experiences as an undergrad some years ago. Sometimes this fun can get a little out of control or little too boisterous. When this happened who showed up? The police? No (well occasionally)... More often, if the situation was beyond your residential director, it was Campus Safety that showed up. It was someone you knew: Sean Williamson, Tom Bates or another officer. People who know who you are, know your background, circumstances and people who are invested in your success. They did not let you or others off the hook, but handled situations with care and concern. Furthermore, you also knew that you would see them the next day and daily afterwards as you made your way through campus. Like in the classroom, you couldn't hide, you were not anonymous. You were cared for and corrected at times, and most importantly, you were always accountable. These experiences may not have always been happy ones, but they were important and you have acquired knowledge through them.

Let us think about your food... and not just chicken nugget day. Where did it come from? This is a theme that is often brought up on campus as we strive to be more sustainable, more resilient. You may have explored the topic of food in your Pathway seminars, a permaculture class, a sugaring class or one of your other courses. You learned the answer is bigger than it first seems. And many of you were not satisfied with the answers you were finding. What did you do? As you have been held accountable in your classes and in your dorms, you decided to hold others accountable.

You went to Tom Galligan, you went to Mike Heffernan. Some of you lead and many of you supported efforts to make a larger part of the answer to the question of where your food comes from to be right here, from New Hampshire or Vermont rather than California or other far off place. You not only wanted your food sourced more locally you also wanted it sourced more ethically and fairly. Again, you went to the leadership and the result? In March Colby-Sawyer became a certified Free Trade campus. At Colby-Sawyer you have been free to interact with and speak truth to the leadership and the leadership has had to respond. In turn, you have learned and grown under this leadership. Reflect on this and think about how this will impact your decisions and interactions with leadership in the future. Again, experiences that you have learned from and acquired knowledge.

I could come up with countless examples of your experiences with the Colby-Sawyer community that are similar to the classroom, campus safety, your food and the leadership. In fact, over the past weeks I have asked some of you about the people in the Colby-Sawyer community who have influenced your lives. There was no dearth of responses. Members in every office were mentioned: the registrar's office, residential life, admissions, housekeeping and facilities...the list goes on. This reveals a picture of a tight-knit, well-developed community. Your experience has been one of a community that has pushed you, held you accountable, listened to you and loved you. Knowledge gained through experience. Your experiences with this community are indeed what will make all of you stand out as Colby-Sawyer graduates!

Okay, so let me borrow a question from my colleague Laura Alexander's speech to the graduating class of 2009. "Now what?" I am sure this question has been on your mind recently, and your parents' minds. To assist you in developing an answer to this question, allow me to share an experience as a 21-year-old recent graduate back in 1998. A few months after sitting at my commencement speech, I was headed to Africa. I had joined the Peace Corps and was headed to be a Fisheries Extension Agent in rural Zambia. I was excited and nervous.

The first three months of living in Zambia were filled with training: how to build small dams, canals, ponds, how to care for fish. Six days of training per week. In addition to the daily technical training, we also had 4 to 6 hours of language training. The language I was learning at the time was Kaonde, a Bantu language similar to Swahili.

As part of our language training, we were often tasked with translations. Some of these translations were done during our morning community meetings. Often the translation involved a proverb. Zambia is rich with proverbs. The day came when it was my turn to translate a proverb. I stood before the community, nervous, as I am now, and recited the proverb in Kaonde. Here it is – well, at least as best as I can remember:

“Inge muji na nsenji kunyuma ya maboko, iji kiswi anweba.”

After I said it I looked around and scanned the room. I sighed with relief. Judging from the nods of approval from the Zambians I had gotten it right. I then went on to translate the proverb into English. And here it is:

“If you hide a cane rat under your armpit, it will bite you!”

As I scanned the room again the Zambians still nodded with approval, but my American peers chuckled nervously. Their faces expressed confusion. I was confused as well.

Now, how many of you have seen a cane rat?

For those of you who haven't, picture an 18 to 20 pound gerbil and you will have a good idea of what one looks like. At the time I translated this proverb, I could understand a snake, a water monitor or a honey badger biting someone, but an 18-pound gerbil? I stood there a little dumbfounded as I was only expected to translate the proverb into English, not relay an understanding of its meaning. After a moment or two of awkward silence the morning meeting went on and the uncomfortable awkwardness I had felt melted away, but I still had a gnawing, or biting, a biting need to understand

the proverb. What did it mean? Later that day I talked with my instructor, Jebros, and asked him to explain the proverb. To him it was obvious, and he was surprised by my lack of understanding. He said,

“Ba Harvey, a cane rat, which is more like your beaver or rabbit, is a delicacy that needs to be shared with family and friends. The proverb warns against greed and hiding pleasures in life. It demonstrates the need to share good things. It is a lesson from a cane rat.”

This stuck with me:

“It demonstrates the need to share good things.”

And this is what I implore you to do as you figure out your answer to, “Now what?”

Share good things!

It makes sense...right?

As I left training and went to my remote village in the Northwestern Province, this proverb made more and more sense every day. A Zambian village is small, 100 people, some more, many less. There is no running water, no electricity, no TV, no X-Box to play Call of Duty. In other words, no opportunities to disengage or remove one’s self from the daily dealings of a small village, no way to hide. Shelters were made from sticks, mud and thatch, so sharing, no matter how high the desire for privacy, was a fact of life. Any attempts at not sharing good things, like not sharing a cane rat, will bite you. It will breed discontent and disrupt the harmony of the small village. So, this proverb provides us with sagacious advice. And I believe in many ways you can liken your experience here at Colby-Sawyer to a small village in rural Zambia. Colby-Sawyer has been your village.

Take this lesson from a cane rat with you as you leave Colby-Sawyer. Do this by sharing this experience and knowledge of living in the Colby-Sawyer

community. It is a good thing. In a world that often seems obsessed with globalizing and shrinking the world, remember the power of community and the need to share. Remember how this community has shaped you and how you have shaped it. Just like you counted here, let people know they count. Just like you were held accountable, hold people accountable and don't let them hide. Listen as you were listened to, and, most important, love as you have been loved! I know you can do this. I have experienced and learned a lot from what you all have shared during your time here.

With me ...

You have shared failures and successes,
You have shared frustrations and the perseverance to overcome
Shared your poetry and your art
Shared a love for science
Some of you shared a love of catfish, others a curiosity for snakes
I have shared a raft and resisted raging rapids

And as I have shared a translation with you today, some have shared the patient translation of a Boston accent.

The list goes on!

Continue this. Continue to share with me and the Colby-Sawyer Community as you go out into the world. Share your failures so that we can help you find ways to succeed. Share your successes so that we may continue to learn from you. Together, let's share our experiences in order to continue acquiring knowledge.

These experiences, this knowledge.
These are all good things!
Thank you all,
Good Luck,
Thank You for Sharing.