

After-dinner Address Delivered at the Providence College 2004 Arts Honors Convocation

If You Can Do It Here, You Can Do It Anywhere

By Charles J. Goetz*

2004 Distinguished Liberal Arts Honors Alumnus

Who am I? Why am I here?

Jack Partridge's gracious introduction just gave you some idea of *who* I am. Now let me tell you *why* I'm here.

One short answer is: I'm here because they asked me. They offer you a "free" dinner in exchange for a speech. They warn you to keep the speech to a half-hour. Impart some wisdom, inject a little humor, be inspirational. Sure, sure; and in whatever time is left-over, transmute some lead into gold.

That's a tall order in only 30 minutes. We professors are programmed to speak in nothing less than 50-minute chunks.

It's a pity that, instead, they didn't ask me to give a brief speech on sex. I've always wanted to use the opening "It gives me great pleasure. Thank you and good night."

My pecuniary compensation for this speech? Let me give you a hint: the Dominicans are a mendicant order. Still, if I want to earn my "free" dinner tonight, I'll have to give you a better "Why I'm here" than just "They asked me."

A little over 47 years ago, I was wearing a black and white PC freshman beanie cap on my newly crew-cutted head. My mother was unkind enough to suggest that I looked "like a monkey." Little did I know that I was about to have the first in a series of strokes of good luck.

I had arrived on campus pretty cocky and overly-pleased with myself. It was the second year of the fancy new National Merit Scholarship competition. I had miraculously managed to snare one of the 300 given nationwide that year and I was feeling, as a then-girlfriend so colorfully put it, disgustingly *smug*.

On the first day of freshman orientation, my new roommate, Bob Grathwol, was called to a mysterious meeting with a few dozen other freshmen. The invitees turned out to be all of the entering students who had been awarded merit-based academic scholarships by the College. And that mysterious meeting was the organizational session of the very first Honors Program group here at PC.

* Hartfield Professor of Law, University of Virginia School of Law.

I was *not* invited. But I wasn't worried. I figured that The Powers That Be would remember me sooner or later. And they did, less than a day later. Thus, I became the last member of the original Honors Program cohort. Or, if you want to be mean-spirited about it, I didn't make it into the original group, but was the first New Recruit.

We original Honors guys—because we *were* all guys in those days—were more familiarly known as “the Pilot Group” or just “the Pilots.” If you suspect that the “Pilot” tag implied that the long-term future of an Honors Program was not exactly graven in stone at PC, you're right. Honors was a “let's give it a try and see what happens” proposition. Well, here we are at Arts Honors, become bigger and better than ever under Fr. Smith's presidency, and with a 50th Anniversary in sight.

If I may digress for a moment . . . We Pilots always thought that, if we were called Pilots, we ought also to have Pilots' wings. Nonetheless, PC was too bloody cheap to ever award us proper Pilots' wings, either then or in the 47 years since. So, I'm seizing upon this occasion to rectify the oversight. For any Pilots here present tonight, I have your wings for you. I'm already wearing mine.

Speaking as a Law Professor, I counsel you not to try to use these wings to circumvent security at the airport.



As a young Pilot, I had no more idea of becoming a University Professor than of trying to become the First Man On The Moon. My idea of teaching was what high school teachers did: trying to keep the troops pacified, keep them from tearing the classroom doors off the hinges. No, I envisioned a future as either a monied corporate executive or as a big-shot lawyer. But then I was lucky enough to meet Dr. Paul van K. Thomson, “Thomson *NO P*”, as he would say. That meeting changed my life.

Thomson was, of course, the legendary founding Director of Arts Honors here at PC. Paul was also the Pilot Group's very demanding classroom professor for English composition and literature during our first two years. In my arrival phase of smugness, I already considered myself a pretty fancy wordsmith. After all, hadn't I won a New York area essay contest for Catholic high school students? And, as the song says, if you can do it in New York, you can do it anywhere.

Instead, first-year writing was a lesson in humility. Thomson relentlessly picked out all of the flaws in my writing just as would a surgeon lancing pussy pimples. I remember getting back my papers full of embarrassing red marks reminiscent of the pox. And I learned Thomson's rule about spelling and grammar errors: "More than one is two too many."

I'm forever grateful that the Honors Program compelled me through four years to grind out a constant stream of writing, all of which was subjected to relentless scrutiny and criticism, both of form and content. I also wrote for *The Cowl*, the *Alembic* literary magazine, and the *Veritas* yearbook. Whatever kind of writer I was when I came in the door, when I walked onto the Commencement stage, I could write not only "pretty" but also clearly and persuasively. Mastering the art of expressing oneself cogently via the written word was one of the great opportunities of Arts Honors. We learned to Write Right.

Dr. Thomson was also a superbly entertaining classroom performer. One memorable day, he jumped up on top of the desk in the front of the room to declaim a passage from the Shakespeare play *du jour* that was our current topic of torture. At one point he stopped, looked around the room and exclaimed "Sometimes I can't believe that they're actually paying me *good money* to teach Shakespeare." Well I have a pretty accurate idea of what PC was paying English professors in those days. For him to say that they were paying him "good money" is an example of what he taught us was a figure of speech called *hyperbole*.

Still, that guy perched on the desk caused a seed to germinate in my mind: "Here's a smart, really capable fellow who's having a GOOD TIME being a college professor." Many of you will likely have the opportunity to find out the truth of the old saying that "The trouble with most jobs is that they're work." I had four years to observe that Paul Thomson was that rarity of rarities, a person who genuinely *loved* what he was doing. Eventually I decided to follow along a trail marked by his footprints. If I hadn't ever met Thomson in Arts Honors, I figure that I might have more money in my bank account—but I'd have a lot fewer happy moments in the memory-bank of my life. So, a big explanation for who I am and why I'm here is Paul Van K. Thomson.

We teachers are often scorned: “Those who can, do; those who can’t, teach.” And college professors are especially targeted, as proclaims the limerick

There once was an old man of Esser,
Whose knowledge grew lesser and lesser.
It at last grew so small
He knew nothing at all,
And now he's a college professor.

Still, most professors really *do* know a good bit—even if sometimes they seem incapable of explaining it to *you*. Some of what I learned in order to become a university professor and scholar, I learned right here. So, I want to say a few words about learning at PC.

Preparing to give this talk, I thought a good bit about what I learned here. I’m probably going to shock you by claiming that most of the information drummed into my head here has proven to be either *useless or quickly forgotten*. But, hear my whole story before you judge the real implications of that deliberately provocative claim.

Some of the Useless Things that I learned at PC are Latin oddments which you may have heard too. These include being able to exclaim “*Quidquid recipitur secundum modum recipiendus recipitur*.” Whatever is received is received in the manner of the recipient. I’ve once or twice let that one fly at a class that was being particularly resistant to one of my pristine clear explanations of arcane points in Economics and Law. When asked what it meant, I claimed that it could be translated freely as saying, in context, that “It doesn’t pay to cast pearls before swine” or “You can lead a horse to water, but you can’t make it drink.” Still, the *quidquid*-phrase isn’t a big winner in *The World Out There*. And neither is “*Virtus in medias stat*” nor the Thomistic “*sed contra*,” much less “*anathema sit*.”

I did once, at a cocktail party, impress a member of the English faculty at the University of Virginia by knowing that the opposite of hyperbole is *litotes*, a factoid that I remembered only because I got it wrong on one of Thomson’s diabolical Freshman English exams. But that’s the *only* time that the word *litotes* has ever issued from my lips.

And I blush to admit that I remember disconcertingly little of Plato or Aristotle or Thucydides or Thomas or of the *Prolegomena to Any Future Metaphysics*. Just two months ago in Salamanca, Spain, I had my nose rubbed in the reality that I retain precious little of my four years of Spanish.

I do recall one thing notable thing from Biology Class. When we were studying the digestive tract, our professor told us “The next time you’re making out on a date, remember that you’re sucking on one end of a 60-foot tube filled at the other end with fecal matter.”

I could go on, but the message would be clear and grim: You, like me, will quickly forget most of the content of what you learn in your four years here. Much of what you *do* remember will be pretty useless from a practical perspective. Mighty discouraging words. So, then, why bother? Well, bear with me for another few minutes.

I was an Economics major. One of my first Economics classes was Money and Banking, an early session of which dealt with bond underwriting. By happenstance, I already knew something about bond underwriting. I had graduated from high school in January and spent the intervening months before enrolling at PC working at a Wall Street brokerage house. That firm provided free courses in investment finance to employees.

At PC, the problem arose when my professor gave an explanation of the bond underwriting process that, well, didn’t match up quite right with what I had learned on Wall Street. Unthinkingly, I raised my hand and asked for a clarification. Although I really wasn’t trying to be a wise-ass, it’s true that the tenor of the question suggested that I didn’t think the professor’s explanation was 100% “on the money” (pun intended).

Well, disaster ensued. The Professor took offense at the implied criticism, thinking that I had dissed him. Fortunately, the bell signaling the end of the class rang just then. Saved by the bell? Not exactly, because the professor exited with the sneering line “Since you think you know so much about underwriting, Mr. Goetz, maybe *you’d* like to give the lecture tomorrow when we reconvene!”

Surely, neither the professor nor my classmates ever dreamed that I’d dare accept the challenge. It was probably stupid to do it. Still, they don’t call me “Gutsy Goetz” for nothing. And, believe it or not, my 20-minute lecture went pretty well, further convincing me that maybe a career in professoring was not such a silly idea. Luckily, the prof was very gracious about the incident. Indeed, he became a friend and a mentor during the rest of my career as an Econ major. So, this potential disaster turned out to be yet another stroke of good luck.

Moreover, I’ve always suspected that the underwriting lecture incident was a factor in an additional fortuitous development later that year. As background, you all need to understand that class attendance was taken *very* seriously at PC in my day. Professors actually took daily attendance by calling the roll. After three cuts in a semester, one’s grade began to be docked, culminating with a dreaded FA –the FA being not a comment on the large size of one’s butt, but

“Failure due to Absences.” At the end of my sophomore year, however, the Economics department head informed me that, as a very, very super-special privilege of my last two years in the Advanced Honors Program, class attendance would be *voluntary*. You can infer how I reacted from an incident at the 25th Reunion of my graduating class.

A fellow walked up to me and said, “Hi, I’m Dominick Golia, one of your fellow Economics majors. I wanted to introduce myself to you because you were enrolled in all of my classes and your name came right before mine. But, when they called the roll, *you were never there*.”

“Where the heck is he going with this?” you may wonderingly ask. Well, my point is that, during those last two years I *did* learn a lot of Economics, enough to get a top-of-the-scale score on the Economics Graduate Record exam. Obviously, though, I didn’t learn my Economics from sitting in class with professors and classmate Dom Golia. I read the textbooks for the courses and a lot of other books as well. And I thought a lot about how it all fit together. In sum, I learned how to *learn it on my own*. I Learned to Learn. Remember that exhortation: Learn to Learn.

The Honors Colloquia also provided a glorious Learn to Learn experience. Every week, we read those Great Books and were compelled to write a paper about them. We had to write the paper *before* some professor figuratively held our hands and told us what we should think. No spoon-feeding. How revolutionary!

Years afterward, I reamed out a class of Economics Ph.D. students for not having adequately prepared the readings for my class. Later, one of the students attempted to justify himself. He said “I get so much more out of the reading after we’ve discussed it in class and you’ve told us what to look for.” I had to bite my tongue to keep from retorting “You hopeless, blithering idiotic clod! What are you going to do years from now when you have to dig things out for yourself without me to tell you what to think and do?”

Indeed, the best graduate school teacher I’ve ever encountered, a Nobel laureate in Economics, never gave explanatory lectures at all. Each week, he assigned a question to be answered in five typewritten pages. The classes consisted of evaluation, with his expert assistance, of how well we students had done in ferreting out the answer—or, if, indeed, there *was* any answer at all.

Remarkably, the Arts Honors Colloquia worked the same way. Students had to evolve their own ideas and subject them to the reviewing scrutiny of wiser heads such as Dr. Thomson and his sparkling lieutenant, the then very-young Father John Fabian Cunningham, O.P. Father Cunningham had joined the Honors faculty high command as Vice Squadron Leader of the

Pilots, long before he became Commander-in-Chief of PC, as President Cunningham. I remember a colloquium session where I was told by Thomson and Cunningham that I was wrong in arguing that many of the ideas in Adam Smith's *Wealth of Nations* had earlier appeared in the works of the French Physiocrats. I also remember, in true Gutsy Goetz style, stubbornly redefending my Physiocrat thesis in my major end-of-the-semester Honors paper that term. And I recall Thomson and Cunningham giving me an A+ on that paper. And I further remember how much I respected them for being very smart people who were nonetheless unfailingly open-minded and susceptible to persuasion, even from a mere student.

Many of you probably by now understand the resolution of an apparent paradox. On one hand, the *stuff* you learn in College really is often eminently forgettable and/or largely devoid of practical value. Yet, the process of *Learning to Learn* is the magical key to a rewarding post-university life, a lifetime of continuing to learn *whatever it is that needs to be learned*. This is what true Education is all about.

At first, I intended to suggest an analogy between Learning to Learn and the adage about fish and fishhooks: "Give a person a fish and you provide one meal; teach that person to use a fishhook and you provide a lifetime of meals." But Learning to Learn is so much more than that, because it is more flexible, more adaptive to presently unknowable needs. Using a fishhook is, after all, only useful to a person who will likely encounter a fishable body of water. Learning to learn is like teaching a person how to be creative about bending a piece of wire into *whatever tool is necessary* in the circumstances that an unpredictable future will present. She who needs to open a lock can make a lockpick from the wire. And the same wire can be fashioned either into a spring to hold things apart or a binding to keep them together. Or even a piece of jewelry.

The methodology of Learning to Learn should sound familiar to you. It has been a distinguishing feature of Arts Honors since the very beginning. I can testify that it really works. I stand before you as a Law Professor who never had a course in Law; a computer programmer who never studied computer science; an Italian-speaker who never had a single lesson in Italian. And I could go on. I Learned to Learn, and I did it right here, thanks in large part to Arts Honors.

Now, it is true in principle that one could Learn to Learn by studying almost anything: a mathematical system in which one and one equals three; or the Ptolemaic theory of the universe; or how to weave blankets; or unraveling any one of the innumerable puzzles of our world. Why, then, is mastering the ideas in the Great Books of Western Civilization any better

than anything else? Well, think of it as a training regimen for the mind, a program of intellectual weight-lifting and exercises for the brain.

From this “intellectual exercises” perspective, do you see why a Great Books curriculum would be a training course *par excellence* if one wishes to Learn to Learn? Whoever grapples with the breadth and the sophistication and the intricacy of the ideas in Western civilization’s Great Books imbibes a lot of *stuff* that, quite true, will soon fade from memory. But, more importantly, that person will perforce develop the intellectual muscle to confront almost any of the unpredictable learning challenges that the future world of practical endeavor will spring. The famous song line applies to the Arts Honors curriculum: If you can do it here, you can do it anywhere.

I was *not* an obsessive scholarly bookworm at PC. Rather, I did my best to extract every drop of enjoyment out of school life. I lettered in track and cross-country, was elected an officer of Student Congress, chaired dances, was editor-in-chief of *The Cowl*, and had a date every weekend night. And I successfully wooed a hot woman, who is still here with me tonight. I was trying, as Thomson laughingly accused me, to be the proverbial Renaissance Man depicted in the Great Books!

Still, you would be wrong to think that I was everybody’s Favorite Guy, either among the students or the faculty. The U.S. Army once used the recruiting slogan “Be all that you can be.” Well, “Be all that you can be” was what I wanted, both for myself and for Providence College. But when I looked around me then, perhaps impatiently, I saw the Honors Program as an island of enthusiasm and commitment embedded in an ocean of disinterest and lethargy.

A very vivid scriptural passage admonishes “I would that thou be either hot or cold, for if thou be but lukewarm, I will vomit thee up and spit thee out.” Well, nobody would have ever accused me of being lukewarm, even those who would gladly have vomited me up and spit me out. I used *The Cowl* as my pulpit and my pen as—if not a sword— a persistent, probing prod. My fellow students were angry enough when I needled and jabbed at them, but it was nothing to the reaction of many faculty. At that time, too many faculty members thought they were above criticism, especially from mere students. To the Neanderthals, I apparently was the very epitome of the noxious influence of the Honors Program and those uppity kids in it.

The level of hostility in some faculty circles was great enough that I wondered whether I might be bounced out of Providence College on some trumped up charge —or even for an offense that I was actually habitually *guilty* of, such as having a bottle of wine hidden in my dorm room

or sneaking in after curfew. It didn't matter; "living dangerously" was part of the spice of my PC life. "Full speed ahead and damn the torpedoes."

Happily, the times do change. I keep up with what has happened here at PC over the years. I read *The Cowl*. I use Google to check on what kind of faculty the College is hiring and promoting and what things interest the students. I'm gratified to see that the island of quality that was the Honors Program in my day has constantly expanded. Indeed, the Honors enclave that once was an embattled beachhead has metamorphosed into the feature that dominates the academic map at Providence. And I'm delighted to see that the kinds of student concerns that I raised, politely and civilly, as a student are now welcomed as part of the legitimate discourse of this academic community, rather than as a hostile and impertinent attack.

Well, Graduation Day dawned in June, 1961, and I was still here, my "bounce out" paranoia unwarranted. A few months later, I was a brand-new Ph.D. student in an economics graduate program. As the old saying goes, "I was scared bleepless." (Well, the old saying doesn't exactly use the term "bleepless," but this is a formal occasion and you know what I mean.) Although PC was, and is, a very respectable academic institution, one can't help worrying that it isn't Princey-tone or Hahr-vahrd, where the student SAT scores still average a cut above ours. How goes it when PC grads try to compete in the Big Leagues with those folks? Those of you going on to post-graduate education may have good reason to ask yourselves this question. Well, I have the answer for you, based not only on my own graduate student days, but also 40 years of experience teaching graduate and professional students in highly competitive programs.

It's true that the *average* student from the most prestigious, elite schools is often perceptibly better than the average student around here. Still, experience has convinced me that there is little or no difference among the *best* students from different schools, no matter where those students spent their undergraduate days. In short, one of my catch-phrases applies once again: if you can do it here in the PC Honors Program, you can in fact do it anywhere, and against any competition. It would have saved me a lot of needless worry if someone had convinced me of that in 1961!

Almost three years to the day after I graduated from PC, my graduate program mentor exited the room where my committee was passing judgment on my just-given doctoral dissertation defense. He stuck out his hand and said "Congratulations, Dr. Goetz."

That was over 40 years ago, and I've never stopped learning new things. Nor, in the tradition of Dr. Thomson, have I ever stopped "preaching" to whomever I can get to listen. Last

week it was a group of judges in Tucson; tonight it's you folks, here on Smith Hill. Dr. Thomson was exactly right: being a professor at a good school is one of the greatest jobs in the world.

You may be asked by someone not here present what happened tonight. It would be a fair summary if you said the following.

Well, he was little gray-haired professor who said some really weird stuff. He mentioned fecal matter, vomit, and bleep. He claimed that most of what we learn is likely to be either useless or quickly forgotten. But he was equally insistent that, if they literally get with the program, Honors students emerge from PC with a few very precious and enduring things indeed. They'll "Write Right." They'll "Learn to Learn." And, if they're lucky, they'll have a few professors who will inspire them to care deeply about things, to live life with passion, fearlessly and not as lukewarm namby-pambies. They'll try to be all that they can be.

"And," he maintained, "if you can do it here, you can do it anywhere."

You've heard a bit about who I am and why I'm here. So, we're at my grand finale. I really had intended to honor the request to transmute some lead into gold. But, alas, I've expended all of my allotted minutes. So, I'll just close by saying that I loved it here, that it was for me the Right Place, truly a kindly mother, an Alma Mater. I fervently wish for all of you present students that, when your hair turns gray, you will be able to return here with as much affection in your hearts and as many memories of good times.

It has been a very high honor to share this evening with you. Thank you and God Bless.