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(Dinner on 3-22-11)

Speech for Berger Scholarship Dinner #3

Renaissance Commodores

Some of my closest friends tell me that my productivity makes them feel uncomfortable. A few of them have even admitted that I accomplish more in a day than they do throughout the entirety of a week. When I hear comments like these, I generally just smile knowingly and nod appreciatively because, in some strange way, they are giving me a compliment.

As a sample, here's a cross-section of what I have accomplished during my previous week at Vanderbilt:

- Graded literally 400 high school student essays and final tests that assessed their knowledge of what I had taught them of the novel Brave New World over the past 9 weeks of student-teaching
- Attended Peabody teacher in-service days
- Performed an original spoken word poem, that I had written and rehearsed, to hundreds of prospective students alongside two published, professional performance poets who we paid to bring to our campus
- Networked with other student groups to guest perform in their shows and to co-sponsor future performance events with them
- Held a meeting with the executive members of the performance organizations that I run
- Convinced new members of those organizations to take over the leadership positions I'll be leaving behind
- Raised enough money to establish two annual \$500 scholarships for talented and college-bound Nashville youth performance poets so as to defray their impending college expenses and to act as a way for me to pay your generosity forward.
- Earned another scholarship that enables me to study abroad this summer nearly free of charge.
- Put a down payment on a year-long lease for an apartment within walking distance of campus
- Wrote a new poem
- Wrote a new satire article
- Cooked a new chicken recipe
- Watched the movie Battle L.A. in theaters with my roommates and managed to somehow acquire this gigantic cardboard-billboard-advertisement that has since been fashioned into a wall-enveloping poster which resides above our dorm room couch like an impending nuclear holocaust on any visitors
- Showed my younger sister around Vanderbilt and introduced her to my closest friends to help her decide if our alma mater would become her newest motherland
- Got drunk with my roommates and had philosophical discussions about who are the hottest actresses in Hollywood and what are our life plans for what the hell we are going to do with ourselves once we kick off college's training wheels in less than two months

...and this was only a light week.

I tell you all of this not to try to convince you that my generation of “kids these days” is far from lost – some of us are, and some of us still need to get lost so that we can truly find and define ourselves. Nor do I tell you this to try to make you think that my life is somehow strangely busier and more complex than all of yours – I have no desire to see who among us has the biggest ego or the most cluttered calendar. I tell you this because doing so reveals what it takes to be a successful and accomplished Vanderbilt scholar.

To borrow terminology from one of humanity’s greatest periods of enlightenment, being successful and accomplished students at Vanderbilt necessitates becoming what I would like to call “Renaissance Commodores,” men and women who can do it all, and do it all well.

I have friends who hold 3.97 GPAs but who can’t hold conversations about anything other than their own fields of expertise.

I had friends who could party like rockstars and who were insanely entertaining to be in the company of, but they have since dropped out because they couldn’t cut it in the classroom as well as they could cut the rug on the dance floor.

I have had friends who could excel in neither realm who I have long left behind, but I have since surrounded myself with friends who excel in both, and it is in this shared experience, this shared struggle to succeed and to set ourselves apart from every other overly-qualified and equally-intelligent college graduate that we learn to stress the best of ourselves and to push our minds and bodies to the limits of humanity’s capabilities.

We feed off of and learn from each other’s energy, creativity, and ingenuity. We inspire each other to kick classes and make names for ourselves, never accepting anything other than excellence and efficiency from one another, and Vanderbilt is one of the few places where this phenomenon occurs so effectively.

As scientist and novelist Jared Diamond suggests in his book The Third Chimpanzee, it is was not the mental capacity that distinguished the surviving Cro-Magnon from the Neanderthals eons ago but the mental ability, and it is this same ability that will distinguish us, once again, from the rest of our species.

Because we are the forerunners of a mental evolution, students who have mastered their lessons in paradigm shifting, realizing what is vital to complete, what is a reasonable amount of work to accomplish in a day, and how much of ourselves we can allow ourselves to give to other people and to other efforts so that we still have some of ourselves left when we finally let our heads touch pillows, whether this happens late at night in the honest hours of exhaustion and necessity or early in the morning before the sun stirs the rest of the sleeping.

As a senior nearing the end of his 4th year but not final year, I find myself more and more often reminiscing and reflecting on the experiences I have had throughout my years of college because it is in our past reflecting and our forward planning that we are learning and improving rather than stagnating and repeating. I find myself tending toward experiential learning, for no matter how great my professors may be, life is still my best and most relevant teacher.

One of my most life-changing experiences occurred last year when I had the honor of interviewing Vice Chancellor David Williams, Vanderbilt’s number 3 of administration, for an article I had written for The Slant, Vanderbilt’s most awesome humor and satire publication.

Williams is important because he is Vanderbilt's first African-American Vice Chancellor and his specialty is in University Affairs and Athletics. He's also a tenured law professor, a still-practicing lawyer, a board member of far too many organizations to list, a Motown expert and aficionado, a radio DJ, a great storyteller, and an awe-inspiring mind.

However, despite all his expertise, as a representative of The Slant, I asked him all sorts of weird questions. For example, while pointing to his regal, purple, Masters in Law cloak hanging from the coat rack in his office, I asked, "So what powers does your super suit give you?," to which, not missing a beat, he immediately replied, "When I put that on, my boy, I become the artist formerly known as Prince."

Our comedic interview lasted for about an hour, and once I turned off the recorder he simply asked me "So, what's your major?," to which my response slowly evolved into an hour-long chat with him telling me stories of his younger life and me trying to relate to them so as to not reveal too much of my appreciation and giddiness. Half way through our post-interview chat, Williams called in his secretary and asked her to cancel the rest of his scheduled appointments for that afternoon.

Only at Vanderbilt would such an occurrence happen. Only at Vanderbilt would an administrator agree to do an interview with a little satire paper, answer all of my idiotic questions, and then ignore the rest of his important duties just so that he could talk to a single student for an hour about life.

I retell this narrative because Williams is an exemplar of a Renaissance Commodore, a person who can excel in academia and still enjoy life so as to say that he truly lived it.

That afternoon, I left his office feeling the truth that "**A single conversation across the table with a wise man is better than 10 years of study in books**" more powerfully than ever before. It became one of those moments where you can physically feel the learning taking hold in your mind, and I thank all of you for that opportunity and experience.

In my 4 years, I have learned so much simply from meeting new people at Vanderbilt with whom I never would have crossed paths otherwise. Those great men and women have changed my life, just as the great men and women in this room have changed my life by giving me the chance to stumble into the middle of their paths to excellence and to walk alongside them.

Because the stupid things we do in our lives are what we remember of ourselves.
But the intelligent and wise actions we perform are the ones for which others remember us.
May you all be remembered well.