

“Stories of a Baylor Honors Experience”

By Stephanie Allen

Delivered to the Baylor University Honors Line Camp

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Thank you, Dr. Beck, for your kind introduction.

Good evening to you all. My name is Stephanie and we’ve never met before. Four years ago, I was just like you: worrying about the intensity of my schoolwork, wondering if my roommate and I would get along, excited for what the next four years of my life would entail. And if I could say anything to my 18-year-old self, the one in your shoes, I would say this: “It’s going to be okay. In fact, it will be greater than you can ever imagine.”

Congratulations to each of you. I consider it a great privilege and honor to be one of those charged with welcoming each of you wonderful souls to this sacred place. You have done well so far. You’ve gotten the grades, the scores, and the recommendation letters. You’ve written the essays, gone on the college visits and done the research. Lastly, you’ve chosen Baylor: a place with so much potential to help you become the absolute best version of whom you will be. You’ve chosen well, my friends. Cheers to you!

In the months since I was asked to speak at this banquet, I have looked through journals, class notes, books, photos and letters, gleaning pieces of wisdom I have been given that I could then pass on to you. I tell people that I had the greatest undergraduate experience on earth and I genuinely mean that. My mind was cultivated and challenged; my spirit was nourished, refined and taken to higher levels than I knew existed. You see, this is a place that fosters the transformation of the whole person, if you let it. In a world where millions of children and young people do not have the opportunity to go to school, you have been given the opportunity to be educated and to help those who have not had this opportunity. Revolutionary President of South Africa, Nelson Mandela, once said “Education is the most powerful weapon which you can use to change the world.” And I don’t think he is just talking about skills you learn. Rather, it’s about the intellect that is refined; the habits formed; the logic constructed; the stories bestowed. It is also about the questions left unanswered; the valiant comeback after an exam that didn’t go as well as you would have wanted; the shattering of an idea you once held true and the constructing of a new one. Just as iron sharpens iron, education refines the mind and the soul.

Education allows ultimate integration. In fact, the definition of “integrity” is “the condition of being unified, unimpaired, or sound in construction”. Here at Baylor, you have the opportunity to build a foundation of that integrity. At no other time in your life will you be able to take religion, life science and foreign language courses alongside those in literature, business, history and whatever else you choose. During your time at Baylor, you are encouraged to allow these ideas and the deluge of information you gather to interplay with your career goals, your beliefs, your experiences, your relationships, and your dreams. Here, may you be divinely transformed by the renewing of your minds.

In addition to choosing Baylor, you have chosen to be part of the Honors Program. You’ve chosen the path less traveled and, trust me, it will make all the difference. While

our experiences at Baylor will likely be vastly different, I do want to convey truths, joys and stories from my own experience that may help you. It is important to note that sharing stories, especially those of personal growth, is a sacred thing. It is one of the pillars of human culture. In his 1972 novel, *Invisible Cities*, Italo Calvino talks of what it was like in ancient port cities when merchants would gather around to tell stories:

“These merchants do not come together merely to trade spices or jewels or livestock or textiles. Rather, they come to this town to exchange stories with each other—to literally trade in personal intimacies... this is what intimacy does to us over time: it causes us to inherit and trade each other’s stories. This, in part, is how we are to become annexes of each other, trellises on which each other’s biography can grow.”

Sharing your stories is giving of your experience. Sometimes sharing a story is a way of giving joy to another human being. Other times sharing lessons learned from a painful experience can redeem the pain felt by that experience. In this way, I hope that you all share your stories with others and listen to the stories of those around you with great reverence, intention and a desire to learn and understand.

I chose to be part of the Honors Program rather last-minute. In the beginning, I had doubted that I was capable of the extra work in addition to my intense premedical studies. And research for an honors thesis? Didn’t that involve working in a tiny laboratory and conducting experiments with lab mice? No thanks. However, I knew I wanted smaller classes and that I was interested in pairing my hard sciences with liberal arts courses, like Great Texts and religion. I was also drawn to the promise of close faculty mentorship.

In my Great Texts courses, I delved into the groundbreaking texts of Plato, St. Augustine, Aquinas, and Dante, among many others. In these small, seminar-style courses, we were encouraged to interact with the material and with each other. My professor, who wore a different hand-tied bowtie every day, told us that the theme of the class was finding the answers to this question: “What is the good life?” Is Homer right in saying that happiness comes with honor, legacy and wit? Is Socrates correct in saying that we only know who we are when we think outside the cave, leaving the puppet illusions we’ve always known, braving the initially blinding light of reality? And what about faith? Are faith and reason contradictory ideas, or does one actually fulfill the other? I learned that faith allows reason to expand, and gives the mind more areas of life to know. On the other side of life, perhaps we will not need faith—we will see God with our eyes and profound harmony will exist between faith and reason, resulting in enduring happiness, or joy in the presence of God. Benedictine monk and philosopher, St. Anselm of Canterbury, argued that we see signs of God all around us every day, but we cannot see God yet. There will come a day when we see God in all fullness, the Beatific Vision. Vision connotes understanding. Thus, the Beatific Vision, seeing God face-to-face and understanding all that we never before understood, will satisfy and elate both the heart and the mind. One of St. Anselm’s favorite phrases is “*fides quaerens intellectum*” (excuse my butchered Latin). It means “faith seeking understanding”. (You’ll also notice that “Faith seeking understanding” is the motto for the Honors Residential Colleges.) The quest for truth is predicated by a faith that the truth indeed exists and can therefore be sought. My Great Texts courses, interacting with a receptive heart and a truth-seeking mind, took me out of

the realm of childhood spirituality. They gave me the confidence to ask difficult questions, and to realize that the more I grow, the less I know. I began to become less attached to concrete answers, knowing that the things of God are greater and more majestic than my mind can ever comprehend. In this season, my favorite verse came from 1st Corinthians 13:

*“Love never fails: but whether there be prophecies, they shall fail; whether there be tongues, they shall cease; whether there be knowledge, it will vanish away. For we know in part, and we prophesy in part. But when that which is perfect comes, then that which is in part shall disappear. When I was a child, I spoke as a child, I understood as a child, I thought as a child: but when I became an adult, I put away childish things.
For now we see through a glass, darkly; but then face to face: now I know in part; but then I shall know fully, even as I am fully known.” --- 1 Corinthians 13:8-13*

My sophomore year was, from some respects, the year when my life was taken to new heights. I studied abroad in Maastricht, Netherlands under Dr. Lisa Baker and Dr. Troy Abell. Through a series of integrated pre-medical courses, Drs. Abell and Baker revolutionized the way I thought about myself. “Stop that schoolboy thinking and think of yourself as a scholar” they said. They also revolutionized the way that I thought about the world, and what I believed about that world.

I learned that using statistics to make decisions is the only way to rule out human bias. I learned the beginning steps of differential diagnosis of a patient. I learned how history and philosophy interacted with medical knowledge across the centuries. I did a presentation in my Medical History class on women in medicine and earned honors program credit. I learned the human immune response as an extended analogy to the Battle of Helm’s deep from Tolkien’s *Lord of the Rings*. I visited the world’s first anatomical theatre in Padua, Italy and ate gelato and pizza in the quaint piazza with my professors and my friends.

In addition to the academic knowledge I was gaining, I also learned an incredible amount of emotional and spiritual principles. “If you cannot give grace to yourself, you cannot give grace to others.” I was taught. My professors truly embodied the phrase “live, love, work and play well”. For the first time in my life, I was told by an authority figure, “Stephanie, go play.” For seemingly the first time, I took great gulps of life. I lived so fully. I traveled to 14 different countries, got lost, ate too much chocolate and took the most difficult classes. I saw so many wonders that this world holds dear: the stately and treacherous Cliffs of Moher on the coast of Ireland; the alabaster artistry of Italy’s ancient sculptors; the soaring minarets of Turkey; Germany’s battered, resilient and redeemed countryside. The world was so much bigger than me and my meager understanding of it. My framework of understanding knowledge was shattered. You don’t understand things by being told what to think or how to think. It’s much more personal than that. Spirituality and knowledge are much more similar than I had ever known. During that semester, I had tea with Dr. Baker, who would eventually become my honors thesis mentor. The first question she asked me was this: “What are the top three events that have happened to you that have made you who you are today?” This was my professor, expressing an interest in getting to know me as a fellow human being, with my own conclusions and my own valid and meaningful experiences.

Soon after my Sophomore year, I found myself traveling to Kenya for the first time. This trip, and the many others that I've taken since, cemented my calling in life: to improve the health of women and young children on a global scale. Overwhelmed by malaria and malnutrition, this region is home to millions. Food and medicine are scarce, but imagination and innovation abound. The people I lived among vivified medicine and public health for me. Pathologies and epidemiologic models developed faces, names, and stories. I garnered strength and zeal from the bright eyes of the inquisitive students I taught in the schools, the hours of stories women told, and the pleasant coos of babies who survived the tropical summers strapped to their mothers' backs. Over the past three years, I have spent four months among the Luo people of Western Kenya. I have encountered harrowing stories of hunger, injustice, and bitter poverty. I have also encountered the deepest level of joy, the love every woman has for her children and compelling stories of humble and quiet redemption. I've danced with widows and orphans as they praise the God from whom all blessings flow.

My experiences in Kenya have followed two paths, which are convergent rather than divergent in nature: the paths of spiritual growth and academic endeavors.

"Blessed are the poor". What does that mean? Where I work, over 20% of people are HIV positive, AIDS orphans are commonplace and most people, trapped in perpetual poverty, live on less than a dollar a day. What good can come from such a place? I once thought. But, if you remember correctly, that's what they said about the little town of Nazareth, too. "Can anything good come from Nazareth?" Christ's disciple asked. "Come and see for yourself." Answered another. Likewise, I'd heard the stories of Kenya and I went to see for myself.

In proper Jewish fashion, Christ would frequently answer a question with another question. When the disciples were stuck in a storm on the raging Sea of Galilee, they said to Jesus, "Teacher, don't you care if we drown?" to which he replied "Why are you so afraid? Have you no faith?" When the righteous man said "And who is my neighbor?", Jesus replied "Which of these three do you think was the neighbor to the man who fell into the hands of the robbers?" In fact, Jesus only directly answers 3 of the 183 questions he is asked in the four Gospels. Perhaps Christ responds to questions with questions in order to re-position our viewpoints or to challenge our view of God or of the world. In the words of Franciscan friar, Richard Rohr, "Jesus asks questions, good questions, unnerving questions, re-aligning questions, transforming questions. He leads us into...transformative space... he leaves us betwixt and between, where God and grace can get us, and where we are not in control." This could show that Christianity and following Jesus aren't about having all of the answers. Maybe that's what faith is: knowing that you don't have all of the answers, and you never will, but trusting God anyway. In the words of one of my favorite people, "*Perhaps it's trusting in the answerer more than in the answers.*"

Kenya is like that. You think you have spirituality all figured out, then you meet people who have nothing and are much more spiritually well-off than any of us. There are people

who have cultivated and mobilized entire communities on a dime. There are people working to grow food for local schoolchildren, there are those who take in AIDS orphans, caring for them as their own. Then you meet those who will die: babies who have failed to thrive, an HIV-infected mother of seven. The juxtaposition of poverty and excess is staggering. People clap, dance and sing: the choirs of the Most High, I'm convinced, are comprised of Africans. *Kwan gweth magi: Count your many blessings*, I can still hear, as the women climb the hills, balancing firewood on their heads. I worked, rested, laughed, cried and lived with the Luo people. If they, as sorrows like sea billows rolled, could proclaim that God is good and that it was well with their souls, so too could I.

In short, I fell in love with this community. When the opportunity arose to do my Honors thesis project on a topic that would benefit the women and children of that community, I jumped at it. It was, by no means, easy. I changed topics four times. I read hundreds of articles. I scrapped my entire literature review three times. We drew a dozen concept maps of how education affected contraceptive use, how age correlated with number of infant deaths and a host of other variable relationships. It took a lot of time, and most of it was independent work with my mentor supervising. Friday nights when many of my friends were out doing things that seemed more fun, I was playing with numbers and drafting thesis chapters. One late Tuesday night, when analysis of my data had continued to be complicated, my thesis mentor and I sat in the basement of Moody Library, dizzied by all of the numbers. "Stephanie," she said as we opened another pack of goldfish. "I know this is difficult. But you're doing the right thing. You're loving people through your work and making life better for these people. And, most importantly, you're loving God with all of your mind." Those numbers meant so much to me. Each of them told part of a woman's story and I had the privilege of using my knowledge and skills to draw conclusions that could better their lives. How grateful I was for that! I loved my topic. I had the best mentor in the entire world. The patience, grace and wisdom she extended to me during my time at Baylor were more than I could have ever asked for. I loved the impact I could make with my research. And I loved all 113 pages of my thesis.

The day of my thesis defense was one of the best of my days at Baylor. I gave a presentation of my project, including the robustness of the reasoning and the statistical analysis. Four of my favorite Baylor faculty members had agreed to serve on my thesis committee, reading the entire thing and giving their critiques. It was truly an honor to be so challenged and so remarkably supported.

[hold up thesis]

This came in the mail two weeks ago—a bound green book with gold text on the spine—was like academic Christmas. One of my best friends graduated Honors and University Scholars and is now a second year medical student at Baylor College of Medicine. She keeps her honors thesis in a very strategic place on her bookshelf. When school is difficult, she looks to her shelf, sees the green book and says to herself, "I wrote *that*. Therefore, I can do anything." I know I will do the same in the next chapters of my life. And as I speak with you here tonight, I tell you this: *You can do it too*.

During my four years at Baylor, I found myself. I found myself in conversations, in books, in conversations *about* books, in laughter, in the joys and in the difficulties. I found incredible friendship, both among people my age and among faculty. One of the absolute best parts about Baylor and the Honors Program is the faculty. Not only are they brilliant and remarkably kind, they are willing to go above and beyond to challenge and cultivate their students. I had a professor tell me once, “Stephanie, the only reason that I would ever disown you would be if you became a selfish human being. Save for that, I will always be proud of you.” That’s the kind of people you are learning from.

In the wake of my stories, I have some advice on how to make the most of the next four years and how to prime yourself for that transformation that I was talking about earlier.

First of all, you must choose to be joyful and to be open.

It should be noted that there is a difference between joy and happiness. Our society seems to be obsessed with “happiness”. Whereas joy is not an emotion, but a spiritual principle. Happiness is a feeling: it comes and goes depending on the circumstances. Joy, rather, is a choice and, therefore, can be cultivated. Joy can be experienced and practiced no matter your circumstances. The simple joy of being alive is “so cosmically basic it’s mind blowing: the joy to be here, connected, animated, breathing, blessed, resilient, to be broken, to be open, to have what was, what’s left, what’s coming.” What a joy it is to be part of reality. If you look at life through this lens of joy, you will naturally see *more*.

Likewise, you must have an open mind. You, like every person you meet, are a spiritual being, capable of incredible conclusions about life. Do your best to honor and understand those around you, especially those who don’t come to the same conclusions you do. Accept that there are two sides to every story and that there are times when it is better to be kind than to be right. Listen to those around you. Teach and be teachable.

Also, be open to letting *situations* be your teacher. If something great or something less-than-ideal happens, ask yourself, “What am I learning through this?” Take difficult situations deep into your soul. Use them as grist for the mill. In the parable of the man who built his house on the sand and the man who built his house on the rock, you’ll notice that storms came to both houses. Storms and difficulties are inevitable, no matter your preparation. It’s what you glean from those storms that is your choice.

Secondly, you must work hard and be incredibly intentional with your time, your words, your deeds, your knowledge and your skills.

All of these marvelous opportunities lie before you. They are yours for the taking, my friends. ***But YOU must rise to meet them.*** You can easily go through these four years unremarkable. It is your choice. Study hard and get the grades. If a certain studying style isn’t working, do something different. If you’re struggling with a subject, go to office hours or go to tutoring. Do not be too proud to seek help. If you’re interested in a professor’s work or research, go visit him or her during office hours to learn more.

Be present: to yourself, to others, and to God. Look people in the eye when you speak to them. Ask questions in class. Learn the names of the people on your hall and those that

sit around you in class. If you're "bad at names", make a vow to yourself that you will get better. Never, ever text during class. Write notes of encouragement to those that you care for most. Have a firm handshake. Engage in spirited dialogue about things that matter. Have conversations with those who look, talk and think differently than you do. Join a cause that is bigger than you and me. Be humble and pursue what is good and right.

Go on a mission trip. Study abroad. Volunteer your time. Have fun. Go to movies and concerts. Have picnics in Cameron Park. Show hospitality to an international student. Arrange dinner parties. Write thank you notes. And be brave and confident.

Be present. Be remarkably awake to life and all of its subtle gifts. If you're always stressed; if you're always absorbed in your text messaging while you walk to class; if you're always worried about the grades instead of learning the information, you will not be able to be alive in the moment. You will miss out on a lot of life. Take a look at what it would mean for you to be more present to yourself, to God and to those around you.

Thirdly, you must give grace to yourself and to others.

During my four years at Baylor, I had to let go of that notion that I knew everything. I also had to let go of my addiction to productivity, which I'm still working on. I learned that my worth was not correlated with how many things I check off of my to-do list. Our worth as humans, on the contrary, is tied directly to *who we are* and not what we do.

You have a circadian rhythm for a reason. You have to sleep and you have to rest. Those can be two different things. Sleep implies that you're unconscious. Rest means that you're taking a break from the stresses and obligations of life, whether that be playing with a dog, having dinner with friends, reading a book in the sunshine, or whatever you do. Have just a bit of leisure time and don't feel bad about it. Don't lose yourself along this sometimes all-consuming path of becoming educated.

Don't forget your family. As I got to know myself better during my time at Baylor, I also got to know my upbringing from a different angle. My love for my family grew exponentially. I am indebted to them for their patience and willingness to listen. My mother's endless dedication to and love for my sister and I is apparent in everything she does. My father's intentionality in every interaction and constant desire to do better and to be better are inspiring. My parents' humility in their work and dedication to integrity are astounding. And my sister's passion for motivating and inspiring others is unprecedented. I hope that you, too, come to love your family even more, as I have.

May you not forget the two greatest commandments of all time: to love God and to love others.

While I hope that your time at Baylor brings you great career aspirations, more than that, I hope this place teaches you to become a good human being. I hope you engage your scholarship in practical problems of this world. I hope you work to alleviate suffering and that the peace, joy and love of God shines through each of you.

May the sweet always outweigh the bitter in your lives. When darkness comes, may you drink in all that there is to learn. When the sun shines, may you dance, for you were born for such times of freedom.

I will leave you with one final blessing. It comes from the Celtic day prayer of a monastic community in Northumbria, in northern England:

*May the peace of the Lord Christ go with you, wherever He may send you;
May He guide you through the wilderness, protect you through the storm;
May He bring you home rejoicing at the wonders He has shown you;
May He bring you home rejoicing once again into our doors.*

Thank you.