

Address to the Faculty of Appalachian State University (excerpts)

Dylan Russell, Student Body President

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When I was thinking about what to speak about, I thought: What do I want to leave Appalachian with? What is the essence of an excellent education?

When I think about that, my mind immediately flashes to my First Year Seminar class, “Becoming Lost.” We read works about the philosophy of being lost and the good things that come from getting lost. And we actually went camping and got lost. But one day our Professor came in and gave us a letter that has haunted me to this day, it said.

Dear Teacher:

I am a survivor of a concentration camp.

My eyes saw what no man should witness:

Gas chambers built by learned engineers.

Children poisoned by educated physicians.

Infants killed by trained nurses.

Women and babies shot and burned by high school and college graduates.

So, I am suspicious of education.

My request is: Help your students become human.

Your efforts must never produce learned monsters, skilled psychopaths, educated Eichmann.

Reading, writing, and arithmetic are important only if they serve to make our children more humane.

I read that and my heart sank. In that moment I realized what myself and every other student was capable of. The potential for good and evil rests in each of us. The fact that folks were willing to kill another human being all because someone told them to do so – that’s scary.

Flash-forward a year and I saw that letter come to life in the classroom. It was the first day of school and pouring rain. And our professor asked us to go outside and count the red and green cars. We were all livid, yet did so without grumbling or

protesting. We came back in soaked, arguing about numbers, and extremely frustrated. And he had the audacity to ask us, "Why did you do that?" To which we replied, "Because you told us so!" He said, "Why? Not even sheep would subject themselves to that." He told us what to do and we willingly did it.

When I think of "the essence of an excellent education," unfortunately I immediately think about everything that I have been told—all the pieces of knowledge that I have accepted as facts. I have somehow forgotten that discovering and questioning is the true essence of an excellent education....

We need you to teach us what it means to be more humane. We need you to teach us how to research and discover new ideas. We need you to challenge us in ways that we could never imagine. We need you to make us question why we are here, what we are learning, and what we hold to be true in a way that is most natural to us....

Students have the opportunity to be engaged in the issues that face us, whereas you have the opportunity to help us address these issues head on. I'm thankful for you because many of you have inspired me, many of you have met me where I am, and many of you have encouraged me to ask questions. Because of the excellent education I have received from you, you have touched my heart, and I know you will touch many more. We are forever indebted to what we have learned from you. Thanks again.