

Juniata: You and Me

Betty Ann Cherry

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I am very honored to have been asked to address the Class of 2016 at graduation. To each of you, to your family and friends: my heartiest congratulations! I have spent all of my life here in Huntingdon and at Juniata, born when my grandfather was president and my father a professor, and grew up with my dad as president. I then married a Juniatian of the Class of 1953 and started teaching in 1962. Ron and I retired in 1998 after thirty-six years of teaching. I still live in Huntingdon, so I have been a part of Juniata a long time. Fifty years ago, the first class I taught, the Class of 1966, sat where you are now, and I will be with them, celebrating their fiftieth reunion in June. To say I am excited this spring is an understatement! The juxtaposition of these two events, involving present students and those of my first class, is more than I could have imagined in my wildest dreams. Thank you, Juniata.

As each of you sitting here knows, relationships matter. They are what life is about, and therefore each of us has the responsibility to know how to initiate and maintain them. Human beings are made for—created for—relationships. Whether you believe that “no one is an island” or “it takes a village,” you are acknowledging the fact that no matter who you are, where you come from, or what you do, you will be and should be in relationships with other human beings. Now the “biggie” for today: I sincerely hope that your time at Juniata has helped you to be better at relationships—to value them, to nurture them, and to recognize that you are more fully human because you are in relationships. Student-student, student-faculty, student-facilities, student-administration, etc., your years here at Juniata have been full of all kinds of relationships, and I bet that those relationships are what have made your time here important to you. Likewise, the community called Juniata will forever have your relationships as an integral part of it. And the stories you tell about Juniata? Are they not really about the experiences you had in those relationships?

Human beings are persons and are to be treated with respect, period. Inappropriate behavior is inappropriate and even harmful because it does not respect the personhood of another human being, thus making good, healthy, beneficial relationships impossible. I hope that many times during your years here, you have come to recognize when and why your own behavior has been detrimental to a relationship; likewise, I hope you have learned what helpful, encouraging, respectful behavior looks like and that you

are better at practicing that behavior now than when you were a freshman. Are you? Did you take advantage of the “glass bubble” nature of your time here to learn how to treat others as human beings, as a “Thou” and not as a thing an “It,” as Martin Buber suggests?¹

How many of you had your own bedroom before you came to Juniata? How many of you had the experience of actually sharing a room with someone else over an extended period of time? Up until this year, you had no other choice in campus housing. How did you like having a roommate? What a great learning experience that was. The ways of living together range all the way from the extreme of no rules or structure to dividing the room in half, with one half for the sloppy student and the other half for the tidy student—which is exactly what our son did in his freshman year at college.

Here’s a story. In the late eighties, I was acting associate dean of students for two years, and it fell to me to deal with any and all roommate issues. There were a number of them, but there is one I have never forgotten. Two women who had never shared a room with anyone dug in their heels, and each insisted the other had to move out. The poor resident assistant found one woman’s stuff put out in the hall by the other one. After several meetings, one of the women gave in and both had a rough semester, after which the other woman was able to move in with a friend. I did not speak to either woman again until her senior year when the one who stayed in the room came to my office in the History Department, located in the I. Harvey Brumbaugh House. She wanted me to know that she was now a resident assistant dealing with two instances of upset freshmen roommates, and did I remember her when she was so upset as a freshman? We both had a good laugh, and it was clear she had learned a lot about relationships in her time at Juniata. You do not always know what you have learned until you have lived it. College roommates are a great way to learn to live with someone before you actually choose with whom you want to live, where, and for how long. It is not always easy to remember that your roommate is not an “It” to be moved about the chessboard by you. He or she is a “Thou” to your “I.”

Madrigal dinner has not been around forever. When Ellis Hall was new, a recent graduate was hired as its first director after a year of trying to figure out just what was needed. He was a very creative, charismatic guy, and Madrigal was his idea in 1970 or ’71. Traditions grow and change. The tent city that goes up the week before drawing for tables at Madrigal was added close to ten years later. It took several years for Madrigal to catch on, but as its popularity grew so did the desire to get certain tables for the singing of the “Twelve Days of Christmas”—another addition to the original idea. It was cold in December, and students were standing outside for several hours. Security was not happy, and the director of Ellis Hall, who also was part of Center Board (comparable to your Juniata Activities Board), was not happy and the whole unhappy situation landed in Center Board’s lap. I was the faculty representative on Center Board, and we had several meetings trying to figure out how to handle the problem. Andy Murray, then Campus Minister and the musician who played the “Twelve Days of Christmas,” suggested that we

incorporate the pre-drawing activity as part of the Madrigal experience. We did, and in time we got the tent city that you now know. I knew it was going to work when I heard a father, a professor at Juniata, give up the small electric heater from his office for his daughter to use in her tent for a week. Just think a minute of all the relationships in this single tradition. Many, many opportunities to treat another person with respect—to have an I-Thou relationship.

Students who have leadership positions on campus hopefully demonstrate this kind of relationship. Students have had considerable say at Juniata since the establishment of Student Government in the mid-thirties. We are honoring one former student leader, Carl D. Glaeser, '77, today. Here is a story of his leadership as president of Student Government. We had enacted a full-scale curricular change in 1971, set to start with the class of 1975. By that time, students had lots of suggestions on how to improve it. Student Government got permission to not only cancel classes for a day of campus-wide discussion, but also to involve members of the faculty and administration with the students in structured groups all around campus during the morning and early afternoon. Then the entire community turned up in Oller Hall/Rosenberger Auditorium in mid-afternoon to share with each other the suggestions from the groups. To my surprise and delight, nearly everybody came. The faculty-student committee that dealt with curricular matters was on stage, and I was a member of the committee. For two hours, different students talked and then reached an outcome that did make changes. The important point here is that ideas were shared, by and large, in a respectful way because there had been good ground work done by Student Government, treating conflicting ideas with little of the partisan rancor we see and hear today in our political arenas. How often, however, do we get leaders who set out to tell people what to do (those my-way-or-the-highway types), rather than involve others in the decision-making process? That is, how often do we end up with relationships are only I-It? Neither the leader nor the community of which he or she is a part benefits in this situation.

The most obvious place where relationships matter is when we talk of teams, whether in sports, band, theater, business case competition, or debate. Did you know that before Juniata had a football team, it had a wonderful debate team that won the Pennsylvania state championship by beating Swarthmore? When there are winners and losers, all need to pay attention to relationships. Women's volleyball started at Juniata in the late seventies, and for many years former players returned for the finals or for the last home game of the season to encourage the current team and to reconnect with former players. There were a lot I-Thou relationships where respect and trust in fellow teammates prevailed.

Anyone who has been on a team of any kind knows what I am talking about. Relationships make a difference, and most coaches know it. Attitude is mighty important; team leaders also matter. An example of this was a player who should have taken lessons from LeBron James. Talent is also important, and there was a short, scrappy basketball player awhile back who did not get it. He was a very good

shooter, and the team was good but not great. There was a lot of speculation about why. He was an advisee of mine who kept complaining to me about the rest of the team. He simply could not see his behavior as part of the problem; after all, he made the most baskets, game after game. He could take a lesson from LeBron, who is at his best often when he plays the role of playmaker, by seeing where his teammates are and who has the best chance to score and then sending the ball his way. This reminds me of all the talking heads who watched Villanova win the NCAA tournament. They kept referring to the way they played as “unselfish” and then would show plays that demonstrated it. It was very clear that they won because each had a relationship with each of the other players that was one of trust and respect. Yet none of them will lead in the NBA draft.

One last story comes out of what we teachers do every day. Yes, we teach. We interact in a variety of ways with students in our classes, labs, and activities. You see us doing all this, but what you do not see is the constant thinking about you, about many of you. We are reflecting on not just how a class goes, but on you, individually, and your place in this particular community. When my husband and I returned from a year in Sapporo, Japan, I was much more aware of international students in the first semester back. In my two sections of the required senior course, Senior Value Studies, there were several international students. Two women stood out, one in each section, because they were willing to participate and be involved. My schedule and theirs must have matched in some way because I saw them on a somewhat regular basis. The one, Sue, was always with several students, mostly American, and the other, Judy, was either alone or with one or two students, usually other international students.

By the end of the semester, when they turned in their papers, I could identify each without their names on them because Sue’s was full of experiences with other students, and Judy did not mention one other student. It only mentioned the one professor who was her advisor. She was very happy with her academic experience, and that was all she wanted to write about. Both papers were well written and it was obvious they had had very good experiences at Juniata. But I had a regret; Judy had missed out on what I think is essential to a Juniata experience—namely, relationships. The topic of the paper encouraged discussion of relationships and, when added to what I had seen of her on campus, I had to wonder if I was correct in assuming that she had not put time into relationships. Note, I used the word *regret* not as a judgment in any way. We are all different, and heaven knows there are lots of ways to relate to others, but I wish for you at least the experience of an I-Thou relationship here at Juniata because I think that we can do it well, most of the time.

Choosing which stories from the hundreds I know, after a lifetime here, made this a hard assignment. I knew what I wanted you to understand about Juniata, namely the importance this community places on relationships because an I-Thou relationship builds you and your community, while slipping into an I-It relationship destroys you and your community.

I would like to think that each of you, members of the class of 2016, could now be in an I-Thou relationship with me, not the same as that which I have with the class of 1966, but hopefully not an I-It relationship!

NOTES

1. Martin Buber, *I and Thou* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1937).