

Horticulture!

James Tuten

Freshman Convocation Speech

August 24, 2009

James Tuten is Associate Professor of history at Juniata College.



President Kepple, Provost Lakso, faculty, guests and especially class of 2013. Today I would like to introduce you to someone—she’s dead, but I’m a historian so you really had to see that coming. Her name was Dorothy Parker. Parker, like some of you, hailed from New Jersey. At the height of her creativity she made up part of what was called the “Vicious Circle,” better known as the Algonquin Roundtable. Some would call the Roundtable *the* group of New York-based writers in the 1920s and 1930s. They earned their sobriquet because they usually met for lunch in the Algonquin Hotel. Parker herself wrote poems, short stories, criticism, two Oscar-nominated movie scripts, and stand-up comedy material. Her wit is the stuff of legend. Parker’s satirical approach to American culture is part of a strain in American writing that includes forerunners like Mark Twain, contemporaries like H. L. Menken and descendants like P. J. O’Rourke and Stephen Colbert. I suspect she would be enormously popular if in her prime today.

I will share just a few of her many serrated witticisms:

One lunch hour, when some of the men in the Algonquin Group began praising the qualities of a woman they knew, Parker interjected: “That woman speaks eighteen languages and can’t say No in any of them.”²

When her Algonquin Group friend Mary Sherwood had a baby, Parker wired her—collect—
“Good work Mary—we all knew you had it in you.”³

She even offered some guidance on how we are to consider jokes: “There’s a hell of a distance
between wise-cracking and wit. Wit has truth in it; wise-cracking is simply calisthenics with words.”⁴

I agree with Dorothy Parker there, which leads us to our real subject today—horticulture. Parker
was challenged to use the word “horticulture” in a sentence and, famously, she immediately came back
with: “You can lead a horticulture, but you can’t make her think!”⁵

I want to challenge you, the class of 2013, to make horticulture your watchword or rallying cry
for these four years. You know about rallying cries: “Remember The Alamo” “Next Year in Jerusalem,”
and “Stay classy, Huntingdon.” As faculty and as a college we can lead you there—we can create
opportunities and make demands of you in order for you to get the credential that a bachelor’s degree is—
we can lead you to culture—but we can’t make you think in the larger sense. In the largest context I am
saying that the word “horticulture” is your reminder—a mnemonic device—to yourself and each other to
apply discretionary effort. It’s a mnemonic device to urge you to strive, to go, to act, or to apply effort
during this incredible opportunity you have of being at Juniata. We’ll help lead you to a whole new world
of knowledge and experiences, but it will be up to you to dive in and explore that world.

Let me define the difference between necessary and discretionary effort in the college context.
Necessary effort is how much you must, at a minimum, apply yourself to your education in order to get
your degree. Discretionary effort is the difference between the necessary effort and the maximum you are
capable of applying.

I’m going to offer you three arenas in which “horticulture” might serve you as a rallying cry to
apply discretionary effort: academics, attendance at cultural events, and extracurricular activities.

ACADEMICS

The first and most obvious arena to consider is doing your course work. Necessary effort (before
horticulture) will net many of you C pluses and B minuses. You will find that it will take discretionary
effort to earn As. Don’t believe me? Here are the numbers. From 2005 through this May’s
commencement Juniata graduated 1642 people. Forty-four of them graduated *Summa Cum Laude* (that is,
with a 3.9 grade point average). That’s a wee 2.68 percent. Oh, and three people had perfect 4.0 GPAs
which is less than two tenths of a percent. It takes a lot of horticulture to graduate with a 3.9 from Juniata.
Now I was no *summa cum laude* and at least one reason for that was that in my first year of college I had
no notion of discretionary effort, but I began to catch on to that idea as a sophomore.

This summer I packed up my office and moved into the wonderfully restored Founders Hall.
During that process I was surprised to uncover some sheets of notes from a theory course I took in

graduate school. In that class I heard many terms and names for the first time. In the last pages of my notebook I kept a running list of them and once a week or so, when I needed a break from reading or writing, I would take the list over to the library reading room and try to fill some of the holes in my knowledge. In a small way I was applying that discretionary effort. I rallied to horticulture and when you exercise your desire to learn by looking someone or something up in your iPhone, you too are a horticulturalist.

The very best students don't really take summer off. Horticulture goes year-round. They pursue internships, research positions (start looking in November), or they read or study for the MCAT, LSAT and such. They relax the pace in the summer, perhaps, and they may not be in the classroom in June and July, but they make progress. In our highly competitive world that's one place that they gain an advantage.

Similarly, you don't have to study abroad to graduate from Juniata or from Princeton. That's a horticulture thing. You can choose to go to Ecuador, Mexico, Ireland, Germany, Greece, Russia, Spain to name but a few opportunities. It takes more effort to learn that second language, to go some place and make new friends all over again, to learn to eat different food, spend a strange currency. But those cultures are there if you choose and that experience will change you for the better. I have never had an advisee come back from study abroad who didn't believe it the best thing they had ever done.

So if your roommate is trying to decide whether she should burnish her Spanish skills by going to Orizaba, Mexico next summer or instead make some bank at Sheetz—help her out with a big... “Horticulture!”

CAMPUS LECTURES, PLAYS, CONCERTS, EXHIBITS AND LIBERAL ARTS SYMPOSIUM

As part of College Writing Seminar Lab you will be expected to attend events on campus. There will be lectures, art gallery openings, instrumental and choral concerts, plays, and probably some things that defy easy categorization. Quite a few of you will perform in these events (a big horticulture from me to you), but not everyone is a performer. Even so, you should take in as many of these events as you can. Let me give you two specific reasons: one for those among you who trust social scientific evidence and another for those who favor qualitative forms of evidence. There are legions of researchers that study higher education and how you learn, why, and so forth. George Kuh, one of the giants in this field, has shown that attendance at these kinds of events leads directly to growth in cognitive complexity, academic knowledge and aesthetic knowledge.⁶

My qualitative or anecdotal case is valuable as it comes from a different authority on higher education. It comes from my brother Tim. His pedigree in matters of higher education is excellent because he spent more years as an undergraduate (nearly ten) than anyone I have known. Obviously he

did not go to Juniata and sadly his college offered no four-year guarantee. Nevertheless, Tim knows college. In his super-super-super-super senior year he was made to go to lectures organized by the Business department and after those talks he told me if he could start college again the thing he would do differently was to attend all the great talks he had missed. Like you I was stunned twice by this statement because I expected him to say he would have gone to class, or maybe limited himself to one major, but he was talking about what he learned, about the rewards of discretionary effort, about horticulture. I hope you will learn from Tim's example.

So, in September when the Trey McIntyre Project is to perform and your buddy says: nah, I'm gonna stay here and play Madden 2009 one more time—you look him square in the eyes and say: “Dude, horticulture!”

CLUBS, SPORTS AND ORGANIZATIONS

Another particularly well-regarded researcher on higher education says that extracurricular involvement develops critical thinking skills. In fact, and I hesitate to say this aloud: you probably develop as much cognitively out of the classroom as in it.

In particular, taking part in clubs, sports and organizations leads to the development of leadership skills, team-work skills, it enhances your social self-confidence and maturation, you grow cognitively, and you can make friends. You will also have a great deal of fun and like college so much more.⁷

Folks, if attending lectures and artistic productions and being involved in student clubs didn't matter, then you could have stayed home, and gotten your degree online from Tuten's Speedee University.

In two weeks when clubs really start in earnest and you think you don't have the energy to go the Circle K meeting, or can't get up Saturday morning to go the Habitat For Humanity Build, or have yet to feel comfortable with the other members of the Archery Club, place a reminder in your Blackberry calendar for the meeting time that says: Horticulture!

On this point I am going to speak directly to the men in the class of 2013. Another statistical trait common across higher education and in evidence here at Juniata is that male students are much less likely than female students to engage in extracurricular activities, excluding sports. Gentlemen, I am challenging you to step up. This is a choice. If you don't do this you are agreeing to get less out of your college experience and that could come back to haunt you when you are seeking a job or entrance to medical school or whatever your desire is. In fact, research shows this kind of involvement in college is among the strongest predictors of future success. Importantly, our society loses something if you come out of this less skilled than you might have been.⁸

I hope that you see the wit and truth behind horticulture. I hope that you will remember that you hold tremendous potential at your discretion and finally, I hope you will challenge each other daily to spend that effort on the things that matter.

Thank you.

¹ The “Horticulture” logo is by Sarah Erdely ’12.

² Alexander Woollcott, *While Rome Burns* (New York: Grosset and Dunlap, 1936)

³ Woolcott.

⁴ *Paris Review* Summer 1956, 81.

⁵ John Keats, *You Might As Well Live: The Life and Times of Dorothy Parker* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1970), 45-46.

⁶ George D. Kuh, “The Other Curriculum: Out-of-Class Experiences Associated with Student Learning and Personal Development” *The Journal of Higher Education* 66 (March 1995) 123-166.

⁷ Ernest T. Pascarella and Patrick t. Terenzini, *How College Affects Students Volume 2, A Third Decade of Research* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2005) 616-617.

⁸ Robin Wilson, “The New Gender Divide” *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, January 26, 2007) 53, A36. See also: Susan A. Dumais, “Cultural Capital, Gender, and School Success: The Role of Habitus” *Sociology of Education* (January 2002) 75, 44-69.