

What Do You Want to Be?

Bill Thomas and Jerry Kruse

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Bill Thomas is Professor of Information Technology at Juniata College. Jerry Kruse is the John '54 and Irene '58 Dale Professor of Information Technology, Computer Science, and Mathematics, and is Assistant Provost at Juniata College.

Jerry Kruse: Ladies and gentlemen, Bill Thomas, the fiftieth winner of the Beachley Prize for Distinguished Teaching. He's the "Golden Beachley!" It's like he should be out on the Quidditch field or something. By the way, Bill is the epitome of calm and cool, but I know he's annoyed with me right now for pointing out this "Golden Beachley" thing. So, just like Bill right now, you may be wondering why I'm up here too, the twenty-seventh awardee of the Beachley Prize for Distinguished Service.

Bill Thomas: As Jerry mentioned, he won the Beachley award for service. It was amazing that we both won the award together in the same year. Winning these awards together was the only thing that could make it better for us. Jerry is also here so that in case I pass out, he can drag me off the stage and keep going with the speech. Right now I put the odds at 50/50 that is going to happen.

Kruse: It turns out that, unbeknownst to each of us, Bill and I were involved in the other's nomination for the Beachley awards, and so we thought it would be special for us to share this speech together because so much of our professional lives have been intertwined. As Oliver Wendell Holmes once said, "There is no friend like an old friend who has shared our morning days, no greeting like his welcome, no homage like his praise," which sums it up pretty nicely.

Thomas: Hey, I think Jerry just called me "old!"

Kruse: And we know why you're here, and it isn't to spend too much time listening to us, so at the very least we promise that our speech won't be twice as long because there are two of us.

Thomas: As we thought about what we might share with you today, one topic resonated with both Jerry and me. We wanted to take a few moments today to think about "Who do you want to be." How will you choose to interact with those around you as you begin your adventure outside of Juniata College? Will you treat those around you with respect, dignity, and kindness? Will you help those around you succeed and be the best that they can be? Or will you choose to tear down those around you, either through actions or words? You can choose to build up or tear down; the choice is really yours to make.

In a faculty meeting at the beginning of the fall 2016 semester, President Troha said, “We are truly blessed to be in this place doing the work that we do.” I found what he said to be extremely motivational for me as I moved through the academic year. This is an example of a statement that builds.

Kruse: I fully admit that when I was where you are now, preparing to graduate, I did not really know who I wanted to be. At least upon reflection, the idealized version of who I wanted to be had no grounding in reality. But in my defense, it was the 1980s and anything was possible! Just watch some videos that were on MTV at the time. But Bill and I hope to reflect on our journeys and to share some words of wisdom with you.

Thomas: We are blessed to be here together, as you all start a new journey. The word “blessed” is very much in vogue today . . .

Kruse: I just tweeted out a picture of all of you with the #BLESSED. I’m @krusegw on Twitter.

Thomas: . . . but I think that it does describe how fortunate we are to be at Juniata College. With the challenges you have faced and are soon to face, and all the places we could be, where else would you rather be than at Juniata? But now it is time for you to move on from this place.

Kruse: And as you begin your journey, we hope that you will be as fortunate as we have been. Now let us share some anecdotes on how others built us.

Thomas: When I was leaving industry to start teaching, we had four young children. To make the switch I would have needed to take a significant pay cut, and I finally decided one day I just couldn’t do it. My wife Tilda said to me, “If this is what you want to do, don’t worry about the money. We will figure it out.” I have never looked back. I have always enjoyed teaching, and as you can tell I haven’t missed many meals along the way either.

Kruse: I have to say that I have some of the most amazing colleagues, in both my academic departments (Information Technology/Computer Science and Math) as well as in the Provost’s Office. And my family, I can’t even start to thank them for their love and support. As for the many other great colleagues we have had the privilege to serve with, I don’t know that we can get to all of them in a meaningful way. So as Bill and I work our way through this speech, we are going to mention some people, but not all, who helped us along. Just know it’s not a complete list!

When I started here, there was just a single Math and Computer Science department. And during my first semester, Sue Esch and Loren Rhodes made sure to let me know that they were aware that things were going well. No formal sit-down meeting or anything like that, but maybe a brief interaction in the hall, “Hey, I hear things are going well in class.” Those small messages were so empowering to me, and our wish for you is that you could both empower someone by giving unexpected positive feedback as well as receive unexpected positive feedback.

Thomas: Jerry and I went through promotion to full professor at the same time. Ask your professors about this. In a bit of an understatement, let me tell you that this can be a stressful and time-consuming process. But it was also empowering because during this yearlong process we learned how many people wanted us to succeed. So many people stepped up to help and advise us on how to navigate the process: Loren Rhodes, Marlene Burkhardt, John Wright, John Bukowski, and Donna Weimer to name a few. It was humbling and overwhelming to consider all the people who were willing to take their time to help us succeed by reviewing our materials, providing suggestions, and listening to us . . .

Kruse: . . . okay—me—whine.

Thomas: This really motivates you to pay it forward and help mentor others in the same situation.

Kruse: During the first ten years I was here, I never spoke at a faculty meeting. The 2008 Jerry Kruse would be in stitches at the thought that the 2018 Jerry Kruse is here talking to all of you. But one thing 2008 Jerry Kruse did do was be open to things outside his professional comfort level. So when his friend, David Widman, invited him to workshop on assessment, specifically on performance tasks, he said “yes.” By the way, food is a big part of my life—and lunch that first day was steak! That was a win, no matter what else happened in the workshop. But seriously, here’s the life-changing part. Shortly after we returned to campus, we presented at one of the early Scholarship of Teaching and Learning (SoTL) brown bag lunches. Jim Tuten suggested I might be able to embed these assessments directly in my course, and then Dave Drews approached me and asked if I wanted to work with him.

At that moment, the trajectory of my career changed. That’s when, in the movie of my life, the dramatic music would start and lead into a montage of all these great things happening: assessment, international opportunities, committees, SoTL!

Thomas: Now we would like to describe ways that you are able to build up others. I have been noticing lately short positive messages on the white boards in BAC. “Have a great day Juniata,” or a corny joke, “What’s a dentist’s favorite time of day? Tooth hurty.” These things make a difference, and people notice.

Sometimes we forget to be kind, but kindness does make a difference. It is in the small things along the way, things like:

- saying “thank you,” offering a kind word, giving a warm welcome;
- being sure to share with someone when you see they did a good job;
- telling people how you appreciate the work that they are doing;
- giving someone your full attention when they are talking to you;

Kruse [pulls out phone]: “Thanks man, for doing this speech.”

- or listening carefully when they need a place to vent.

Kruse: Bill has always listened to me, and the great thing is that he doesn't always try to fix my problems, but he just listens. This reminds me of a quote by Danusha Veronica Goska, "And yet when we study the biographies of our heroes, we learn that they spent years in preparation doing tiny, decent things before one historical moment propelled them to center stage." Because most days you won't get a grade or some other official feedback, focus on those "tiny, decent things" which Bill just mentioned earlier. Show up every day and work through whatever challenges you may be given. Sometimes, as you're grinding through, your "tiny, decent thing" might not hit the mark, but I am sure that your friends, family, and co-workers will appreciate your effort.

Finally, our graduation wish is for you to find, like we have, a job you love. I've always said (at least since 1999) that I have the best job in the world.

Thomas: For me, this job is definitely in the top 5%. There are some jobs that I'd rate higher, but I can't throw a 98-mph fastball!

Kruse: Nick Offerman, who played Ron Swanson on my favorite TV show, *Parks and Rec*, said the following at last year's University of Illinois commencement ceremony: "Leslie Knope once said that Teddy Roosevelt once said, 'Far and away the best prize that life has to offer is the chance to work hard at work worth doing.'"

Thomas: We are all so happy to see you graduate, but of course we will miss you. I see the pride of your success in the faces of my colleagues at Graduation. We are so happy to see you succeed.

Kruse: We clap for every single one of you! When you are walking across the stage with your diploma, check out Bill and me. We're clapping.

Thomas: We're in this with you. Your success is our success. We will miss you, but please keep in touch, visit, send us an email.

Kruse and Thomas [to each other]: High Five!