

Livingston Lecture—October 2008

Thank you Christy . . . looking over the ballroom, I can only say that while I'm gratified to see so many friends, colleagues and students in the audience I wish you would have taken me up on my offer to skip the speech and just show up for the reception. . . some of my best presentations have been to empty rooms and I really was hoping to repeat that experience.

Well, as you know, it's customary on occasions such as this to begin one's remarks with a series of thank yous. . .

... and I want to especially thank the nominating committee---for whom a special ring in hell is being reserved---for their generosity in offering me this wonderful honor—which comes with the expectation of some sort of performance—in the midst of the busiest semester I've had in the 17 years I've been on this campus. To quote Yogi Berra, "I want to thank everyone who made this day necessary."

I'd also like to thank my colleagues in the department of Humanities and Religious Studies, who have consistently supported my odd fancies and allowed me to take advantage of the opportunities that have come my way. I also appreciate the presence in the audience of my beloved husband of 34 years, Bruce, who must surely be wondering at all this pomp and circumstance since he has to listen to me (or at least pretend to listen to me) just about every day.

Finally, I'd like to thank the Livingston family for their support of the university and their commitment to providing us with an opportunity each year to remind our community of the values, beliefs and behaviors which give our profession its purpose and meaning.

When I was told that I had been chosen to give this year's lecture, my first impulse was to offer my fantasy of the best Oscar acceptance speech ever—and quote Groucho Marx as Captain Jeffrey T. Spalding in *Animal Crackers*: saying "Hello, I must be going" and leaving the podium. But then I realized that while that sort of Livingston lecture might make you REALLY happy and add glory to MY legend, it wouldn't do justice to Professor Livingston's legacy. . . and I really would like to do that this afternoon.

Since my arrival on campus in fall of 1991, I have attended every Livingston lecture except one and I have always left the lecture feeling inspired, rejuvenated and re-committed to my work after hearing each colleague's remarks. For me, this sense of annual re-dedication is Professor Livingston's legacy and one that persists, even so many years after his death. Although I never met Professor Livingston, I find important lessons in our annual meeting to celebrate his life and influence on our university and that is my topic this afternoon. In part because I suffered from a complete brain freeze which has persisted in the months since I was informed of this honor, I decided I would call on the wit and learning of others—and in doing so, demonstrate some of my own. So I came up with a title for my presentation, long before I had any idea of what I might say . . . and consulted a variety of authors to generate some aphorisms which I'd like to think Professor Livingston would approve of. I've titled my lecture "Aphorisms for the Academy." I might have also called my presentation "quotations for the querulous" since my intention is to share some sayings which I think offer advice or present morals in short, pithy ways.

My dog-eared copy of *Webster's Ninth New Collegiate Dictionary* defines an aphorism as "1: a concise statement of a principle" and "2: a terse formulation of a truth or sentiment" (p. 95). As I prepared for this lecture, I was struck by how easily my ideas could be expressed as a group of aphorisms, many of them appearing to be overworked phrases from everyday life, which could take on surprising relevance and a new vibrancy when I applied them to my experiences at Sac State. I also wondered how Professor Livingston might react to the Sac State he'd find in 2008. What would his response be to the changes that have taken place on our campus since his

retirement in 1981? Since I'd prefer not to put words into his mouth, I decided to try to find quotations that might reflect his values and principles and use them as launching pads for a series of my own meditations.

Now, I believe the art of quotation is just that---an art, albeit perhaps a minor one. One major aspect of this art is knowing when to use a quotation—that is, at what moment to drop it into a conversation or text. For many of us, a well-placed quotation, delivered with a kind of casual authority establishes one as widely read and a person of reasonable erudition. A second element of the art of quotation is in selecting whom you quote. One ought to only quote people whose utterances are unmistakably amusing, subtle, learned or profound. And in trying to do so in this talk, I am acting on an observation of the American playwright, Wilson Mizner, who once said, "If you steal from one author, it's plagiarism, if you steal from many, it's research."

So, among the other things I've been doing the past few months, I've been researching the creativity and wisdom of many authors and in doing so, I have spent a lot of time exploring the work of some great thinkers of the past and present. As the cultural critic, Fran Lebowitz once wrote, "Original thought is like original sin: both happened before you were born to people you could not have possibly met." My image of Professor Livingston is of a person who would appreciate my efforts to, paraphrasing Sir Isaac Newton, ". . . Stand on the shoulders of giants." Especially since I received many suggestions when I told colleagues the title of my presentation, I should mention my criteria for selecting these aphorisms---I've chosen a few that have particularly caused me to smile or reflect. . .if nothing else, Professor Livingston's legacy seems to require that academics demonstrate that they are members of a thinking species.

Please, also understand that I am not attributing any of these phrases to Professor Livingston.

Over the years, what has stayed with me most clearly after each Livingston lecture has been my sense that Professor Livingston's legacy is based in his ability to attach pleasure (his and that of those around him) to his life and to ground his work as a teacher and a colleague to some basic principles. For me, as I have been inspired by those who have been inspired by his example, his life and career provide us with a consistent model of what it can mean to be productive, skillful and influential. As a role model, I think Professor Livingston and the respect his name still evokes, reflects a simple but powerful aphorism, one which, I believe, he would support if he was a member of our faculty today. . .that aphorism is that "values never change." Certainly the past several years have brought tumultuous and deep changes to our campus, our state and the nation, but we still stand for something---actually a basic set of somethings, a core set of values, which delineate what stays the same even during periods of transition. Oddly enough, although I am still skeptical about their use, as I have worked with folks in different parts of the campus to prepare our WASC Educational Effectiveness Report, I have been repeatedly drawn back to President Gonzalez's Destination 2010 goals. . .and in them I find proof of this idea that our university operates within a long-standing framework of values. Despite a kind of persistent, cyclical skepticism. . . to my amazement, our mission statement, Destination 2010 goals and strategic plan repeat and reinforce core values which I believe were in place as far as back 1954 when Professor Livingston joined the faculty. Let me remind you, of the two of those values which I find most important, two values that Professor Livingston also seemed to embrace. . .these are the same two values which I think need to shape our actions today---

First, We believe in integrity--- and not just in the absence of deception. . .we want to be completely to be forthright in all our dealings, saying what needs to be said and not just what people want to hear.

Second, We want to do right by all the members of our community---we intend to act with the best interests of all in mind, to treat everyone with whom we have relationships---our faculty colleagues, our staff, our administrators, our students, our visitors, our many stakeholders--with care and respect. We have great people here, people who want to do well, people who are capable of great things and who

come to campus fired up to achieve. I believe its in our best interests to nurture a community that liberates and amplifies the energy these folks create.

Whenever Professor Livingston is mentioned, I am struck by the power of his commitment to this sort of University community. Perhaps because I spent the last weeks of the summer and first weeks of the fall thinking about the Puritans and talking to my students about some core American values which we can trace back to these colonists, I increasingly see the cluster of values I've just described as covenants---solemn, binding agreements. . . . And each year that I attend a Livingston lecture, I leave the auditorium with a renewed sense of the covenantal relationships which are illustrated by Professor Livingston's career and which underpin many of our efforts at Sac State. My sense of Jack Livingston is that he grounded his time on the faculty here in a set of interlinked, sometimes implicit, sometimes explicit. . . obligations and responsibilities which framed his interactions with colleagues and students. He devoted a significant amount of time and energy to helping his colleagues fulfill their obligations to one another, their covenants with our students and their responsibilities to society-at-large, and as a result, he was fully engaged in the everyday life of the university and its shared governance practices.

But Professor Livingston was first and foremost an educator. Although the English poet, WH Auden once described a professor as "one who talks in someone else's sleep," our goals as an educational institution are noble ones. According to Henry Adams, "a teacher affects eternity, he can never tell where his influence stops."

The importance of our educational enterprise brings me to a quotation I'd like to share and expand on. . . I remember, as a child, seeing advertisements for Charles Atlas's body-building secrets in the back pages of the comic books my brothers and I would devour on summer family vacations. One phrase has stuck with me:

- "I was a 98 pound weakling before I got the Charles Atlas plan . ." and I'd like to use that idea to illustrate a vision of the University I think I share with Professor Livingston---so my second aphorism is that "I was a 98 pound weakling before I came to Sac State."

One of the most significant effects of my career at the university can be likened to the muscle building activities of bodybuilders that inspired the use of this phrase to promote Charles Atlas's gyms. One of the great benefits of being an engaged member of this faculty is that there are plentiful and wonderful opportunities to "flex" your muscles. . . As I've worked on different campus activities and initiatives, I have met and been educated by many colleagues—and been given the chance to "pump my self up"—that is to acquire and demonstrate new levels of programmatic, institutional and individual learning. With each new challenge, I have found myself exercising new or underused intellectual muscle and will. I think we are defining and working our major muscle groups as we focus our institutional conversations on the development of useful and philosophically rich teaching and learning activities. I certainly think we should do all we can to ensure that our students have a similar intellectual muscle and character-building experience as a result of being on our campus. This idea of "building" experiences leads me to my next aphorism:

- "If you build it, they will come. . ."

Although the CSU system and our campus mission statements and historical culture are centered in the concept of accessibility, it isn't enough to simply use this "A" word. We must find ways to create access

points for our community, our students, and our staff and faculty colleagues. Professor Livingston seems to have had a clear sense of “who” our “they” are—following in his footsteps, I’d like to suggest that my experiences of the past 17 years lead me to think that we can make our goals and plans more visible, more accessible to the very people we intend as the beneficiaries of our enterprise. To do so enlarges “buy-in” into the activities of the institution as a whole by those both inside and outside our campus community. “Building” even a primitive version of our institutional vision enables us to visualize new ways of engaging in the processes of improvement and effectiveness that are central to our educational and service missions. What’s being built here is surely a kind of “field of dreams”—a place where we can make our ideas public and work to achieve them. And actually, although I am suffering a fairly severe case of WASC accreditation fatigue at the moment, I think the re-accreditation process has helped us identify and focus on our University’s contributions, both actual and potential, to our community. It also provides us with an opportunity to act on our obligations or covenants I referred to earlier— to one another, our students and the society at large. . . .and that idea of action leads me to another quotation:

- The thrilling moment in the 1931 film *Frankenstein*, starring Boris Karloff when Dr. Frankenstein shouts---- “It’s alive!! It’s alive”

Certainly, I must admit that on occasion, my work with students and on various projects, has taken on what one might describe as “Frankensteinian” aspects. I’ve had the experience of something I thought was a good idea going terribly wrong for reasons I hadn’t considered, and certainly my students bring questions and ideas to the classroom which align with their lives, and not mine. The result of both these experiences is a kind of liveliness which can be exhilarating, even while it is occasionally dismaying. David Noble, an American historian who was one of the most influential professors of my graduate work, and who is retiring this year after teaching at the University of Minnesota for 56 years—has described teaching as a “jazz performance” which he improvises each time he enters the classroom. Professor Noble was also recently quoted as saying that the world is no less mysterious to him now than it was when he entered college in 1945. His remarks reinforce my sense that faculty are always learning, that learning is a process and what I love about the process is that it is alive. . .

Another lesson I’m learning, which is centered in the liveliness of life at the university relates to my interests in change agency and institutional culture. When we deal with living things, we need to have mechanisms in place for the unexpected which allow us to acknowledge and deal with difficulties and problems with the care, humor, and the earnest resolve they deserve. For me, Professor Livingston’s most significant contributions to the life of this university are grounded in his efforts as a scholar, a colleague and a mentor----inspirational roles which require you to “grow” and mature to meet the expanding and evolving expectations of those with whom you interact. As I have worked for the past few years on our WASC re-accreditation, the universe of my interactions has expanded in ways that I think must parallel Professor Livingston’s experiences---I am increasingly interested in those we describe as external stakeholders and thinking about what exactly their stake is in our university.

When I was a PhD student, one of the most provocative articles I read was David Kammen’s “Legitimizing myths and Educational Organization.” Kammen posited 2 attributes which he felt provided the foci for legitimization myths in higher education.

The first was that institutions of higher education, “redefine” their students---that is, that somehow, attendance is a transforming experience. Attendance, whether or not any learning actually takes place, confers special status.

Kammen's second point flows from the first. The special status accorded graduates is a flexible quality--- constantly being negotiated and confirmed by society. The university is considered useful to the community in which it is situated, although the nature of this utility is not described with any particular clarity or precision. It seems to me that the frequency with which this argument of usefulness is advanced is due, in some measure to the low esteem in which most Americans hold matters of pure intellect (here I am making passing reference to Richard Hofstadter's 1963 *Anti-intellectualism in American Life* and Susan Jacoby's updating of Hofstadter, *The Age of American Unreason* published in 2007.)

Generally, universities are forced into a dependent posture for social and financial support and often a case needs to be made for them on the basis of something other than the intrinsic merits of scholarship--- while I'd prefer that we make our case on the basis of the discoveries, creations and inventions for which we are responsible; or by referencing our role in cultivating the arts, sciences, languages and literatures; or though our efforts to enliven and sustain public discourse, nurture historical memories, and offer professional training, American society increasingly seem to view higher education as an industry, with a "a market share" as if administrators were corporate executives, faculty were a highly trained work force (more or less) a, knowledge was a product and students, nothing but consumers.

Professor Livingston provides a model that I find more congenial---I believe he operated on the principle that education is a process of life-long, life-enhancing, transforming, life-changing activities.

And that principle leads me to my next aphorism:

- "Rome wasn't built in a day"

It has becoming increasingly clear to me that even with unlimited funding and focused work, initiatives like Destination 2010 and the Strategic Plan are insufficient to the task at hand, especially (as my work of the past 4 years on our WASC reaccreditation has revealed) if the task at hand morphs into something bigger than simply communicating to ourselves and select, interested others about our institutional efforts and values. Initiating, energizing and implementing change in any organization is a multi-dimensional process. . .and in the case of the university, those elements can be further complicated by resistance from members of the community who are, on principle, resistant to any change at all.

Coming to the realization that our work can display not only our greatness, but also has the potential to reveal structural and procedural weakness should, I believe, lead us to re-conceptualize our efforts. We are in the midst of evaluating and recalibrating our entire frame of reference---the values, structures and organizations that contribute to our efforts to make the university a more effective educational institution. Although this aphorism has a Cecil B. DeMille cast to it, I love the idea that what we're building is a lively, complex environment.

The aphorism, "Rome wasn't built in a day" is also a meaningful reminder that enduring, valuable institutional activities are not simply academic flavors of the month. The kind of re-creation and re-orientation I'm describing is incremental, intentional and strategic. As Professor Livingston's 27 year career demonstrates---anything worth doing is worth doing for the long haul and doing well. This dedication to the long term I'm asking you to consider carries a contradiction within it that we should also address, stated rather nicely in this aphorism:

- "The only constant is change"

Certainly, the more anxious among us argue that we live in a world of too many changes----as a matter of fact, I once participated in a Wharton School of Educational Leadership seminar in which a facilitator described the reality of higher education in the early 21st century as a “steady state of change” as though we were all white water rafting down the Colorado river. Even those who are more confident about change— and I belong to the party of partial confidence—are concerned that we have little agreement as to the principles with which we should frame, shape and evaluate change. I’d like to propose that we use an enriched sense of the transformative nature of education as the foundation of our institutional definition and efforts. We know that the average student will have 7 career changes in his or her work lifetime—that’s 7 careers, not 7 different jobs at fast food joints. One of our primary responsibilities as educators, it seems to me is to enable our students to change. To prepare our students for a world of unknown complexity we need to teach them to see the world anew and to understand that while learning can be difficult and demanding, knowing about history, the arts, the sciences and social sciences can provide us with tools to create and command, shape and reflect change.

I think change has a partner in hope—hope promises that change will come and that it will come beneficially. Again, Professor Livingston provides us with a model--- he had the capacity to instill hope in his students, his colleagues, the community, and I suspect, in himself. And I believe a commitment to hope is a fundamental pillar of our profession. It is gratifying to work in higher education, to do something valuable, to work with students and ideas; to be able to think about things. Only a churl or a nutcase would complain about holding a job like ours.. . That may be why our colleague Dan Decious, emeritus professor of Chemistry once introduced me as the most “disgustingly cheerful person” he knew. As the novelist James Branch Cabell observed, “the optimist proclaims we live in the best of all possible worlds; and the pessimist fears it is so.”

It seems that optimism may also have been one of Professor Livingston’s qualities. When Professor Curry proposed that this even honor Jack Livingston, he described Professor Livingston as a person “respected for his sense of humanity, for his wit and good humor” and that brings me to my next aphorism:

- “Are we having fun yet?” –a phrase attributed to Zippy the Pinhead in a 1979 comic strip by Bill Griffith

I’d like to make a plea for the wit and good humored part of Professor Livingston’s legacy. Although our work is important and certain a serious business, I think we can really improve the quality of our institutional life by focusing some of our attention on the fun we’re having. There is plenty of absurdity, silliness and pleasure in our jobs and work with one another to go around, and from my perspective, celebrating those aspects of our institutional life would serve us just as well, if not better than, focusing on our sense that we are undervalued, overworked and mis-used. I have taken to heart a thought of Oscar Wilde’s that I think Professor Livingston would have appreciated. Wilde said, “Some cause happiness wherever they go; others, whenever they go.” I certainly want to be the former. . .as a matter of fact, I think being playful helps us work better. By no means am I expecting that Sac State will become any sort of clown college. . .but I do think that we can enrich the enjoyment factor of this environment by allowing ourselves to recognize how good many of the things we’re doing really are---and allowing our selves more moments of playfulness and joy. Remember the words of the Scarecrow in the Wizard of Oz—“Joy! Rapture! I’ve got a brain.” In doing so, I think we can actually model an approach to the world that might benefit our students. As Bertrand Russell said, “One of the symptoms of an approaching nervous breakdown is the belief that one’s work is terribly important.”

What I think is terribly important, what really stays with me each year that I attend a Livingston Lecture is my recognition that Jack Livingston provides a model for us of what an excellent professor is—the power of his legacy is in practice--- the professoriate as a kind of deed, as a way of living, as something that we can DO. What excites me about the Livingston lecture each fall is that it is like Janus, the Roman god associated with doors and gates and all beginnings who is usually artistically represented with 2 opposing faces. . .by being inspired by the past, and taking a few moments for introspection, I inevitably find myself asking forward-looking questions, questions that each year lead me to think about ways I can improve my classroom practice, my collaboration with colleagues, and my patterns of thinking in order to do a better job of applying my core values to my life and work.

I hope you can use my remarks this afternoon in that spirit---I wanted my contribution to the Livingston lecture legacy to reflect the central elements of Jack Livingston's importance to our University. Even this many years after his death, he casts a bright light on our campus---each year that I attend a lecture, I think about our institutional values and how they align with what I value as a scholar, a teacher and a person; I think about what I have and what I want and my hopes for my colleagues and students. Joining the distinguished list of Livingston lecturers is certainly an honor and presenting this lecture has been something of a strain. . .but the effort will have been worthwhile if you have been able to use the occasion to reflect on your place in our university and the ways in which you can be inspired to renew your sense of your importance to our efforts and our students. In doing so, I think you will be attaching yourself to Professor Livingston's legacy in the most meaningful way possible.

Finally, I want to again thank the nominating committee and those of you who have taken time from your busy schedules to come and hear me speak. I'm incredibly flattered by this honor and to close, then, let me make use of a last quotation, this one from Shakespeare's *12th night* and say,

"I can no answer make but thanks, and thanks and ever thanks."