

Yury Chernyak

Kellogg Oratorical Speech

“I have a question.”

How many times have I walked into my professor’s office and spoken those 4 words? My professor would respond “of course you do”, knowing that my one question would produce a second question and then a third, and many more thereafter!

I am sorry—professors—if I sometimes overwhelmed you with my many questions. But that’s exactly how I feel about life: overwhelmed.

I arrived at Hartwick College as a quite naïve individual, but as I went from one class to the next, and learned the language of various disciplines, I stayed curious and became even *more* curious, asking the “whys” and the “hows.” I began to sketch for myself a complex yet breathtaking picture of the beautiful world of which I am a part. Each stroke added a new detail, which represented the knowledge I was gaining: about the birth and expansion of the universe, the formation of our planet, the history and progress of our civilizations. It’s absolutely mind blowing {motion}.

This sketch of mine allowed me to see the interconnectedness of things—as though the existence of the universe and everything in it is like a story, of which you and I are a part.

Studying in school, taking classes rich in information and knowledge, is supposed to make you feel smart—right? Wrong. Quite ironically I feel just the opposite—I can say that these past four years have made me smart enough to realize how much I do not know.

But I appreciate this realization.

Look around you! Look at how miraculous life is! Look at the miracle that is happening this very instant—I am moving my jaw in a vertical motion {point to mouth} while simultaneously using my larynx {point to throat} and in unison, they allow me to produce sound. And what is sound? The

vibrations of particles in the air, which is travelling as I speak in the form of a wave—which is represented by sines and cosines which can be related to triangles and circles and exponentials. But now I am going off on a tangent (math pun intended!). {pause}. These sound waves reach your ears, and--whether you are still listening to me at this point or not--the sound wave vibrates your ear drum, which causes an electric signal to be sent to your brain which in turn interprets these signals as the letters forming words forming phrases that you have learned and remembered as a child.

My one simple example—what is physically happening as I deliver my speech—demonstrates my point: just how many questions and ideas are raised just by any one concept or phenomenon: in this case, the mathematical properties of the wave, the motion of particles in the air, the molecules that make up the air, the biology of the ear, how the brain interprets the signals it receives, how the brain learns language, how many unique properties belong to the many different languages we speak, how these many different languages have formed human culture. {mind blowing motion}

Do you see? Do you see how my one question triggers an endless series of questions?

Now ask yourself—how are we supposed to grasp and understand all the complexity of the world and its phenomena?

The answer is that we can't—and perhaps will never be able to.

So what should we do—give up?

Absolutely not! We are each of us a part of something much larger than ourselves.

Our purpose—as a species— is to survive in order to make the world a better place to live.

Look at how far we have come!

We can look to the edges of space—billions of light years away, and into the tiniest parts of matter. We uncover truths about our own origins; we create medicines to save millions of people (to save people's lives).

But still--there are unanswered questions that our generation must work to solve; Questions about climate change, about poverty, hunger, inequality and crime.

We stand on the shoulders of those who lived and struggled before us, so you and I can confront today's challenges. In my view, this has been the purpose of our Hartwick College education: to ask the questions that will allow others who come after us to stand on *our* shoulders.

Like many of you, I am concerned about going out into the real world and doing something bigger than myself. But I know now--how to ask questions and how to seek answers, and thereby how to appreciate the world around me. Our shared journey may at times feel endless—I guess that's what life is. But as Albert Einstein thought: "The important thing is never to stop questioning".

Thank you, professors, friends and family. Thank you Hartwick College.