

Fall Faculty Meeting—Lang Hall Auditorium
Monday, September 2, 2017, 3:30-5:00 pm
“Flying Squirrels: Connecting our Lives and Work to a Bigger Purpose”

Good afternoon. Thank you, Faculty Chair Kidd, for the opportunity to address the faculty. I am deeply honored to be here today.

This last August, my father and I planned a backpacking trip to the Cirque of Towers in the Wind River Range. The week before the trip he called to say that he was experiencing some health issues, so we needed to cancel our trip. Four years earlier he had battled cancer in the parotid gland. A year ago it had migrated to his lungs, for which he had undergone radiation.

Rather than taking a trip out west, I decided to take the week to be with him in Tennessee. When I arrived on Saturday, he told me he had made reservations Sunday night at the Snowbird Mountain Lodge, one of his favorite spots in the Smoky Mountains. I appreciated his thoughtfulness. He was clearly not in any condition to be carrying a forty pound pack on a weeklong expedition in the rugged mountains of the Wind River Range.

On Sunday, we drove the Cherohala Skyway across the Tennessee mountains into North Carolina to the lodge. Along the way, scenic pullouts were marked with brown signs sporting an image of a camera. As we passed each pullout, my father said, quizzically, “I wonder why they sell cameras up here?” At the next one: “Look at that, cameras for sale!” At one pullout that also offered picnicking, he declared, “Picnic tables for sale too!”

Despite what some might say, my father is not experiencing dementia. His dry sense of humor has been his *modus operandi* all his life.

About two-thirds of the way up the Cherohala Skyway we passed what looked like two telephone poles opposite each other on either side of the road. At the top of each, five foot long planks extended out over the road, leaving about a twenty foot gap in between. I wondered out loud what the poles were for.

“Flying squirrels,” he explained.

Within my family, two methods of responding to my father have emerged. My four siblings and I either ignore my father or we play along. My mother, on the other hand, takes every word seriously. She would argue with him to try to get him to see the error of his comment. So when my father stated, simply, “Flying squirrels,” I responded: “Right, flying squirrels.” And then drove on.

My father asked me about work. He had been a professor and department head of biology at Kenyon College, so he took a keen interest in my professional life as a Provost. So I discussed the five big projects we would be working on in the coming year.

The first, which we had discussed before, was the transition into a Faculty Handbook and the collaborative process we would undergo to reconsider faculty evaluation in order to celebrate faculty work across the arcs of their career. I told him that we still had healing to do on our campus from previous events and that I hoped this process would further build trust, inspire innovation, and heal.

He also knew from previous conversations that the faculty and staff at the University of Northern Iowa offer students a remarkable learning experience both inside and outside the classroom, with rich applied learning that complement learning in the classroom. I explained that we have the opportunity as an institution to deepen the relationship between the curriculum and the co-curriculum by making engaged learning both intentional and developmental. He commented that this would likely provide us with national recognition and reminded me that such activities not only assist students in developing their professional readiness but also their civic agency, their curiosity, and their willingness to serve others.

Our third project is the re-imagining of our General Education Program. He and I talked about the role of the faculty and the curriculum in students' lives, the way in which a carefully crafted and coherent series of courses could open possibilities for students – and even change the trajectory of their lives. I reminded him of a former student of his that I ran into in Maine many years earlier. When the individual heard my name, he approached me.

“Now Wohlpart, that’s an unusual name. Any relation to Al Wohlpart from Kenyon College?”

I explained that I was his son. He told me that he took a class from my dad 30 years earlier in their General Education curriculum that greatly influenced his life. I asked him if he would like to speak with my father. I pulled out my cell phone, reached my dad, and told him I had a former student of his who wanted to chat. After I handed over the phone, he went to an alcove and they had a thirty minute conversation, deeply reflective and philosophical but periodically punctuated with uproarious laughter.

When he returned the phone to me, I could tell that the conversation had moved him. He explained that he had taken a class with my father called “Man and Nature,” part of an

interdisciplinary experience in the foundational curriculum intended to broaden students' understanding of the world, expand their ethics beyond the anthropocentric, and initiate an awareness of interconnections and interrelationships, at once building their capacity for humility and their capability for leading change. The curriculum had been designed in response to the growing awareness in the 1970's of the human impact on the world, the birth of Earth Day, the advent of the Clean Air Act and Clean Water Act, and the beginning of an ecological mindset. My father's former student explained that he was not a science major, that he did not take another course with my father, but that this course offered texture to his life.

How do we take up the professional responsibility before us as faculty, I asked my father, to create a curriculum that responds to our time, that allows this generation of students to engage the big questions of their era in ways that make explicit the purpose behind the courses they take? That indeed offers a sense of coherence and meaning such that students complete the General Education Program wanting more, not less? And that truly creates a foundation for deeper insight and thinking in their majors?

The next project was one that would span several years. We need to build community around our reaccreditation efforts for the Higher Learning Commission. We had not fared well with accreditation over the last two cycles, largely because our efforts were not planned or integrated into our work over a period of time. The primary deficiency in the last round was with program assessment--developing clear and meaningful student learning outcomes and then directly assessing those outcomes for the purposes of revising our curriculum and pedagogy in order to continuously improve student learning.

Finally, I shared with him an update on our Vision, Mission, and Strategic Plan. To make our vision of "creating a diverse and inclusive campus community" come to life, to really provide students "an engaged education empowering students to lead locally and globally," we need to weave this work into our reward system and resource allocation. Several efforts are underway to realize our vision, including developing draft metrics for the strategic plan which will be shared with the university community for their feedback and input. We have elevated our work with diversity, sustainability, and community engagement, all geared towards increasing student success.

On Monday morning, we left the lodge and drove to Joyce Kilmer Memorial Forest. Within this ecosystem stands the largest number of trees--tulip poplars in this particular case--

over 130' high and fifteen feet in diameter than anywhere else in the eastern United States. We were alone in the forest as we slowly walked up the path, my father's laborious breathing a remnant of the radiation treatment. At each of the poplars close by the path, we paused and together hugged the trees, leaning into their cool bark, soothed by their ancient spirits.

We passed a nurse log, an ancient tree that had fallen to the ground, dead but sprouting new life. He stood by the log and wondered in awe at the way in which the old beget the new, how life passes on to life, how we live in a great circle. In that moment, as we stood together in Joyce Kilmer Memorial Forest, alone but embraced by something much bigger, much grander than our own lives, I felt the way in which my father's deep sadness at his own mortality was imbued with an awareness that his life was whole.

On the drive back down the Cherohala Skyway, I asked my father, again, about the odd telephone poles. "Flying squirrels," he said. When we stopped for a short hike up to a bald, I googled "Cherohala Skyway" and "Flying Squirrels." I learned that the parkway had intersected an endangered population of northern flying squirrels who could not cross the roadway. The ingenious design of the flying squirrel posts had allowed for a greater integration of the gene pool, and hopefully the survival of this population.

My father is eighty years old and full of life, his mind and his heart as sharp as they have ever been. He has found some magical way to know that his life is attached to something bigger. Something so grand that it grounds his daily existence in deep and rich meaning. His impact on students and his work supporting faculty have been a model for me about how to offer my life as a gift to others.

Over the last several years my father and I have engaged in deep conversations about the end of life and what lay beyond--about the transition from this earthly existence to what comes next. He wanted to know, to be prepared, and to have some sense of where he was going. On this trip, he no longer had any of those questions. He only talked of his children and grandchildren and the gifts they offer the world. Of his former students and faculty whose lives he embraced as if they were family. Of ancient poplars, so tall and so majestic. And nurse logs that beget life. And flying squirrels.

Thank you for coming today.

Thank you for listening.

And thank you for believing.