

Stephen Dunn

## Stockton Commencement Speech

May 11, 2014

I want to honor President Saatkamp by mentioning him as I intended, though he is not here with us today.

Provost Kesselman, Board Members. Distinguished faculty, family (especially, today, mothers), and the graduating class of 2014,

I'm here this morning to speak about you, and your future, and I will try to do inexactly that – at least for a while – by speaking about myself. I was the first in my family to go to college, and had I not gotten a basketball scholarship, that might not have happened. I was one of those serious-minded students – you might recognize the type – who didn't know how to be a good student. The truth is that my first experience with good talk, really good talk, talk that was insightful and seemed to matter, was in overhearing coach Van Breda Kolff at Hofstra speak about basketball and the tendencies of teams and their players, talk that was highly observant and nuanced. It was information that could be immediately put to use. His was a

practical intelligence,h

The great American poet Emily Dickinson said, you have to get at the truth *slant*. Her presumption is that it's very hard to say what you wish to say straight on. To say something true, in other words, is an achievement, a triumph, really, of precision over fuzzy thinking, and of knowing who we are over our tendencies toward self-deception. And by slant I think she also means, where and when to enter the story you're telling – and I think she'd agree that the middle isn't a bad place to begin. It permits you to expand in various directions. Which is my excuse for taking this talk in various directions.

But enough about me, the joke goes, what do *you* think about me? You're probably thinking, get on with it, Dunn. Tell us something our parents can feel good about, that can justify their investment in us. Well, I'll try, but I might tell it slant.

I'm aware that some of you are thinking of specific careers, though I imagine a good many of you are in the limbo world of What next? And, having taught at Stockton for over 35 years, I have no doubt that most of you are prepared for What Next, which means you are ready for the inevitable crooked path that awaits you. Our area of General Studies has anticipated this, has allowed, nay, insisted, that you take courses outside of your comfort zone.

How good, for example, that the person graduating with a business degree, might

have courses in the humanities and the sciences. Or the person graduating with a degree in art has had courses, say, in psychology and geology. A liberal education may not make you a liberal, but it will make you more empathetic to otherness, and it might not make you a conservative either, but it will teach you what is valuable to conserve. To become a judicious conservator of values should be one of the goals of a liberal education. Sockton has been one place where such truths become self-evident. You are ready, I'd wager, to perceive truths that will come at you slant. And no doubt you have some tools that will help you to manage the challenging confusions that lead to clarities.

Here's my poet's statement of full disclosure. I confess that I'm more interested in your souls than in your successes in the big, demanding world of money and commerce, though the state of your souls may be very much related to such success. I'm not thinking about soul in a religious way, but, if you will allow the distinction,



