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Guest Column: Musings About Our Words, Their Effect, Changing Students Lives - By: Dr Merry Sleigh, Psychology

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Guest Column: Musings About Our Words, Their Effect, Changing Student Lives-- By Dr. Merry Sleigh, Psychology

Merry Sleigh, psychology professor, sent this to me last week, asking if it was a good column for *The Weekly Reader*. It certainly is! So without further ado, the excellent musings of our colleague Merry Sleigh:

Through one of my roles outside of Winthrop, I am responsible for inviting speakers to our regional psychology conference. This year, I invited Dr. Pete Giordano, a professor at Belmont University. Among numerous other teaching accolades, he was recently named CASE/Carnegie Foundation Tennessee Professor of the Year. One line of his research focuses on how casual remarks from professors can alter the course of students' lives.

He began his talk by inviting the audience to think of a time in their life that significantly impacted the direction in which they were headed, a "transformative moment." My thoughts turned to my

freshmen year at James Madison University. I had tested out of freshmen English, and thus found myself sitting in an upper-level literature course during my first semester of college. I handled the first assigned paper the way I had always written papers in high school. I wrote it the night before, did what I considered to be a very careful revision, and then submitted the paper with high hopes for a top grade.

When the paper was returned to me, there were so many red markings that it looked as though someone had bled on it. The pain of my poor grade was heightened by the teacher's ending comment, "If this is the best you can do, you don't deserve to be in college." Now, it seems important at this point to admit that this memory might not be totally accurate, a factor that Dr. Giordano has considered. However, he believes that accuracy of the story's details is less important than the subjective perception of

the individual. Perhaps my professor was not as harsh as my recollection, and in his defense, he had recently suffered a great loss in his life, which likely impacted his teaching.

Dr. Giordano then asked the audience to consider how this situation impacted our lives. My response was a greatly enhanced motivation to improve my grade in the course and prove to this professor that I deserved to be in college. I went on to major in English, along with psychology, earning a 4.0 in both majors. I credit these grades more to the determination that emerged following that one interaction with a professor than to any raw talent I possessed.

My experiences match Dr. Giordano's research. His data, collected from narrative accounts of both undergraduates and college professors, revealed that in many cases, the single event that changed the direction of people's lives was a comment from a professor. Most

“ I think about times when I thought about sending an encouraging e-mail to a student but was too distracted and busy. I regret those times now. On the flip side, I can conjure memories of a kind word shared with a student, and the student’s positive reaction, which at the time seemed irrelevant, but now takes on a new importance. Realizing the impact that our comments have may be just the “transformative moment,” we need to begin more intentionally speaking truth, support, and encouragement to our students.”



Continued from page 1

experiences were positive, although some, like mine, were negative. In almost all instances, the resulting outcome was perceived to be positive. Interestingly, and this is where the research might have the most meaning for us, the professor who made the comment most likely did not remember the comment and was unaware of its impact. Dr. Giordano was able to provide several examples in which professors were praised by former students, who recalled a comment or interaction that changed their lives, and the professors had no recollection. You may have experienced this yourself, receiving notes from past students detailing a conversation, comment, or feedback that has long been lost to you but cherished by them. If you have, congratulations are due. You have probably impacted more lives than those of the students who contacted you.

Regardless of whether we have evidence of our impact or not, the truth remains that our words make a difference. Transformative events shape the narratives that we create to describe our own lives, and these narratives shape our identities. I enjoyed Dr. Giordano’s talk, and

maybe even more so as time has passed and I continue to reflect on the power that we hold as professors. I can think of times when I almost shared a compliment with a student but held back because I worried about it sounding falsely flattering or insincere, when I worried about my words being misinterpreted. I think about times when I thought about sending an encouraging e-mail to a student but was too distracted and busy. I regret those times now. On the flip side, I can conjure memories of a kind word shared with a student, and the student’s positive reaction, which at the time seemed irrelevant, but now takes on a new importance. Realizing the impact that our comments have may be just the “transformative moment,” we need to begin more intentionally speaking truth, support, and encouragement to our students.

And since Merry left some space, I will jump in to comment.

What Merry shares from Dr. Giordano’s research and her own experience resonates with all of us, I am sure. For me, my first memory is of a funky bar in Blowing Rock, in the days when Appalachian State students had to

drive winding Highway 321 to go to “The Rock” to get a beer (or three). I was shooting pool—badly—with one of my favorite English professors, Dr. Bill Ward. (He was a favorite for his excellent teaching, and for his incredible wit, but also because he is a fine guitar player and singer, and we spent many happy hours playing music together.) Bill had had a few, and I had too. I remember when he paused with his pool cue and looked at me and said, “Bird, you can do this! You can be me!”

He didn’t mean being a pool player; he meant I could be a college English professor. I was working on my master’s then, and going on to get a Ph.D. was already my goal, but Dr. Ward’s drunken yet heartfelt encouragement lifted me in that moment and reaffirmed my intentions. I can’t count the number of times I have thought about that moment since, especially during my years at the University of Rochester, working on that next degree, discouraged, intimidated, and overwhelmed at times. In those low moments, his words would come back to me and spur me on. I really could do this!

As teachers, we drop seeds all the time. May they be good seeds...

Thanks For Helping Make the Teaching and Learning Center Work!

Winthrop's Teaching and Learning Center offers a wide variety of sessions each year for faculty and staff, on teaching, technology, professional development, and personal development. From leading class discussion to mastering the Smart podium to tenure and promotion to cooking soufflés, the TLC tries to make sure that all faculty and staff receive

the kinds of professional and personal development that will make them better teachers, administrators, and employees.

To offer this programming, the TLC depends on the talent, expertise, and generosity of our faculty and staff. We do not have a big budget to bring in outside speakers and experts. Even so, we are able to offer engaging,

timely, and valuable sessions every year on a variety of topics. We thank those who have offered their time and talent in past years.

We also thank those of you who have attended TLC sessions. Your time is valuable, and we appreciate you taking some of it to enrich yourself through professional and personal development.

A Service From the TLC: Teaching Consultation

The TLC for several years has been offering a service: teaching consultation. At the instructor's request, I (or another agreed-upon person) will visit your class to observe and consult with you afterwards about your successes and challenges. This consultation has nothing to do with the tenure and

promotion process, and no reports will be made to department chairs or deans (unless you so request). The invitation to the consultant can only come from the instructor, not from a dean or chair or any other person. All conversations will be private and confidential. If you don't want me to visit your class and observe your teaching, we could

just meet and talk about your teaching. If I am not available to visit your class because of my schedule, I will find a qualified person to do the consulting. So please let me know if you would like to invite me into your class or for a consultation. Call or email me (803) 323-3679 or birdj@winthrop.edu.

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and Open Educational Resources. Within each category, you will find a number of excellent and informative videos. The Office of Academic Affairs has provided us a one-year subscription to this service.

People often tell the TLC that they would like to go to sessions, but they don't have the time or they can't

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The 2nd Annual Winthrop Conference on Teaching and Learning

Many thanks to the presenters and attendees at our 2nd Annual Conference on Teaching and Learning, Saturday, January 31, 2015. It was a great day! Make plans to join us next year. Special thanks to TLC program coordinator Dana Bruneau for making the conference run so smoothly!

Thought For the Week

"What is the most rigorous law of our being? Growth."
--Mark Twain