

## **Text of talk for Opening Academic Session for First-Year students, August 2018.**

I have been thinking about journeys – such as that of Gandhi in 1888 - 130 years ago – when he went to London at age 19 to become a lawyer, over the objections of his family, his mother, who made him take a vow to not touch “wine, woman and meat.”<sup>1</sup> Upon arriving, Gandhi was extremely shy and was known to prefer to write down his thoughts and have others read them for him when required to do public speaking. He found the food and weather appalling at first, and struggled with the strange culture of London. After some time however, he learned to live in London, found a favorite vegetarian restaurant, and even helped found the Vegetarian Society. He was known to go on long walks of many miles and by the end of his three years found the cold of London “invigorating.”

More than the physical discomforts, Gandhi’s journey also allowed him to become what in the words of the American legal advocate Bryan Stevenson terms “being proximate.” Only by having a first hand and close-range opportunity to live and study in England was Gandhi able to deeply understand the empire he would soon work to dismantle with the liberation of India nearly 60 years after his entry to London on the HMS Clyde.

Bryan Stevenson, who spoke at SUA during last academic year, is a modern-day version of Gandhi working to represent dispossessed and forgotten people lost in the criminal justice system. Bryan Stevenson founded both the Equal Justice initiative, and the “The Legacy Museum: From Enslavement to Mass Incarceration” which opened to the public on April 26, in Montgomery, Alabama. During Bryan’s talk last year at SUA, he described how only by being “proximate” can we understand the nuanced experiences of others. This helps him in his work, as he indicates “if you are willing to get closer to people who are suffering, you will find the power to change the world.”<sup>2</sup>

Yesterday I had the great chance to meet many of you during the dinner. I really enjoyed hearing about your journeys to SUA - whether they are from across Los Angeles, across the Southwest, or across the earth such as for many of you who are here from countries such as Rwanda, Nepal, Japan and some of the other 20-something countries represented in your class. One of the students told me that his great passion is in “stories” - and how he loves collecting stories about other people and other cultures. These stories are vital to you as you begin your education. You will hear stories from your classmates, from students, from faculty, from authors who may be writing literature, history, or sociology. These stories contain the seeds of your education - and by thoughtful reflection will blossom into a deeper and more meaningful interpretation of the world around you. Once you have thought and incorporated these stories into your life, you will also never see yourself the same way, as you too will be sharing your stories, and reinterpreting who you are.

Joseph Campbell, an author who did great work popularizing and interpreting mythologies and stories from around the world, also promoted the idea that cultures use stories to interpret their universe and values, and ultimately to help people understand who they are. For Campbell the

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<sup>1</sup> Gandhi, M., *An Autobiography or The Story of My Experiments with Truth*, Ch. 11 .

<sup>2</sup> Stevenson, B., Critical Conversations talk at SUA, February 20, 2018

self is "the whole range of possibilities that you've never even thought of. And you're stuck with your past when you're stuck with the ego. Because if all you know about yourself is what you found out about yourself, well, that already happened. The self is a whole field of potentialities to come through."<sup>3</sup>

From gathering stories about others and sharing stories of yourself you will be able to understand your own ideas and working theories of the world, and develop new ones. This process will expand, deepen and strengthen who you are. From these stories also will arrive "narratives." The narratives are what Bryan Stevenson says both solve and sustain problems in the world. His advice to those who hope to change the world is to transcend fear and anger, and stay hopeful as we begin to understand deeply the narratives of the problems in the world and work to change them.

The stories you hear from others, and from your faculty, and from authors within Core I all will combine to change who you are. This is perhaps the time to then discuss our SUA curriculum, which begins with Core I. Core I is a wonderful chance for you to immerse deeply in the "Enduring Questions of Humanity" using 3.5 weeks to answer some of the most important questions that all humans have asked over the centuries. In my work last year at SUA, I worked with faculty to gather reflections on Core I and other of our GE courses. The faculty shared how they approach each of these courses in a document we created on the SUA Core and GE curriculum, and I wanted to share some of their thoughts with you.

In thinking about our SUA Core I course, some of the faculty mentioned how the course can "introduce students to the idea of education for the purpose of human development"<sup>4</sup> and to give students "the opportunity to learn how to minimize shallow commitments, and to immerse themselves in deep thinking."<sup>5</sup> One faculty member describes how "The works studied in Core I present us with *enduring questions* that have engaged human thought and provided catalysts for cultural transformation through the millennia."<sup>6</sup>

Other of our GE courses commonly taken by first year students include Pac Basin and American Experience. Pac Basin is unique to Soka University, and draws from our location in the Pacific Basin region, and from our very international intellectual community in unique ways. The faculty expertise in the Pacific Basin also has enabled them to develop their own textbook for this course, and each of the sections allows students to "undertake an interdisciplinary investigation of the diverse cultures, histories, societies, and sub-regions that comprise the Pacific Basin."<sup>7</sup> American Experience allows for our students to engage in a dialog of what the American Experience means to them, whether they grew up outside the USA or within the USA, and by having about half the students from around the world, this dialog is informed by a wide variety of experiences. Within American Experience faculty typically draw on examples from the past that illustrate larger principles of what it means to be American, and these examples are

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<sup>3</sup> Campbell, J., *The Hero's Journey: Joseph Campbell on His Life and Work*.

<sup>4</sup> Chang, E., quoted in *A Guide to General Education and the Core Curriculum*, SUA.

<sup>5</sup> Kehlen, J., quoted in *A Guide to General Education and the Core Curriculum*, SUA.

<sup>6</sup> Crowder-Taraborrelli, T., quoted in *A Guide to General Education and the Core Curriculum*, SUA.

<sup>7</sup> Wiener, M., quoted in *A Guide to General Education and the Core Curriculum*, SUA.

as diverse as the people in the US. As stated by one of our professors, “‘American Experience’ is a nearly infinite concept. There are as many such experiences of America, its history, culture and politics, as there are people who submit to America’s complex and changing realities. The point of this course is not to delineate one singular view of all that, but to provoke each of you to examine your own experience of American institutions and energies.”<sup>8</sup>

In all of these courses, Core I, American Experience, Pacific Basin, Learning Cluster, Modes, and our other SUA GE courses, you will experience unique learning environments. From these courses you will have your own stories, and these stories will be further ways to shape your understanding of the world around us, and of yourself. In all of these courses you will also experience a journey, and I hope that in these journeys you can be “proximate” to new ideas and new people and use the time to discuss deeply with your classmates and professors. In this way, you can then have the perspectives needed to change the world.

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<sup>8</sup> Merod, J., quoted in *A Guide to General Education and the Core Curriculum*, SUA.