

The Brunonian Edge

I often ponder the philosophical principle of "Occam's razor." Occam's razor holds that, when presented with two competing hypotheses, always go with the simpler. But is the simpler necessarily better?

In our years at Brown, we have teetered on that razor's edge where life's dilemmas rarely permit choosing the simpler over the more difficult. In my years as an undergraduate, I elected a more daunting path – taking time off to sojourn in adult life. At one food justice NGO, where I worked during this time, I was not resigned to simply regarding hunger as a given and fighting it. I asked: When agricultural production could provide every living human being with over 2,900 calories a day, why is it that over 800 million people worldwide still live in hunger? How did this epidemic of inequality come to be? It's just not simple: our world is one where power and its abuses prevail, yet somehow our ethical integrity and hope endure. When I returned to Brown, I grasped that it is precisely along these rough edges that we question, that we work and that we tenaciously, always, uphold our values.

An orator I admire once implored, "I trust that you [all] will grow in [your] ability to be impatient for positive change, to discern the good from the merely adequate, to embrace the challenge of fighting for those who are less fortunate, [and] to insist that your choices measure up to your values (...)." These words, delivered by our former Brown president Ruth Simmons, beckon us to the very traditions that now belong to us. If we fell back on Occam's principle, we would betray the Brown ethos that taught us discernment, that encouraged us, through the Open Curriculum, to synthesize and proactively take charge of our studies. For me, balancing on that razor's edge, this meant pursuing an independent concentration – even when many cajoled me

not to out of expediency. Resolved to continue pushing the envelope, I proposed the concentration called, “Geopolitical Epistemologies,” which merged fields like politics and critical history, philosophy and political economy, to enable me to address the larger questions of disparities and conflict. Questions like, “How is caloric intake connected to warfare?” And even more broadly, “How do we know what we know?”

My ongoing search for ways to create impact in this world led me to work at the Rachel Maddow Show this past summer. When it came time to introduce myself, I sheepishly put forward the title of my concentration. “Geopolitical Epistemologies?” Dr. Maddow joked. “Oh Wow! I was just thinking about Geopolitical Epistemologies!” Her sarcastic quip was delivered winkingly, for she herself had been a Rhodes Scholar in politics. And above all what this attested to was the distinction of Brunonia. As it turns out, explaining my title has been a recurring icebreaker in interviews and informal conversations. And when people were confounded, it allowed me to showcase the best things about the Open Curriculum and the breadth of our global thinking.

But I want to take a moment to look back, to lay bare the irreverence of forgetting against the duty of remembering. It is no simple matter that we live with the hard truths – the inherited traumas and realities – of memory. My parents were among the tens of thousands of Hmong people who sought asylum in the U.S. as refugees from the Vietnam War, though specifically from Laos where a Secret War was waged. They survived and escaped America's Agent Orange and bombardment of over 2.1 million tons of bombs just in the tiny country of Laos. There, destruction lingers in the pernicious form of unexploded ordinance and genetic defects. This aftermath reminds us that we have changed the course of life as we know it. Our very existence may be threatened by the reckless hubris of human might expressing itself as a geological force found even among the soil, the stone, and the seedling. What I’m describing here is not merely

symbolic. In this era some have dubbed the Anthropocene, nature is no longer independent; it is transformed and violated by human artifice – like the Agent Orange and undetonated explosives now melded into the earth’s crust. It is in the Anthropocene, in times of living amongst the ecological outcomes we have wrought, that our activity must be redirected so this enfeebled planet can begin to heal itself. Because the future does not belong to us, at least not any future we’ve imagined, we cannot afford to lose sight of our humility. How we triumph over adversity and express deference to it, and how we mitigate tragedy and mourn it, will define our generation. Through this, we may just bring ourselves to the giddy brink of a new paradigm that, in turn, yields a unique strength.

Perching on the edge of Occam’s razor between the simple and complex, is a test of this supple determination. For I know acutely the defeat of giving in to simplicity. But I know, too, the feeling in my splayed hands of the optimism within reach, the firming grip on the virtues of the human heart, on the brutality of love, on the arrogance of the mind’s search for understanding. At Brown, this was manifest not only in our innovation and original researches, but also in the infinite resonances of our rallying cries and in our surmounting of entrenched injustice. As Richard Wright enjoined us, we must “hurl words into [the] darkness and wait for an echo; and if an echo sounded, no matter how faintly, [we must] send other words to tell, to march, to fight, to create a sense of hunger for life that gnaws at us all.”

Today’s ceremony honors both the happenstances that have led us all to share this moment together and a future that we all must commence to actualize. A future that may just be imperiled by treading the simpler path. That we entered and exited through the Van Wickle gates, that we are now graduating after four years (more or less) and in the winter time, and that we have only begun to make the sacrifices required of us, evinces the profound flaws in the dictates of

Occam's razor. The degrees that we will receive do not only certify our scholastic achievements, but also the audacity with which we carved out our own chapters here. And, above all, today confers upon us the edginess of Brunonia, because, as they know at Harvard, "not everyone can get into Brown." So, congratulations, class of '57ers, for completing one chapter of your life and beginning another! From this moment henceforth we carry with us inalienable privileges and responsibilities; we must fathom the entire world and fashion the strategies that will address its precariousness. The onus is on us to embody the very tenets of our education that exceed Brown's walls and lend us the unassailable ability to make a transformative impact on this earth.

Go forth, ever braving that razor's edge!

Thank you.