Opening Convocation
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Where Three Roads Meet
By Anthony R. Haigh

I am always curious about the journeys we take to get to where we are in life and the narratives those journeys to the present represent. There are also those journeys that are still in our future, those journeys that are yet to happen, that exist, as yet, only in our imagination.

Each of you has a unique story to tell. “The Story So Far.” Some of it will be true. Some of it you wish were true. Some of it is made up to help create continuity in your narrative. Some of it is made up to validate the truth of where you are now. But it is your story. I am in the story telling business. I am here at Centre to help teach young people the skills needed to tell their stories and the stories of other people. It’s what I do.

My own story is long and complicated and mostly true. I was born into a working class family in the industrial North West of England. I was the first in my family to go to college—as many of you are. The North West, at that time was still in the thrall of the Industrial Revolution: huge factories belching smoke and noise—Blake’s “dark satanic mills”—an industrial landscape devoid of anything natural or leaning towards conventional ideas of beauty.

Education was brutalist—at age 11 you were tested to see whether you should go to a school that would put you on the college track, or to a school that would lead you to become an industrial apprentice or—for the majority of young people—a school that purported to give you a “modern” education so that you could be a factory worker. And depending on where you lived would depend where the cut off point for each of those schools was. Manchester only had 8 percent of places available for college bound students whereas neighboring Cheshire had 30 percent. Essentially young people were segregated by class in the way that in the American South at the same time they were segregated by race.

But education was the only safe route out of the cultural trap of the working poor. Richard Hoggart, in his seminal work, *The Uses of Literacy*, describes the process of escape in great detail. He points out the role often played by a teacher, who seeing talent in an individual child will find ways to go outside the system to help that talent grow. For me it was the Art teacher who sent me to a specialist art program that took place on Saturdays on the top floor of the city art gallery—where I learned to paint, and the English teacher who used my energy and vocal aptitude in school plays—where I learned to act. Now I was spending days wandering in the art gallery, and encouraged by my teachers, going to the theatre housed in the city library. I was also taken to concerts given by the Halle Orchestra in the interestingly named Free Trade Hall.
Even today, the leading theatre in Manchester is located in the former Royal Exchange where cotton from India, Africa, Egypt and the American South was traded. Galleries and Libraries and Theatres built by Victorian entrepreneurs who knew the value of Art. They took a risk seeking to educate those less fortunate than themselves. People took a risk with me. They saw something in me that they felt was worth cultivating. They were not alone of course; my narrative is littered with people who helped and guided my choices—helped me gain the skills to choose one path over another.

As you go through life you will find these moments of choice that rear up and confront you. Maybe you will have help coming to that moment; maybe you’ll be on your own. Our first year class has just faced one of those choices. Having been accepted to a number of colleges you chose Centre. Maybe someone helped you with the choice—a parent, a high school teacher, an admissions counselor. But you made the choice. Time will tell whether you made a good choice or a great one—how the experience of your time here will weave itself into the fabric of your narrative.

But this evening I want to look at that process of decision making. How we make the decisions from which our narratives are built. What skills do you need to look at your options and imagine yourself in a number of alternative futures? Some people—dull people—cannot see the options in front of them. They see only the one way that is mapped out for them. I once heard a very eminent leader in my field—a designer—tell a group of eager young folk that if they went to college with a portfolio wanting to be a designer and graduated as a designer they had had a lousy education. Education should be transformative. That’s why you are at Centre.

An Australian friend of mine—Dr. Ralph Kerle, an expert in creative leadership—is very curious about those two types of people—those who see one road and those who see many. He is particularly concerned with how these two types affect large organizations those who live in a “culture of compliance” and those who seek improvement through “creativity and breakthrough thinking.” He argues that advances in technology have perhaps limited the options for creativity in organizations he says “the technology underpinning larger organizations demands the organization follow the same process by doing the same thing in the same way in the same situation every time.” We have all experienced this—“If you are calling about a technical problem press 1. If you have billing problem press 2...”—and have been frustrated by it. Technology was supposed to liberate us from the mundane. PLEASE just let me TALK to a real person!

Dr. Kerle uses the term “ideators” (i-dee-a-tor) to identify those people in an organization who are “highly fluent idea generators.” Taking that road to being an idea generator and choosing a path through life that may seem divergent can be tricky. But the rewards are worth it. What do we need to be that person? Imagination—certainly. Creativity—of course. Courage—yes.
Sometimes taking risks within organizations can be dangerous. Where does the whistle blower fit in this paradigm? What happens when, as a member of an organization, you are faced with immoral or illegal behavior? Do you take the risk? Would you have taken the risk? That moment is the one where you are faced with multiple pathways.

Recently we have seen what happens when it is the government who is engaged in immoral or illegal behaviors and the whistle blower is criminalized. Would you do what is right or what is lawful?—that tension that is at the heart of most drama. Have you noticed how in this recent case a divergent narrative has been introduced to obscure the real villainy?

But the world of the theatre, as I was saying, is full of stories about the tension between someone doing what is right, and someone doing what they are told to do. Oedipus met his father at a place where three roads met. For him the metaphoric choice of which road was an actual one. Things didn’t turn out well for him.

The image of roads meeting is a common one in classical literature. It perhaps represents a choice, the consequences of which you may not grasp at the time—which may involve factors down the road that are beyond your control—that you cannot anticipate. Are you a person who will stick to the one road or will you have the courage, and the imagination, and the creativity to take the divergent path.

When we become the “ideator” and offer that new way of looking at the world, or choose a path that was not expected of us—it takes courage. It is all about risk taking—about the willingness to fail. Ask our actors and designers and technicians about risk, about accepting the possibility of failure as a starting point in the creative process. Ask our scientists about the risks involved in the process of experimentation. Ask any of the people on this stage how they engage in risk. The whole process of education is rightly loaded with risk. We can, and must, embrace uncertainty.

As an artist I place a high premium on creativity, and imagination and risk. This past spring (and most of the summer), when I was in England for Centre’s London program, I saw a whole lot of plays. Plays are about people taking the unexpected choice; prisoners putting on a play in a penal colony; an autistic child going in search of his mother; a troubled writer going into exile. I went to the theatre as often as I could. I made maximum use of the opportunities offered by living in London. I went to galleries and concerts. The Tate Britain, the leading gallery in London dedicated to British art, has been rehung recently—with a much more focused approach to the sequencing of the paintings. I found I was drawn again to the artists of the late 19th century—especially the Pre-Raphaelites and those painters connected to the Arts and Crafts movement. This led me down the pathway to revisit those paintings and painters that had been such a part of my growing up in Post-Industrial Manchester. I was lucky, in the part of London I was living, to
have access to several sites associated with William Morris. He has become something of a hero to me. He was a poet, a painter, a designer, a novelist, architect, a businessman, environmentalist, publisher, and a political activist. He was a man who didn’t just follow one path, but explored many different routes. To use Dr. Kerle’s term, a true “ideator.”

It was William Morris who said “I do not want art for a few, any more than I want education for a few or freedom for a few.”

I would like us all to unlock our inner “ideator.” To find that part of us that is creative, imaginative and unafraid of risk. That doesn’t mean that I want you to play chicken with the traffic outside Pearl Hall, or run the flame [a tradition at the college of running naked from the residences to a specific statue on the campus without being caught] blindfolded, (where would be the fun in that!), but it does mean that you should be willing to take chances—to go outside your comfort zone and look for the divergent pathway. To listen to others who may not think like you. To use your imagination and be open to new possibilities. Sometimes it will get you into trouble. Sometimes you won’t be understood by those who control the one pathway. But your life will be richer for it.

So here you are—writing a new chapter in your personal narrative—the next chapter in your journey. You will join Odysseus, and Chaucer’s Pilgrims, and Einstein, and Alan Turing, and Don Quixote, and Montaigne, Morris and Marx, Freud and Darwin—travelers who made bold choices.

Who took the unexpected path.

Bon Voyage, my friends.

Happy trails.

Until we meet again.

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