

EARLHAM COLLEGE

Earlham College
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The Tao of the Ant Guy

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Thank you Sam, and all of the class of 2011, for a kind introduction and for the honor of speaking to you today. I'm especially honored to be chosen to speak on this day, by this class, because we arrived here together in August of 2007, and I've always thought of you as "my" class. I've had classes with you. I've gone camping with you. I've worried after you (occasionally), and I've named my children after you. So it's with something of a heavy heart that I stand in front of you today — I'm going to miss you all! Equally, it's with a certain gladness to see you all go out into the world, and with the fond hope I'll see you again when you return.

When Bonita first approached me to let me know you wanted me to speak at graduation, I was both awed and flattered. It's been a long time since a natural sciences professor has spoken at Baccalaureate! Social sciences and Humanities professors, many of whom have spoken here before, teased me about how I'd manage without PowerPoint to help me out. Well, I'm here to tell you. Can I get the screen to drop? Ok. *This* time I am going to explain the Ekman Spiral if it kills me.

In truth, I suspect I'm standing before you today because you're wondering what happens when I *don't* have access to PowerPoint. Let's be honest — people don't watch NASCAR to see cars drive around in circles. I'll tell you honestly, I'm not sure I know what happens either, but let's find out, shall we? Here's what I wanted to tell you today.

In 1964, a young graduate of a small liberal arts college in the upper Midwest (not us) traveled to LA, intent on becoming an actor. He did mostly voiceover work, occasionally landing bit parts in B movies. By 1970, and with fewer than five credited movies to his name, he became so disheartened that he left acting to pursue carpentry (an occupation for which he had no training). As such, he became a roadie for The Doors and built Sergio Mendes' recording studio.

It was during this time that he got a job installing kitchen cabinets in the home of a minor filmmaker. The director was making a film, and although our carpenter wasn't considered for a part in the film, the two got on well enough that he was asked to read lines opposite people who *were* being considered for the film. By the end of casting, and although many other people were considered for the role, no one could conceive of anyone else playing the part of Han Solo in *Star Wars*. Harrison Ford got the part, and created one of the most iconic film images in history.

It didn't have to end this way — many other people were considered, and most of them were considerably more famous. Had Harrison Ford been a lousy carpenter, had he considered the job of reading lines “beneath him,” the part might easily have gone to one of the more established actors under consideration. Like Christopher Walken. Let me pause for a moment to let that sink in. Wait, I'll set the scene for you. “I'd just as soon kiss a Wookiee.” “I can arrange that.” See? See? Totally different movie. *Creepy* movie.

We'll fast forward 20 years. Like you, I'm in my early 20's, and I've been in graduate school for a length of time that can no longer be considered “respectable.” Professors are beginning to ask, pointedly, when I might be finishing up (or at least no longer appearing on campus). I have tried out for the Seattle Fire Department, I have interviewed at Microsoft, and I'm seriously considering the self-taught carpentry route. In short, I am reasonably certain my life is going nowhere. I work in a temporary building (somewhat affectionately known as The Barn) erected in the 1940's to house part of the university's burgeoning medical complex. It still has a morgue in the back.

It also has ants. Lots and lots of ants. They invade every winter, and they will carry off anything they can find. It's impressive. They arrive soon after the first frost, and their trails extend tens of feet across the common areas, forming a formic conveyor belt between refrigerator and wall. We complain. Nothing happens. We complain to each other. Curiously, nothing happens. Then one day (like the day they miraculously decided we needed our windows cleaned), the university decides we need an ant exterminator. Unannounced, and during a fairly busy time in the life of graduate students (major conference in two weeks), here comes The Ant Guy.

The Ant Guy is in his mid-thirties. He has dark hair, but I'm not sure any of us could pick him out in a line-up. He arrives in a well-worn company van, with a well-worn company uniform that suggests he's made a career of it. Now, I don't know about you, but when I graduated from college, I didn't seriously expect to work in an industry that required the wearing of uniforms, nor do I suspect that Ant Guy went in to his high school guidance counselor and said “hey, so I'm thinking *exterminator*.” This is a career that, like Harrison Ford's carpentry or Andy's flirtations with computer programming, he likely fell into. Perhaps that career as a research entomologist didn't pan out. Maybe he answered an ad figuring it'd only be for a few months. Regardless, it's his occupation. As a result, I expected a sort of jaded disregard for overeducated punks, and a lingering bitterness at whatever circumstance drove him to take up arms in the ancient war between vertebrate and arthropod.

What we got was something altogether unworldly. Ant Guy showed up, introduced himself (though not by name — we never did learn it, nor he ours), asked us what it is we did here, and asked to be shown to the ants. We took him to the ants, and all of a sudden it started. His eyes lit up. Seriously. Like watching a border collie being introduced to sheep for the first time. He came alive in that instant, and then he started to talk. He told us about the ants — what they were, why they were here, and what he was planning to do about it. He told us how these ants first arrived in this country, and why they had become so successful. We were told the internal organization of the colony. People come out of their offices to hear about ants. Work stops, and by the end of his first meeting with us, he had an entire office of twenty overworked graduate students enlisted in the fight — we knew who the enemy was, we respected that enemy, and we were prepared for a long war.

Ant Guy came often to The Barn that winter, and we got so we looked forward to his visits. We'd sit at lunch and wonder if Ant Guy would show up today. We left notes for each other if Ant Guy had been spotted. We felt strangely honored if *our* office were chosen for bait. And through it all, we marveled — *here is a man who truly loves his job*. I've thought about that since. Clearly, Ant Guy had a choice to make, and it's a choice we all get to make. Whatever the circumstance that brought him to his career, love of extermination probably wasn't it. And he could have let that circumstance embitter him to his job, and eventually to himself, or he could *choose* to be happy with his job. And he did. He chose to be happy walking into a nest of whiney graduate students, and he chose to be excited about ants, and he chose to be happy to tell us about them.

Here was a man, in a job that could be considered menial, that he could consider to be beneath him, or what he did to pay the bills and nothing more, and he was fully invested in it. Of course he was good at it — the ants dutifully abandoned the Barn and promptly invaded the coffee shop next door — but being good at a job and loving a job are not the same thing. And I have to believe it wasn't an easy job to love. I've worn a uniform to work, and I'm fully aware of how invisible it makes you. I've also worked at a job that doesn't usually require a high school diploma, and I know how you get treated (there's nothing like walking up three flights of stairs with 140 lbs. of dental cement on your shoulders to be told "oh, can you bring it here in the back room?" "I dunno, *can you buy an elevator?*"). Ant Guy had to choose to carry all that with him, and yet forget it when he walked in the room. He put whatever anxieties, fears, and preconceptions he had to one side and walked in fully invested in that career. He *owned* extermination.

By the same token, had Harrison Ford not chosen to be happy installing cabinets in George Lucas' home (and to take the time to be good at it), I sincerely doubt he'd have been asked to read lines for *Star Wars*. Had he not devoted himself fully to the arguably demeaning task of reading lines so that others might be cast, he would not have been so inextricably linked to his character that no one else fits in the role. (True story — Al Pacino was also in the running. Let's review — "I'd just as soon kiss a Wookiee." "I can arrange that.").

It's been 15 years now since the winter of the Ant Guy, and I still think about him when I walk into a classroom. He remains one of the greatest natural teachers I've ever seen, and I spend a lot of time thinking about how he approached his subject. I think of his infectious enthusiasm for ants, and that his teaching stemmed naturally from that enthusiasm. I think of how he worked a crowd, and how he remembered us from week to week. He had learned to live fully in what circumstance had given him, and we *wanted* to share in what he knew. I want to be as good at my job as Ant Guy was at his.

I also recognize something else — by showing us that happiness is a personal choice, made daily, sometimes hourly, Ant Guy gave many of us the ability to tough out a few more years of school. To find something in this job that made us happy, and to decide we were happy here. I can't claim we suddenly started working together, or that we still didn't gripe about our professors, and snarl at most things, but he did give us a little boost in the middle of a dark Seattle winter. I graduated two (two!) winters later, and I'm pretty sure my time with an ant exterminator had a lot to do with my ability to finish.

Our society places a lot of emphasis on “doing what you love,” and I suspect there’s a lot of merit in that. Certainly I love what I do at Earlham. But I think it’s equally important to recognize that I was *thirty-nine* before I came here. I have had fully *three* “career-like” jobs before this one. I can tell you this — while you’re waiting for that job you would love to do, it’s vital to love the job you have. Every job, *every* job, has something in it you’d rather not deal with, and *every job* has something in it worth doing. The trick is to find and focus on those aspects. Include others in your happiness as you can; I suspect Ant Guy had no idea how much we enjoyed his visits, nor how many of us owe some aspect of our careers to his affirmation. The point is that he left a slightly better world in his wake, even though he probably never knew it, and even though it wasn’t because his career path was designed to do so.

The concept of happiness as personal choice extends beyond the workplace. In a surprisingly few years, each of you will experience great triumph in your personal lives, but equally you’ll experience gut-wrenching hardships. You will get laid off. You will get divorced. You will bury parents. God help you, some of you will bury children. And here is the point — in those moments, you will have a choice. You can choose to let circumstance determine who you become, you can choose to rail against the circumstance that put you here, or you can *choose* to be happy in the face of all that has happened.

It is a great gift for a college professor to be given the chance at The Last Word. What parting thought to give students at the end and the beginning? For me, it’s this — your lives are unlikely to take you where you thought they would; you will be called upon to do things you know you cannot do, but for which there is no one else to do them; and you will find guidance from unlikely sources. Choose to be happy when you can, forgive yourself when you can’t, and keep an eye out for people who are happy. They’re worth knowing, whoever they are.

With that, I want to thank you again for the chance to speak in front of you today. It’s been a rare gift, and one I will hold dearly. I hope you’ll return to us often, to let us know the turns your lives have taken, and I hope to see you all happy on that return.