

Earlham College
Baccalaureate Address
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The Kitchen Drawer
Stephen N. Butler
Professor of Sociology and Anthropology, and
African and African-American Studies

Introduction

We usually proceed without introduction, but this is an historic moment, and historic moments even in meetings for worship should not go unnoticed. What makes it historic is not the obvious fact that the proofreader of the program did not study German at Earlham, what makes it historic is that today two records are set. Stephen Butler today holds the all-college record both for the number of times he has been chosen by the senior class to speak, and for the number of times he has accepted. Now the reason I make that distinction is that in fact, he did decline once. It is an all-time record; four senior classes in recent years have asked Steve Butler, professor of sociology, to address them at baccalaureate. Three times, he has accepted. This is a record that is likely to stand for years. Steve, in fact, suggested that we go back to commencement speakers next year and that would preserve it for all eternity. I promised him we would not do that, so he may have competition, but it is indeed a single honor to be chosen by the class from the faculty to be the baccalaureate speaker and so it is a real pleasure to introduce Steve Butler to those who do not know him, and to welcome him back to this podium.

Richard Wood, President

(Applause) Maybe I should stop now, while I'm ahead!

On this festive day, I want to welcome the parents, guardians, relatives, friends, members of the fifty-year class, and others associated with Earlham to the baccalaureate address for the class of 1989. Moreover, I want to extend my sincere thanks to the class for allowing me the privilege, and indeed it is a privilege, to address you here this morning. To the class of 1989, this is your day. It marks a transition from one period of your lives and ushers in another. But not only that, this day belongs to the parents, guardians, relatives, friends, indeed all those who made the trip to Richmond to witness the events of the day. Today belongs to the 42 members of the classes of 1939 who have returned, marking a half-century of association with Earlham since their graduation. Today also belongs to the faculty, staff, and trustees who are witnessing the birth of a new group of alumni. Today is no more and no less than a community celebration, one which has as its focus the members of the class of 1989. This is your day!

From another point of view, this is my day, being accorded the privilege to address you. Now as we know, power often accompanies privilege, and one must be very vigilant to recognize when power and privilege converge, like now. I can say anything I want to! I feel honored to be asked to speak to you today, and as I reflect on this honor, it makes me even more aware of the many people who contribute to making a college work.

Not just the people who have the speaking parts, but the people behind the scenes. These people have made tremendous accomplishments which often go unmentioned on momentous occasions.

With the fleeting power that you have given me today, I would like to direct your attention to some of the people here. I would like to recognize a person intimately connected with the class. Over the past few years, this person and his staff have demonstrated the ability to attract record numbers of students to Earlham. They have had the good sense to get each member of the current class to invest in an education individually worth approximately \$50, 186.27. Please join me in a round of applause in thanking our reggae disc jockey Admissions Director Bob Deveer and his staff. I also want to recognize a person intimately connected with the class, although much of his work is often done behind the scenes. This is a person who, whenever my classes needed his services, always met my requests with a spirit of cooperation, often finding obsolete films, sharing purchase costs, and arranging for one or two students to see films because they could not see them at the prescribed time. Friends, please join me in a round of applause for the Director of Media Resources and his staff, Wes Miller.

The Senior Class also contains many understated contributors. Because they are so understated, I don't know who they are! However, I want each of you to think of the people who have made your experiences real, unique, and bearable. The roommate who didn't fight, the friend who listened, the people who devote time to produce a newspaper, radio shows, plays, the people with whom you could disagree without hurt feelings, all are things that make this a community. These are the people you will honor in your memories. Please join me in another round of applause.

I had to resist the impulse to deliver a formal academic lecture. Instead, I thought, let's do something modest. I want to say something that may cause you to remember Earlham, and at the same time pass on to you some insights about what I feel is one of the most important issues that will face all of us as we proceed into the future. Accordingly, today's topic is "The Kitchen Drawer".

The kitchen drawer. You all know what I am referring to. It's the drawer you don't dare let company see when they visit. Some of you have versions of the kitchen drawer in every room. Indeed, some people's entire houses reflect the kitchen drawer syndrome. For those of you who do not have a kitchen drawer, there is often a garage you cannot park your car in, an attic, basement, or automobile, all filled with aging treasures; to be sure, versions of the kitchen drawer.

Now in my attempt to understand this phenomenon, I discovered that the kitchen drawer is a nearly universal occurrence. For starters, upon my signal I would like all of you who have kitchen drawers or a reasonable facsimile to raise your hand and to look around. (Approximately 95% of the audience raised their hands) My fascination with the kitchen drawer phenomena stems from, it may not surprise you, the fact that this represents a situation where diversity and universality merge. In fact, it may be that the only true universality is diversity. Let me tell you how I discovered the kitchen drawer.

My family, for those of you who are not aware of it, is interracial. My family of origin is North Carolina, rural, freed slave, and Indian, moving with the northern migration into New York, upwardly mobile and educated. My wife's family is Indiana, Anglo-Saxon rural, and several generations of Earlham graduates, including a member of today's class. In other words, upwardly mobile and educated. One summer some years ago, my family and I were visiting my sister Fran's family on Long Island. A discussion in the kitchen led my sister to launch into a somewhat embarrassed explanation to my wife that our people have a strange custom of having a kitchen drawer into which everything which didn't have some other place was thrown. To her delight and relief, she learned that my wife had grown up with just such a drawer in her home in Portland, Indiana and in fact, we had continued the custom in our home. How could this be? How could a black family from New York have the same kind of drawer as a white family from Portland, Indiana?

A social mystery! I began to check. I embarked upon a trail of discovery over the next few years in order to clear this matter up. At every opportunity, I made discreet and polite inquiries of colleagues, friends, and acquaintances; do you have a kitchen drawer? The results of the informal data gathering was staggering. I found kitchen drawers in England, France, Germany, Italy, Palestine, Israel, the Soviet Union, Tanzania, Japan, Sweden, and a second-hand suggestion that some Eskimos had such drawers. The drawer was found across all social classes, races, religions, sexes, and ethnic groups. I remember thinking, a truly universal phenomenon! This discovery has Nobel Prize potential! It has the potential to change our way of thinking about vitally important everyday concerns. Could it be that my children's rooms did not reflect sloth and sloppiness, but were rather extensions of the kitchen drawer impulse that emerges during the teenage years? Could it be that at various times and stages, our lives look like kitchen drawers? Could it be that the offices of Lincoln Blake, Bob Southard, Paul Ogren, Dan Rosenberg, Kate Winiger, Howard Richards, Margaret Hampton, Gil Klose, Sara Penhale, myself, and others were not reflections of our burdensome work load or an inability to get things in order, but perhaps something more profound? An innate tendency perhaps, one stronger in some of us than in others. Nobel Prize, go for it, Stephen, make your career! Check with your academic colleagues, check the literature, ask the biologists.

One colleague theorized the cause might be biological. It could be something like an appendage gene, something like our appendix, you know, except from that time to time and in various stages of life, it activated the kitchen drawer impulse and that when activated, this innate impulse may extend itself to other areas of the house, to our places of work, and indeed perhaps to our very lives. A sociologist friend suggested it was simply a matter of getting organized and referred me to a free booklet entitled "Get Organized Now", where it was written, "after categorizing everything", everything mind you, "you should have a miscellaneous category and that these items should be placed in a spare drawer".

It goes on, "After you have put away all the kitchen belongings into areas that have been designated above, you may find items particular to your way of life that still haven't found a home. This is where your own ingenuity comes into play". Hmmm.

My colleague, obviously jealous of my discovery, missed the importance of the issue. A colleague in economics warmed up to the question and indicated that while the origin of the drawer was of little concern, we should recognize that as the checkout counters at stores like Target and K-Mart, kitchen drawer items abound. There is clearly some profit to be made with this phenomena. An astute colleague in psychology noted that the kitchen drawer items have a subtle quality. Often you can't remember if you have them at home when at the checkout counter so you often purchase some more, just to be sure! I'll bet the economists figured that one out, too. One anthropologist colleague suggested I focus on the concepts of core area and diffusion, that is, identify where a phenomena originates and trace its spread. Another anthropologist referred me to an article in the March, 1989 edition of the *American Anthropologist* entitled, "Household Archeology: Test Models of Zonal Complimentarity in the South Central Andes" by Charles Standish, assistant curator in the Department of Anthropology in the Field Museum of Natural History in Chicago. In the article, it was stated that "in spite of some limitations associated with household archeology, the family-household is visible, relatively easy to access archeologically, and it is abundantly endowed with information". Ah ha! I thought. Household archeology. A method to look at the cross-cultural and historical dimensions of the issue. Just what I had been looking for to establish some kind of academic respectability for the idea. The article goes on, "While the use of the household concept that archeology does indeed present certain theoretical and methodological problems, it is the most successful analytical tool for unraveling complex economic and political relationships, and each household should be composed of one to several physical structures with identifiable kitchen areas, and so on".

The Nobel Prize notion was coming into focus. Numerous disciplines had something to say, how could I resolve their different viewpoints? I sought out my colleagues concerned with interdisciplinary inquiries. One suggested the concept of the kitchen drawer was too limiting, and that I should compare or shelve, where despite differences in shape and color, all objects were clearly intended for a limited purpose. Those empirically inclined wondered what would happen if I did a study where I took children from various social class, racial, religious, and ethnic backgrounds, divided them into two groups, and let one group play with a towel drawer and the other with a kitchen drawer. Would the children playing with the kitchen drawer show greater gains in such things as risk-taking, creativity, inventiveness, and problem-solving than those playing with the towel drawer? This approach was a bit too mechanical for me. Other interdisciplinary colleagues suggested that if the idea of drawers had any merit at all, that by ascribing human characteristics to them and by using the two drawers as metaphors for social life, I might be able to arrive at some more important insight. I thought this approach seemed to have promise. For example, if towels could talk, imagine the kinds of conversations that would occur in the drawer. What would such conversations tell us? On the other hand, if the items found in the kitchen drawer could talk, imagine those conversations, what would they tell us?

Friends, I submit that from the towel drawer, we might hear how to be folded correctly, how to get in size order, how to rest quietly and passively among one another, and how to do a good job drying folks. I submit that from the kitchen drawer we might

hear that not everyone can be folded, that size order would be a novel concept, that our assemblage is more important for the social life in the family, that our differences, while profound, enable us to have an interesting life, that we may move about and bump into each other every time the kitchen drawer is opened, meeting new challenges, and that each new encounter has the risks and the pains and the joys of creating a new understanding of our collective power and importance.

When you need a pair of scissors, depending on your family's background, more than likely you'll find it in the kitchen drawer. When you need that important whatnot, more than likely you'll find it in the kitchen drawer. When times get hard, when the way is obscured by shadows, when it is hard to see your way, many of you will find candles to light in the kitchen drawer. You may find a flashlight and batteries in the kitchen drawer. Friends, the diversity of the kitchen drawer can lead us all to an interesting and better life if we have the will, courage, and flexibility to engage its potential.

Our world, the world you are about to enter, can be likened to the kitchen drawer and the towel drawer. The world is rapidly shrinking. Nations, peoples, communities, and ideas all face the challenges presented by coming into complex contact with rapidly increasing diversity. Many times, whenever the engagement of diversity results in the pain necessary to get to know the other, there is a tendency to retreat into the towel drawer, where there are no sharp objects.

Richard Sennett, in his book *The Uses of Disorder* notes that such responses may be studied. The idea, whether at the national, community, or institutional level, involves the "attempt to build an image or identity that coheres, is unified, and filters out threats in social experiences." Experiences that don't fit a consciously constructed set of beliefs, likes, and dislikes are cast out as unreal. Rules from the past become the final standard of reference. The Puritans of New England ran into this problem during the Antinomian controversy, inspired in part by Anne Hutchinson, the Quaker invasion, and finally the witchcraft hysteria. In each of these situations, Puritan efforts to articulate more forcefully who they were and what they wanted by more rigidly regulating behaviors and social life made the community more brittle and less able to handle new challenges. All too often, when confronted with new ideas, or people with different cultures, or people with different conceptual frameworks or world views, or people with different ways of seeing, interpreting, and living daily life, the modern response of those who don't understand or who wish to ignore the challenge is something like, "If I didn't know about it, it must be wrong. If I can't understand it, it must be insufficient: If I disagree it must be inadequate. If it does not fit into my understanding of the world, it must be wrong. If it challenges my cherished notions of how people must live, it must be incorrect. We must preserve the past. This new idea will set a bad precedent. We've always done it my way. This person and/or these people are incomprehensible. They don't know how to refuse to do it right. Kill the messenger! Kill the messenger! Drawn to its extremes, we can see examples of these responses at work in China and in South Africa, but we can also see them closer to home every day. De Tocqueville saw that the violence against those who challenge the norm while serving to silence their voices simultaneously

provided the perpetrated with the greatest sense of collective dignity and collective sameness.

More sophisticated versions of this behavior sound something like, “We must be sensitive to and respect those who are different or who have ideas different from our own.” All too often, this becomes translated into ignore, patronize, or tolerate the messenger. Berger and Luckmann in their work, *The Social Construction of Reality*, indicate that if a group’s way of being, their symbolic universe, is threatened by the fact that another group may do things differently, an alternate symbolic universe, they feel they must legitimately repress the heretical challenge because they cannot conceive of another way. The offending group “must be met with the best possible reasons for the superiority of one’s own”. This is accomplished by conceptually liquidating everything outside of one’s universe, that is, denying “the reality of whatever phenomena or interpretations of phenomena that do not fit into”(9) their universe. This is accomplished in two ways. First, all threats from the outside are assigned “an inferior ontological status and thereby a not-to-be-taken seriously cognitive status”. (10) This process can be more sophisticated when, in Berger and Luckmann’s terms, it involves “the more ambitious attempt to account for all deviant definition of reality in terms of concepts belonging to one’s own universe...the final goal of this procedure is to incorporate the deviant conceptions within one’s own universe and thereby to liquidate them ultimately. The deviant conceptions must, therefore, be translated into concepts derived from one’s own universe. In this manner, the negation of one’s universe is subtly changed into an affirmation of it. The presupposition is always that the negator does not know what he or she is saying. Their “statements become meaningful only as they are translated into more ‘correct’ terms, that is, terms deriving from the universe”(11) being negated.” James Baldwin’s comment that civilizations have proven themselves capable of destroying people rather than hearing them is indeed a sobering thought, given the above context. (12)

How does one engage the challenge to grow and to learn from the new and different? Let me focus on colleges, an area of expertise in my personal experience. As a first year student, I recall my professor in the course “Society and Man” telling the class that my neighborhood, Bedford Stuyvesant, which was as orderly as a Catholic High Mass, was disorganized, chaotic, and full of every social pathology known. When I challenged his view, he mentioned something about theory, methodology, empirical inquiry, and discounted my questioning although he never visited the area. He said it was in the book. I wondered who wrote the book. There was, it seemed, an orthodoxy when it came to studying black folks. A number of instructors politely inquired why we sat together in the student center, something Alan Bloom would concern himself with certainly more than 15 years later in *The Closing of the American Mind*. I have to digress for a second. I really never could understand how something like that could last so long, how people could see individuals just sitting down, having lunch, talking, you know what you do when having lunch, and wonder why those people are sitting together! I have just never been able to understand that! Just one of those things, I guess. Blacks, women, and other relative newcomers to the academy frequently find themselves explaining that there are other ways to see, think, and do, and that what already exists on campuses and

passes for knowledge and accepted institutional behavior, is not the only reality. I have come to observe while consulting on many campuses, that newcomers are implicitly asked or expected to engage in a “phantom acceptance” and a “phantom normality”(13) where they are to behave as if they are accepted on the same basis as the proprietors and act as though their existence in the college is as normal as that of the proprietors. They are offered the rewards of membership into the community as long as they pretend they are just like the others. They are asked to accept an existence on the terms dictated by pre-existing standards of justice and fair play constructed by others. My friends, such situations are neither just nor fair. Any place that asks, as a condition of membership, that one negate the experiences of their biography, that which made them what they are, is inherently unstable. President Mitterrand of France put it better in his recent address to Boston University when he said, “Order without justice is disorder”.

In the early part of this century, the black American scholar W.E.B. Dubois wrote that the problem of the 20th century would be that of the color line.(14) Well, he was right, but our knowledge about the complexity of social life, the penetration and interpretation and the sharing of cultures has increased immensely since he wrote those words. It is no longer simply a matter of color, although color, to be sure, remains part of the challenge. But I want to suggest to you here today that your challenge, the challenge of the 21st century is that of the merging and synthesis of cultures. The challenge is no longer how to admit towels of different colors, sizes, and shapes, and how to get them folded correctly. Rather the challenge is how to combine the ideas, ideals, and promise underlying the towel drawer with those of the kitchen drawer for the benefit of all humankind, the entire household, if you will. Solutions to problems such as war and environmental issues will be short-lived and elusive if we cannot meet the challenge of the merging and synthesis of cultures. We must learn to work together to develop new ways of social life as opposed to insisting on the political and/or ideological correctness of one way of life as opposed to another. My friends, in meeting the challenge presented by the myriad of human cultures as well as the technological culture, the knowledge-class culture, institutional culture, and the like, we must find common ideals to which we can all aspire and then use the collective strength of our differences to reach those ideals. The differences among people can serve as a common denominator for a world, nation, institution, or community, rather than homogeneity which makes the other, no matter how well treated, a perpetual stranger. As noted by the American Indian Jamake Highwater in his work *The Primal Mind*, “Human diversity has not been vanquished by conformity and assimilation, but has been magnified by our widening “pluralism”, though it may seem to be less of a reality than we expected of the god or gods who promised each of us absolute dominion”.(15) Highwater continues, “But the virtues of this lesson are not accessible to those who can only see through one cultural window- one sexuality, one mentality, one reality”.(16)

Let me conclude. When I started this talk, I mentioned power and privilege. It is incumbent upon those of you who will inherit these things to use them wisely. Those with power and privilege must do more than just listen attentively, be sensitive, and respect others. Rather, you must actively include others without insisting on your way to create a better order.

Many of you, because of your Earlham education with its heavy emphasis on values, will find yourselves in the position of “other”, the stranger...those who are different, a voice to be silenced. You may want to seek the collective best, you may want to include the voices of those not heard, you may be a messenger, and make no mistake about it, others with power and privilege may not listen or will insist in clever ways that you resist change for a continuation of the status quo. But remember, we came into this world without any guarantees. If you want to successfully meet the challenge of the merging and synthesis of cultures, you must sally forth and do creative and humane battle in pursuit of your ideals. I hope we at Earlham have provided you with the stamina and fortitude to engage this challenge, and if not, wherever you are, when you open the kitchen drawer, think of E.C. Thank you.