

UC Berkeley Linguistics Department Commencement Ceremony

May 23, 2004

Graduate Student Speaker: Rosemary Beam de Azcona

Well, I sat down to write this speech and I wrote down everything important that I wanted to say and reading it aloud in a fast voice took 40 minutes, but Esther and others I talked to said I should keep it to 10 or 15. So I'm just going to skip most of it and get right to the point by only dealing with one topic that I can handle in a short speech:

What is the meaning of life?

There are many answers but since we're at school and this is exam time I'd like you all to ponder the question with me and to choose from one of the following six options:

Answer A: Life is a school.

By virtue of me standing here you know I've spent the last several years of my life in school, but the first classroom of my adult education was Pancho Villa's restaurant where I worked as a hostess in 1990. My first teacher was Martina Rojas from Jalisco, Mexico. Her job was to make the tortillas. She didn't speak any English and I didn't speak any Spanish but she would talk to me anyway and I would memorize what she said and ask the bilingual waiters what it meant. This is how I learned to speak Spanish. On the surface it was a dead-end job but the education I received from Martina is the foundation for everything I've done professionally since.

Answer B: Life is a journey.

Even if you never take a class from George Lakoff or Eve Sweetser, you can't spend much time in this department before hearing someone say this.

I'd like to briefly tell you about the journey that brought me here to study Linguistics at the University of California.

I still didn't know what Linguistics was when I left my studies with Martina for a new school, Gatsby's restaurant in Sausalito.

My new teachers were two brothers named Miguel and Candelario González Balam. One day when I came to place an order in the kitchen I heard them speaking a language I had never heard before, Yucatec Maya. I wanted to learn this language just as I had learned Spanish and Maya instantly became my number one interest.

At this stage in my journey I found a travelling partner in Henry Azcona. He's the kind of person that if he finds out you're interested in something he'll make it his hobby to find things related to your interest. One day he gave me this book: *A Maya Grammar* by Alfred M. Tozzer. I learned that the language's sound system included two dental surds. This was very exciting except for the fact that I had no idea what a surd was. What made an impression on me the most from *A Maya Grammar* was that Alfred Tozzer understood this language that I wanted to understand and that Alfred Tozzer was a linguist.

Apparently there were people who do this for a living, or so I was led to believe by the mere existence of this book. Henry encouraged me to apply to Berkeley. I was 21 and naïve when I made my plan to come to Berkeley for an A.B., M.A. and Ph.D. in Linguistics. I thought that maybe once I had a Ph.D. someone might give me the chance to do linguistic fieldwork in Mexico like Alfred Tozzer had done.

I arrived here as an undergraduate transfer student nine years ago next week during the summer session, but my official introduction to the Linguistics department came that August with the start of the Fall semester. I saw an advertisement for the Project for the Documentation of the Mixe-Zoquean and Zapotecan languages. They were looking for Ph.D.'s and advanced grad students to work as linguists on the project. One of the linguists already affiliated with that project, the ad said, was Rich Rhodes, and as luck would have it I was in his class that fall. I knew I wasn't qualified for the job advertised

but I asked the professor if perhaps I could pay my own way to come along and volunteer as a gopher for the linguists. I pictured myself sharpening their pencils all summer.

Meanwhile when I openly expressed my plan to get three degrees from this department, grad students and undergrads alike were quick to tell me that it was impossible to be admitted into this department as a grad student if this is where you earned your undergraduate degree.

The recommendations of Profs. Rhodes and Hinton convinced Terrence Kaufman, the director of the project in Mexico, and a former graduate of this department, to let me come along that summer. When Prof. Rhodes broke the news to me. I asked him what kinds of things would I be doing to help the linguists. He smiled and said 'you're going to *be* the linguist.' Thus began my journey following Alfred Tozzer's footsteps all the way to Mexico. I'm sure this experience is part of why I defied the odds and made it into grad school in *this* department. Thank you Rich and Thank you Leanne.

Answer C: Life is short, enjoy it while you can.

I can honestly stand before you today and say that these last nine years I've spent here have been the best, the happiest years of my life.

Answer D: In the end, all life is and all a person is, is their memories

That's all a Ph.D. is too. I'd like to share a little bit of my Ph.D. with you by telling you about some of the memories I'm celebrating today.

All first year graduate students take a class together in which they are introduced to life in academia and in the discipline of linguistics particularly. Eve Sweetser was our leader in my first year as a grad student and I remember a wonderful piece of advice she gave us. She told us to always remember what *we* had come here for if we ever felt disconnected from the education we were receiving.

Sometimes students do become disillusioned with the direction or ideology of the field of Linguistics itself and decide to pursue a different discipline, such as Anthropology, but I'll always remember something that John Ohala said. A student asked about a point the professor had just made and the student said that wasn't it true that mainstream phoneticians disagree with the approach the professor had spoken of. John smiled and said something like, "Yes, you're right. A mainstream phonetician would say that, but I'm not mainstream. Nope, I'm not even in the stream. I'm just sitting over there on the shore, waving to everyone else as I watch them float by heading towards the waterfall." Maybe I'm exaggerating but I think that this is the single most important and inspiring thing anyone's ever told me. This was permission to not conform and to still belong. I'm never even tempted to leave Linguistics because I remember what Eve said about holding on to your own interests and what John said about being confident in your own views.

Even people who stay in graduate school often have doubts about staying in Academia long-term. The truth is that people in academia are doing what they love for a living. People who love their jobs end up being workaholics. It's hard to be in a profession where everyone is addicted to their work because then the bar gets set so high that people who are only putting in 40 or 50 hours a week look like slackers by comparison. In Western civilization many scholarly traditions go back to medieval times when monks were scholars. That's why so many scientific terms are in Latin. I often wonder too if the reason that academics work too much is because the pace of work was set a long time ago by celibate, unmarried men who had their meals cooked and served to them by others.

For those you see here today graduating, academia is a place where we belong. Even in our questioning of it we belong and are part of a larger group of internal questioners. One funny memory I have is a conversation with two of my friends. One student was talking about the future and if academia was really the best place to be. That person said "I'm just not sure whether I want to frame my life in the discourse of academia." to which the other student replied "that is the most academic sentence I've ever heard."

I have many memories of Andrew Garrett. In my generation you can't think about our department without thinking of him. He represents perfection, in Linguistics, in handout formatting, and in pie-making. As a teacher, he gives the most challenging assignments of any professor I know, earning him the nickname *Demandrew*. The challenge of Andrew keeps us coming back for more. I didn't have the experience myself when I took Linguistics 230 from him, but when I was an undergraduate I heard a rumor that the grad students in his Ling. 230 class were once given their weekly homework assignment with a numbered set of instructions on the first page explaining how to complete the task. Instruction number 1 was "go to the library and learn ancient Greek." And this was just the *first* thing they had to do to finish that week's homework. He is so demanding that I think it could be true. But, he is also so funny that I think it could have been a joke. And then again he is so larger than life in our eyes that I think this could be another fabricated detail of grad student folklore.

I've already mentioned Rich Rhodes. Like all my teachers here, what Rich means to me is not just intellectual, it's personal. For years he was still telling people, beaming like a proud parent, about the paper I wrote as an undergraduate in his class. I'll always remember one summer in Mexico I was hanging out with the project administrator and she told me that Rich had told her how he had *discovered* me, which is the only time anyone ever made me feel like Marilyn Monroe, and when I tried to milk the secondhand compliment for more details she said "He told me about 'the paper.'" Rich has been like a father to me, supporting me every step of the way.

If Rich is my academic father, and Andrew perhaps my cool uncle, then Leanne Hinton is my academic mother. So many of the Berkeley memories that I'll remember for the rest of my life come straight from Leanne.

Like when she taught students how the two hemispheres of the brain are connected by the corpus callosum. If doctors sever the corpus callosum the result is that there are two personas living in one body. There's a famous story, perhaps an urban legend about one such patient who tried to strangle his wife with his left hand while trying to save her with

his right. Leanne said that we all go around thinking that we are each one single individual only because our two hemispheres are connected by a corpus callosum, and we think of each other as separate only because our brains are not connected by a corpus callosum. Leanne said “maybe if we all had a corpus callosum to connect us then we would realize that we *are* all one.”

Or like the millennium card Leanne gave us at New Year’s 2000. She ended the card with a mathematical calculation. If you assume that there are, say four, generations per century, and every person has twice as many ancestors as a person from the previous generation, if there weren’t any intermarriage the number of ancestors you would have had living in the year 1000 is larger than the number of people who were actually alive on the planet in that year, let alone in Europe or Asia or any other one part of it. Leanne wrote that even if all the people on the planet then weren’t your ancestors because there wasn’t the level of global migration that there is now, it certainly is possible that in another 1000 years people will exist who have most of us alive today as ancestors, so you should treat everyone you meet like they’re family because there’s a good chance you’re future in-laws.

Answer E: Life is about making your mark on the world and creating a legacy.

All the linguists I’ve spoken of today, as well as those I had to edit out of my 40 minute speech have made their mark on me. They’ve encouraged me, and taught me not just about Linguistics but how to be a linguist.

I’ve probably learned just as much from my fellow grad students as I have from my professors, because I ask them all the questions I’m afraid to ask professors.

And the undergrads too have taught me things, like what new slang words like *gleek* mean and that fresh eyes and ears like theirs will find generalizations that more seasoned linguists like myself can miss when we’re too familiar with the data.

All the consultants I've worked with, speakers of indigenous Mexican languages, especially my compadre Lázaro Díaz Pacheco, have also changed the way I see the world and Linguistics. From them I've learned to see myself and the work I'm doing in a different light. I've learned that I'm not always right and that unlike hobbies that you grow tired of, the study of language, particularly in the field, will never stop coming up with surprises to keep you hooked.

And we've all, whether we realize it or not, learned from our academic ancestors, Edward Sapir and Alfred Kroeber and Franz Boas, who we can trace back in a lineage according to who our advisors are and who their advisors were, going back to before this linguistics department was formed. And of course the people who founded this linguistics department, the late Mary Haas and Murray Emenau, who this year turned 100, have had an indelible impact on this department and everyone who comes through it.

And finally the correct answer, Answer F: All of the above

Life *is* a school. And life *is* a journey. And life *is* about enjoyment and memories and creating a legacy.

I know until the day I die I'll often think of the words spoken in these classrooms and the times I walked this campus with my husband, with him pointing where he saw a police car roll down the hill when he was a student here in the sixties, and the times when I got a hug or words of encouragement from Esther and Belén and Paula, and the times when I had lunch under the tulip trees with my daughter Erin, or years earlier as an undergraduate with my friends Cynthia and Candace and Ashlee. I've enjoyed myself and I have good memories. Other than that all you can hope for in life is to make an impact, to have people remember you.

I've been lucky enough to teach hundreds of students in my time here at Cal and if I've had the kind of effect on even a small fraction of them that the people I've spoken of here today, people like Martina Rojas and Alfred Tozzer and Murray Emenau and Leanne

Hinton and Henry Azcona and Terry Kaufman and Lázaro Díaz Pacheco have had on me, then I have had an impact and people have repeated my words to other people I've never even met, and then I, like these teachers of mine, will be remembered, at least by some people, for the rest of those people's lives.

It's a good life.