

FACULTY/STAFF LUNCHEON REMARKS

IN 1970, I WAS AN INJURED VETERAN fresh from overseas duty. The Veterans Administration was offering to pay my way to school. No one on either side of my family had ever been to college, so it had never seemed an option for me. When I applied to Western, I received a letter saying that, after evaluating my college transcript, they felt I was not "college material." They suggested that I apply to a two-year school with an open enrollment policy. Because it was closest to where I was living at the time, I chose Highline.

At first, I felt as though I was being banished to the junior varsity, or sent off to a remote farm team, far from the action of the major leagues. I couldn't have been more wrong.

After more than 32 years of teaching, and having been a visiting professor at both two- and four-year institutions, I know first-hand that I had remarkable teachers, and that I had as good instruction for my first two years as I'd have gotten at a four-year school. In a few cases, it might have been better.

I finished my A.A. degree in less than two calendar years, and transferred into Western's Honors Program, where I finished my B.A. after just one more year, and then did all my M.A. course requirements in another year.

I'm just one of the sorts of students that the community college system is set up to help, and I'll be forever grateful for Highline's mission.

I said I had good teachers, and I did. But I had at least one exceptional teacher: Lonny Kaneko. His courses in Creative Writing changed my life forever. It's fashionable at many four-year institutions to be considered a "research" university, where teaching is, to some degree, secondary. Lonny exemplified a teacher who was wholly student-oriented, and I've kept his example in mind during my own teaching career. Students come first. Period. Lonny, and teachers like him, are one reason why community colleges remain so important to students like me, who slipped through the high school cracks; to returning veterans trying to reintegrate themselves gently into civilian life; to non-traditional students who bring an incredible range of life experiences back into the classroom; for displaced people of all sorts, including the economically disadvantaged. During my first year of teaching at Seattle University, I had a non-traditional student who told me he had dropped out of high school to play music. He did that, he said, and that career was largely behind him. He decided to go to college. Seattle University required him to try his hand at a community college first, to be sure he could succeed in a four-year program. He did, and SU admitted him, where he was doing well. That young man was Duff McKeagan, of Guns 'n' Roses fame. He and I had something in common.

Shortly after 9/11, I went to New York City for the first time. I got lost taking the subway. This little poem records what happened:

Oct. 18 New York City

On the subway an old  
Polish man takes me in charge,  
rides two stops past his own  
to make it certain I find

the right place to get off. When I try  
to thank him, he shakes his head  
no, forget it. No one, he says,  
should be lost when someone else  
knows the way.

For all of you here at Highline who know the way and are willing to share  
it, I remain grateful. For what you did for me, and what you continue to do  
for others, thank you. Thank you.

## COMMENCEMENT REMARKS

OF MY THREE COLLEGE DEGREES, the one that means the most to me is the one I have from Highline. No four-year school would admit me at the time, and my degree from Highline was tangible evidence that they were wrong. Without the community college system, I might never have been able to prove that to them, or to myself.

Last November I was appointed by the governor as the first Poet Laureate for the State of Washington. There are a number of poets in this state who would fill that position just as well, just as I know that there are a number of other graduates from Highline who could just as easily have been selected as the Alumnus of the year, so I'm extremely honored to have been the lucky one. Poets, we all know, deal with a literacy of the human heart; but in order to do that, they have to have a literacy of the tongue. Much of the best of what I know about that sort of literacy I learned, or began to learn, here at Highline, thanks to teachers who made it their business to help me, and thousands of others like me, to do that.

All of you, I'm sure, had a favorite teacher, or a favorite class. For me, the teacher was Lonny Kaneko, and the class was Creative Writing. It was life-changing. The first poem I remember Lonny reading to us was Theodore Roethke's lovely villanelle, "The Waking." Here it is:

### THE WAKING

I wake to sleep and take my waking slow.  
I feel my fate in what I cannot fear.  
I learn by going where I have to go.

We think by feeling. What is there to know?  
I hear my being dance from ear to ear.  
I wake to sleep, and take my waking slow.

Of those so close beside me, which are you?  
God bless the Ground! I shall walk softly there,  
And learn by going where I have to go.

Light takes the Tree; but who can tell us how?  
The lowly worm climbs up a winding stair;  
I wake to sleep, and take my waking slow.

Great Nature has another thing to do  
To you and me; so take the lively air,  
And, lovely, learn by going where to go.

This shaking keeps me steady. I should know.  
What falls away is always. And is near.  
I wake to sleep and take my waking slow.  
I learn by going where I have to go.

Highline was where I had to go, and I'm grateful for everything I learned there, and for what I'm still learning.