

## **2017 Gerald Sass Award Recipient Speech**

*Recipient: Keith Woods, National Public Radio*

Thank you Sonya for your introduction. It's been a pleasure getting to know you. Thank you to the ASJMC committee that chose to honor me this way.

You know, when someone contacts you as Sonya did and says, hey, you've been chosen to receive this recognition, one of the things you immediately want to do is to look up who else got it. Now, maybe you don't ADMIT that you do that – you want to say it's an honor just to be considered, etc., etc. – but you want to know the company you're keeping.

So I looked. Sonya had already puffed me up by letting me know that Marty Baron of the Washington Post was the most recent recipient, so, yes, this was going to be significant. Then I saw the journalism legends, Walter Cronkite and Bill Moyers, Fred Friendly and David Broder, John Seigenthaler and

Randolph Hearst, Hodding Carter and Dan Schorr; Al Neuharth and Bob Giles.

Goodness.

I looked up the Gerald Sass Award list and saw people I've known; people with whom I've collaborated; people I've respected throughout my career – Jay Harris and Jerry Ceppos, Clark Bell and Vivian Wahlberg, Lee Stinnett and David Lawrence.

On that list is the great Helen Thomas, from whom I received an autograph and an award named for her at Wayne State University many years ago. I saw the name of my first Poynter Institute president, Bob Haiman, on the list, along with everybody's play-uncle, Merv Aubespin of Louisville. And I saw the name of one of the most influential people in my professional career – in my life, really – Dr. Karen Dunlap.

So, the next thing you might do after you look at a list like that is ... panic.

Not that I did that, you understand. No ma'am. I feel no pressure. None at all. Really. Cool as a cucumber, I am.

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I want to talk to you for a little while about the thing that drove me into journalism and animates all of the work I do to this day. Then, I'd like to hear your thoughts and have a conversation.

Now, anyone who knows me knows how much I relish the time I spend on college campuses. They are magical spaces.

I have never lost the deep appreciation for the welcoming, life-affirming embrace I got when I stepped for the first time onto the campus of my alma mater, Dillard University of New Orleans. I have never forgotten the lessons from those remarkable professors. Neither they, nor I knew where I would end up, but I knew way back then that I'd still be giving them credit today.

I wonder sometimes where I would be if I had never encountered Dr. Barbara Thompson, who so frightened me and my philosophy classmates with her intensity while sending power surging through our brains with a one-word lesson that she delivered with nearly every class:

“Think!” She’d say. “Just think!”

How would I have come to this day in my life if my social work professor Paul Harmon didn’t truly love me enough to tell me in one of my moments of existential crisis, “You have no more to learn from me about handling these things. From now on, I’ll learn from you.”

And where would I be if professor Helen Malin had not liberated the writer in me at Dillard with a note on one of my essays that said: “Keith, break every rule of grammar and syntax if you like. Just show me that you know the rules in the first place.”

Boom! Hello sentence fragments!

How many of you have been hit with that profound, humbling moment when, years after names become slippery synapses and the years blend into one another, a former student comes up to you and says, “Your words changed my life?”

That’s the magic of your work. You occupy magical spaces.

And our future journalists need that magic; these days more than most. They need your help to think critically; to act credibly; to understand the value of skepticism and the poison of cynicism. They need your passion for the fundamentals and your uninhibited, geek-out excitement about all the new things that continue to transform this profession.

They need it these days more than most, and in one arena more than many.

I’ve sat with students and professors at more than 40 universities across the country in the last 25 years or so, talking about how we might do better at handling things like race, gender,

generations, geography, sexual orientation, ideology, class ... some of the hottest of this country's hot-button issues that we stuff into the semantically inadequate vehicle called diversity.

It's tricky business, that conversation.

I've been invited by some of the most passionate and eloquent proponents of this work to come to their universities to talk about teaching diversity, and I've also been met by those who dismiss it as objectivity-busting advocacy, social engineering, hypersensitivity, or the worn-to-the-nub cliché, "political correctness run amok."

Now, let me digress here for a moment to say that I don't know, really, what people mean by "political correctness," but have you ever really seen it run amok? If pushing for inclusion, fairness, equity, accuracy, freedom from slurs and stereotypes; pushing for journalism that is informed by these values – even if that's "political correctness," has you ever really seen it run amok?

I mean, I've seen the rhetoric *meander* sometimes in the general direction of silliness. Or, maybe it's *wandered* incrementally away from a logical center. But run amok?

Anyway, like I said. It's a tricky conversation, this diversity discourse, especially when you're standing in that magical place on your campus where the things you do and say imprint themselves on young people so profoundly that they're still talking about it when their hair has gone gray.

That notion of your power has the weight of profundity, and you want to get profundity right. Don't do, for example, what I once did at Emory University, when I earnestly encouraged the journalism students to recognize the power of their craft and its potential to do good things for society, because, I told them – without attribution or obvious self-awareness – that with great power comes great responsibility.

I looked up and they were giggling. Giggling! What, I asked them, was so funny? One brave, or kind, or cruel soul – I'm not

sure which was her motivation – helpfully pointed out that I was quoting a character from my favorite comic book: Spiderman.

You want to do profundity right.

It's hard enough teaching people who already know everything. But talking about diversity, whether in the classroom or the faculty meeting, can feel like you're going out on a limb of a tall tree that sits on the ledge of a high-rise building that's built on the lip of a rocky cliff that overlooks a great rhetorical abyss.

I am here this afternoon to urge you to step out there and stare down that abyss.

Many of you, I know, are comfortable in that role – or you're at least comfortable with being uncomfortable in it.

And many of you are not.

I know because you've told me. Whenever I've run a diversity workshop for professors, dozens of them now over the years,

I've asked one question consistently: When are you most comfortable talking about these issues, and when are you least comfortable?

In answering, you've revealed strengths and anxieties; confidence and doubt. Clarity and confusion. Listen to your colleagues, and see if you hear yourself:

“I think all conversations about this topic are uncomfortable,” one professor told me. “It's been even challenging to answer these questions! As a white person, I have adopted a position of acknowledging I will make mistakes when talking about race, but that it's better to try than to ignore it. I want to get ‘better’ about talking about these issues.”

Is that you; comfortable with the discomfort?

Or are you this professor:

“I guess I'm most uncomfortable about forcing diversity to hit a quota,” he wrote, “to choose a story, or person, that's not as strong because you have a diversity initiative.”

Do you share that concern?

How about this one:

“I am least comfortable when having a class discussion that involves race, where the class is mostly white, I am white, and there are a couple of students of color. I just feel like I don’t know how to lead such a discussion sensitively. I certainly don’t want to call on the students of color to ask them to serve as spokespeople ... So it ends up feeling like territory I fear treading.”

Determination. Dissent. Fear.

More sentence fragments for Mrs. Malin. And evidence of the struggle to be our usual, magical selves when the topic is diversity. It trips us up sometimes because we don’t know enough or because we don’t think it’s germane to the course or because we don’t believe the dean will have our back if the conversation gets controversial.

Who wants to climb out on that limb only to be left by the administration to dangle like an unfinished dissertation?

I'm urging you to get out there and dangle.

I understand the hesitation; the fear; the dissent. I've said more than a few times that it seems the most rational human reaction, when confronted with one of these third-rail issues, is silence. Less can go wrong that way. Or so it seems. Listen to this one professor talk about it:

“I am most comfortable talking about diversity issues with students,” she said. “... I don't feel comfortable talking with most of the faculty about diversity issues, especially about the lack of ethnic diversity among adjuncts and faculty, because no matter how innocent the comment, some faculty tend to get defensive.”

And many tend to get silent.

But here's the thing: If you are teaching young people to write, report, edit, produce, podcast, shoot or share on social -- in any area of expertise -- they will need to know how to converse across these differences and critically assess the words and deeds of others.

Call your department journalism or mass communications; public relations or strategic communications; marketing or advertising; your students' success may well hinge on the depth of their understanding when it comes to those issues and aspirations stuffed into the word diversity.

Which of your former journalism students today is covering the tech industry? Which of your graduates is handling crisis communications for Fox News? Or Google?

Do they have the critical thinking and conversational skills to nimbly distinguish between inclusion and quotas; between sexual assault and sexual harassment and sexism? Because they'll need that skill right now if they're the reporter covering

Google's current crisis or the spokesperson facing the media on behalf of Fox News.

It's a skill best learned in the magical cocoon of the college campus.

And I know you're wrestling with it. Listen to this professor's thoughts:

“Where it gets difficult I think is when instructors are faced with tense, emotional situations or topics,” he said. “I think it's important to make students think, and that it's okay for them to be uncomfortable sometimes if they are learning and having productive discussions ... But it's hard to overcome the natural inclination to back away from potentially difficult conversations.”

I'm here to implore you: Don't back away.

If you've got, say, an advertising student who's got some clumsy, unformed, bordering-on-offensive thoughts about just

how responsible he should feel for understanding the way society mishandles matters of sexual orientation, don't back away. Step out on that limb with him, take his hand, and ask good questions: *What do you mean?* Let's start with that one. Then another one: *How do you know that?* Or: *How do you suppose others will hear that?*

You don't have to know all the answers. Just know that it's worth the risk – for the sake of the clumsy student or the students he might offend – to step out there.

Maybe that kind of classroom lesson would have helped the professionals who worked on the disastrous 2007 Snickers Super Bowl ad. Do you remember it? The one with two men reacting with ridiculous mock-violence – pulling the hair from their chests to prove their manhood – after their lips accidentally met from opposite ends of a candy bar? That scrapped commercial, trading on myths about masculinity and sexual orientation, cost Snickers \$2 million by one estimate. It's a \$2 million case study in why teaching this awareness and critical thinking is so important.

This conversation about difference, inclusion, bias; this diversity discourse is a skill that you work on. Develop. Critique. Iterate.

Try it out. Write it out. Talk it out. I know you have real fears. I know that office politics are for real; that there are real consequences for messing it up.

But sometimes it takes courage to be magical.

Now, it's about at this point in the conversation that someone wonders, "Isn't it better to handle these things in a dedicated diversity course so I can focus my time on teaching students the difference between their, there and they're?"

And that will cause someone to respond by saying, "We shouldn't 'ghettoize' diversity by confining it to a single course. It should be everyone's responsibility."

Let's not do that. It's always been a false choice anyway.

There should be a moment in the course and in the curriculum when students get to go deep and wide on diversity; where they learn not just *how* to be more inclusive in their reporting, but *why* they should be doing it. This work of diversity stands atop history they need to know. It's woven into the fabric of ethics, truth, accuracy – everything that undergirds the highest aspirations of their chosen profession. You can't teach that in a single lesson.

So by all means offer a free-standing course on diversity.

And ...

You can write it into any syllabus. From the title to the description to the classroom guidelines, you can signal to your students that you value inclusion, covering the uncovered, mitigating bias and prejudice. From 5-minute digressions to a week dedicated to the topic, you can modulate when and how much you focus on diversity.

But commit to it. Write it into your syllabus. Make the magic intentional.

Now I didn't come here to deliver a paper or a lecture or to ask you to pledge money to one of your local NPR affiliates like WBEZ here in Chicago, where, for just a few dollars each month you can get this very nice tote bag and water bottle.

I came here first and foremost to say thank you. For the Gerald Sass award. For your collective efforts to help our profession achieve the fullest realization of its mission. And for the work you do every day to ignite imaginations, fuel passions and send great journalists to places like NPR.

What you do is magic imbued with power. And while Wikipedia insists that Winston Churchill once uttered a similar phrase, I'll segue to the Q&A part of this session by quoting the great philosopher known commonly as Gentle Uncle Ben, who once told a dude named Peter Parker, "With great power comes great responsibility."

So get out there on that limb on the ledge over the abyss and do your magic.

Thank you.