

Celebrating Teachers and Teaching
UW-Madison School of Education
Tuesday, November 15

Remarks by Bassam Z. Shakhashiri:

“To all the outstanding teachers, I say congratulations and thank you. To everyone else in the audience, I say the very same thing that King Henry VIII said to each of his wives: I won’t keep you long.

[*laughter*]

It says in the program that the Dean comes on at 8:20, so keep an eye on the clock so I quit at 8:20.

[*laughter*]

I’m very pleased to share with you some observations and convictions about teaching, about teachers. I ask that you think with me about these observations and these convictions that I share with you.

Teaching is about making connections. Teaching is connections. It’s not about *making* connections, teaching *is* the connections that we make. The cerebral connections, the emotional connections. Teaching is very personal. The teacher is on display. The teacher is not only in the classroom. Teaching is in the classroom and outside the classroom.

We already know and have heard beautiful affirmations. Teaching is what we do. Teaching is important. But there is something else that is much more important than teaching. And you know what it is: Learning. Learning is what teaching is for. Learning is what we do, the research enterprise that Dean Hess alluded to. Learning is what we enjoy. Because as we teach we learn. You’ve heard this said much more eloquently than I’m saying it now, by our five honorees. But there is something else that is even more important than learning. And you know what that is too: Action.

The action that we take as a result of what we learn. The judgement that we exercise before we act and after we act, in the classroom and out of the classroom. If you come to my office, and you're all invited to come to my office in the chemistry building on the 9th floor in room 9355...

[laughter]

... You open the door, you walk in, you will see lots of things on the wall in my office. But the very first thing you see on the wall, looking straight ahead, is a plaque. I have many plaques, and other shingles, and what have you, all over the place.

[laughter]

But the first one that you see when you look up there has one word in it: Teacher.

That plaque was given to me many years ago, and it's the proudest thing I have in my office. By the way, as I take a little break here to drink some water, I have a bag of goodies right here, for you! This bag has in it these Science is Fun buttons. Everyone, please help yourself when we finish to at least one button. Give a chance to other people to get one and then... I don't want to take any back with me. Can we pass these around? Usually I don't like to pass things around in the class while I'm speaking because they start looking at it, but you already know what this says.

[laughter]

We teach and we learn. We act and take responsibility for our actions. The true measure of what we do. I want to emphasize *what* we do. The true measure of what we do is not the student opinion questionnaires or the student evaluations or whatever you call them, or the grades that we give, or the bonuses we get... have you gotten any bonuses lately?

[laughter]

The true measure of the experiences that we enjoy with others in the classroom and outside the classroom, the true measure, is the behavior and action of those we encounter in the classroom and outside the classroom. Their behavior, five years after they leave us, ten years after they leave us, fifteen years after they leave us. That is the true measure of what we, the learners, aim for. And if what happens out there is not to our liking, it's not their fault. You know whose fault it is? It's my fault.

The conviction I'm sharing with you is about the importance of nurturing curiosity and developing attitudes. Healthy attitudes, not only toward learning, but to be responsible for the actions and the consequences of these actions that we all take. What we really want to be doing is having the people we encounter inside the classroom and outside the classroom, we want them to avoid being bamboozled into making foolish decisions in matters that relate to the well-being of society.

I ask that you think with me, not about the values we impart—gangs have values, they look after each other—I ask that you think with me about being *virtuous* in what we do because it is that, that leads to the behaviors and actions that are desirable. Yes, we have values, and we share these values. We have traditions, we cherish those traditions and we impart to our students skills. Learning skills, ways to solve the problems at the end of the chapter, getting the right answer to the questions that we ask them on the exam. That's all good. But it's not enough.

Acquiring skills to solve today's problems, whether they're in science or in any other arena, is important but not sufficient. We have to learn to exercise judgement. Life is about judgement. Life is about good judgement. I say let us engage together in respectful discourse, especially with people we disagree with. We respect them as fellow human beings. I'm not asking that you respect their ideas or their beliefs. I'm asking that you and I take the responsibility to define the discourse and the level of discourse, especially with people that we disagree with.

I'm not saying which side I'm on, but 60 million people voted one way, and 60 million people voted the other way. Actually, you know which side I'm on, right?

[*laughter*]

But it's not about that. It's about, as you heard earlier, who we are. What we stand for. And what our institutions are, not what they're about, what they are. So in discourse, in conversations, let us speak with each other. Let us not talk at each other. Let us not talk to a class. Speak with people in the class. Speak with people outside the class. In the very same fashion. Because as you heard from our last speaker, we are on display.

Be proud of who we are. My closing comment is something I think a lot about, even more so than before, even though it's been true for a long time. I have a finite number of heartbeats left in me. I don't know what that number is, any more than you do. And what I've come to grips with is what I want to spend those remaining heartbeats for. And how I'm going to be doing it.

For Dean Hess, for her leadership, I'm going to give you this, Diana. [Bassam turns on LED and places it on podium.] I'm going to put it here. And you may speak as long as the lights stay on. Thank you very much."

[*applause*]