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But one pair of eyes stared clearly back. "O.K. I see. Now, what can we do with this stuff?" That was Victoria Gitman. She survived that course and went on to graduate Summa Cum Laude with a Bachelor of Fine Arts degree in Painting and a Bachelor of Arts degree in the Humanities, with a minor in Art History.

Along the way, Victoria won a fellowship to the Yale University Summer Program in Music and the Arts, in Norfolk, Connecticut, perhaps the most prestigious summer arts program in the United States. When she was a junior she won a national writing award for a research paper on the semiotics of packaging of commercial bottled water. In the fall of 2001, someone published an article in the *Journal of American Culture* making the same arguments she had made eight years ago. She was either way ahead of her time, or she is the victim of idea-theft by someone who was sitting in the audience when she read her paper in San Antonio, Texas, and took eight years to digest the arguments. How many juniors experience either of these things?

When we realized she was graduating, we scrambled to try to convince Victoria to enter our various graduate programs. But she said, "Thank you...but I must paint." And paint she has. Six years after graduation she is one of the important painters in our part of the world -- six solo shows, six group exhibits (in which she is invariably singled out by critics as having done the most interesting work), numerous awards.

Spotting a Gitman out of the corner of your eye, you might say, "Is that a Vermeer?" Or a David. "But what are they painting?" you ask. "Well, land's sake, it's Victoria Gitman!" For she inserts her own face and body into works in the style of those masters in a sly and powerful comment on gender and canonical art. Her paintings are technically stunning; and they are also theoretically brilliant. The social construction of reality, indeed!

We asked Victoria Gitman to give the 2002 Honors College Award Ceremony Address to honor her for her achievements. What happened is that she honored us. We have struggled for years to find the language to explain what we are trying to do in the Honors College. Victoria has found the words. She got it. It should be with Honors College students, she's just smarter than we are.

Thank you Victoria Gitman.

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Associate Dean, The Honors College
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When I was asked to speak here tonight, to say a few words about the Honors College, the first thing I did was to pull out from my library some of the books I had read as an Honors College student: Peter Berger and Thomas Luckmann's *The Social Construction of Reality*, the very first reading assignment of the Honors College almost 12 years ago; Stephen Jay Gould's *The Flamingo's Smile*; Bertolt Brecht's *Galileo*, as well as Galileo Galilei's own *Starry Messenger*; One Hundred Years of Solitude by Gabriel Garcia Marquez; *The Raw and the Cooked* by Claude Levi-Strauss; Lewis Mumford's *The City in History*; *The Diary of Anne Frank*, Stephen Fjellman's *Vinyl Leaves*; Ursula Le Guin's *The Lathe of Heaven*... The list goes on. I began to look through their pages, rereading underlined passages and deciphering margin notes scribbled in class. I was trying to find in them an underlying theme, something, perhaps, like the defining concern of the Honors College. But looking back through this body of readings from four years of Honors seminars, I was struck by the wild diversity of the material.

One of the books I pulled out was Gregory Bateson's *Steps to an Ecology of Mind*. In the introduction to his book, Bateson relates his experience of teaching a course that tried to get students to think some of the thoughts that are in his essays - thoughts like “Why do things have outlines?” or “Why do things get in a muddle?”; “What is play?” or “What is an idea?” The first day of class, at the end of the session, a student came up to him. The student glanced over his shoulder to be sure that the others were all leaving, and then said rather hesitantly, 'I want to ask a question. 'Yes,' it's - do you want us to learn what you are telling us?' Bateson hesitated a moment, but [the student] rushed on with, 'Or is it all a sort of example, an illustration of something else?' And invariably, Bateson continues, every year the question would arise after three or four sessions of the class: 'What is this course all about?'

I am sure this will sound familiar to both the students and faculty of the Honors College. Like the class described by Gregory Bateson, the Honors College courses are not particularly about any subject matter. They are not particularly about the French Revolution, Modern Art, Darwinism, Disney World, Cybernetics, Socrates or Descartes - though they often do delve into all these subjects. So here, too, the question invariably arises, often during those initial seminars on “The Origins of Ideas and Ideas of Origin”: “What is this course all about?” “Do you want us to learn what you are telling us?” “Or is it all a sort of example, an illustration of something else?”

Indeed, the Honors College is about “something else” - something far less tangible than information, far less quantifiable than “knowledge,” but far more profound and life changing in its implications: the basic perceptions, assumptions and beliefs-what Bateson calls “the epistemological premises” - upon which such “knowledge” is based. That is, the Honors curriculum is not about the knowledge of a subject - whether it is history, art, science, or contemporary society - but rather about the ways we come to "know" it and understand it. This, I think, is the Honors College's overarching concern and the most valuable legacy to its students.

Surely, what the Honors College asks students to learn - to think critically about our lives and our worlds, to become aware of our culturally and historically determined perceptions, to take nothing for granted and to question the framework of this very thing we call reality - is difficult and often uncomfortable. It sometimes means we need to re-imagine our place in the world, our relationship to others, and to ourselves. It sometimes means we become disconcertingly self-aware, self-conscious in the truest sense. But there is also a sense of wonderment throughout the whole process, a sense of excitement generated by the discoveries of seeing things anew.

As I was looking through that vast array of books from my Honors College years, trying to discern some kind of meta-theme, the thought occurred to me that it was the Honors College's concern and the most valuable legacy to its students.

So what is this course all about? I believe it's about nothing more difficult than learning to lead an examined life. Nothing more difficult, nor more important and more rewarding. The Honors College, really, is the beginning of a life-long journey - or rather, it teaches us to be thinking travelers in this long journey of life.

Happy travels, and may the vision you gained through the Honors College illumine your journey.

But while looking at all those books I had pulled out from my shelves, another thought occurred to me. As interesting and challenging as these readings are - we are talking about some of the best thinking and writing around - they are not really the shaping force of the Honors College. Plato, Brecht, Garcia Marquez, Levi-Strauss - these are the catalysts in that great alchemical process that occurs when great teachers and great students are given the opportunity to interact in an environment that fosters dialogue, cultivates speculation, and embraces chance. I bring up alchemy because there is something truly magical in the way that an Honors College discussion can begin with a simple, basic thought and end up with a radically new insight: a new understanding of something, a new vision of the world - a bit of wisdom, if you will. During my years as an Honors College student, there were many such instances of enlightenment.

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As I was looking through that vast array of books from my Honors College years, trying to discern some kind of meta-theme, the thought occurred to me that it was the Honors College's attempt to create a picture of human thought. In teaching students to look across disciplinary borders, the Honors College points to a way of seeing that transcends categorical boundaries. It's a way of seeing that seeks connections and that once learned translates into every aspect of life.

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