

Dr. Dan Bonevac on The Importance of Showing Up

I'm Dan Bonevac, Professor of Philosophy and Civic Leadership. I'm happy that you're here to join us on this adventure! And it *will* be an adventure. You're part of one of the most exciting things happening in higher education—not just in Texas or in the United States, but in the world. We're going to be learning a lot from you, and I hope you're going to be learning a lot from us.

I thought the best way for me to welcome you is with a few bits of advice that I wish I had known at the start of my college journey.

The first is simple: *Show up!* Show up for class; show up for events; show up for activities. Woody Allen once said that showing up is 90% of life.

That's certainly been true for me. I've gotten to know governors, US Senators, cabinet members, and an Attorney General of the United States. I've been on White House task forces. I've had ideas I proposed become laws, policies, and Presidential Executive Orders. Why? Because I'm an important political thinker? No! *Because I showed up.* Someone said, "Hey, some people are getting together to talk about stuff. Wanna come?" And I said "Yes!" I showed up.

That brings me to the second bit of advice. *Say yes!* People will ask you to do things, to get involved. Say yes. Participate. Volunteer. I've tried to live by the words of Rabbi Hillel: "When someone is needed, endeavor to be that someone." I've had amazing opportunities simply because I did what needed to be done.

Let me give you an example. I played with some of the best jazz musicians in Texas for fifteen years. Because I'm a great jazz musician? No! I once got kicked out of a Jazz Improvisation course. It was because I showed up. I volunteered. I was there when the band was panicking; the bass player hadn't shown up. It turned out he had moved without telling anyone. I heard someone say, "We need a bass player!" "I can play bass," I said. That first time, I was terrified. But I became the bass player—because I was there and volunteered.

My final bit of advice: *Ask questions!* Ask questions of the authors you read, your fellow students, and your professors. Be an active learner.

That was the most important thing I had to learn when I was in college. I was a faithful student. I went to class and did the reading. But the words seemed to leave my brain as quickly as they went in. The professor would ask, What was the main point of Chapter 3? I had read it, but I had no idea. It was like taking a shower: the words hit me but then went right down the drain. I had to learn to ask questions as I read: Why is the author writing this? What's the main point? What's the argument? What's the evidence? When I learned to do that, suddenly everything got easier.

I've found it hard to follow that advice. Let me tell you one last story. I had a chance to take a seminar on the philosophy of mathematics taught by one of the twentieth century's greatest philosophers of mathematics, someone who is now Professor Emeritus at Harvard. For the first half of each session he would lecture. For the last hour, he would turn his back to us and, without

saying a word, write formulas of *Principia Mathematica* on the blackboard, in an obsolete logical notation. We copied them down.

Halfway through the term—in late October—another student stopped me as we left class.

“Did you understand the formulas he was writing on the board?”

“No,” I answered. “I haven’t understood any of them since the beginning of the semester.”

Amazed, he asked, “Then why do you write them down?”

“*You* write them down.”

“That’s only because *you* write them down! I thought you understood them!”

“I thought *you* understood them!”

It turned out *none* of us understood them. But how do you tell the professor that, for the past two months, you haven’t understood *anything*? So, we stayed silent, continuing to write those formulas down, hoping we’d figure them out later. Half of that seminar was a waste of everyone’s time. Why? *Because we didn’t ask questions.*

I *was* that student. Don’t *you* be that student. If you don’t get it, lots of other students don’t get it either. Ask questions!

And enjoy the journey you’re just beginning. I’m glad we’re on this adventure together!