DIRECTOR RAPS
A helpful guide to the M.A. program from its director Dr. Mark Kunkel

I know, “rap” has a much more interesting musical connotation at present, but I am using the word in the 1960s sense, to refer to a serious but informal conversation. As someone who accepted humbly and earnestly the invitation to direct our Masters program in Psychology, it is important to me to try to accompany prospective and present students through their journeys in a way that is more or less worthy of our journeying. So I have written this series of raps, seriously informal conversations, on various program-related topics:

1. What to do, now that I’m admitted?
2. What is mentorship, and how does it matter?
3. What are the ethics of academic involvement?
4. What about academic climate and conflict?
5. What about grades, and evaluation?
6. Diversity: Not just affirmation, but celebration!

Please click on each to take a look at my perspectives, which are not necessarily program policy or even necessarily shared by my colleagues, but reflect my experience, my best gifts, and my considerable investment in helping you get the most from your experience here. I hope my words will be provocative and comforting and helpful to you.
1. **What to do, now that I’m admitted?**

*Dear students, dear brave companions of the road,*

Know that we are grateful to have you here. Know that you are on the brink of the process of becoming part of a community, bound together in other- and sister- and brotherhood. Bound.

I thought it might be helpful to prepare these “What to do, now that I’m admitted?” suggestions. Check some of them out with your student colleagues, okay?

I hope that they are gifts to you.

Know, please, that I consider it a deep and abiding privilege to try to be one who accompanies you in your work of learning and unfolding. I look forward to our work.

1. **Be in touch with each other.** When our admissions process is finalized, and when each of you has finalized your acceptance of our offer to come do work here, we will provide you with one another’s e-mail contact information. It’s never too late to start building community...reach out to others, and let others reach back to you.

2. Review the [Graduate School website](#) for lots of helpful information on registration, financial aid, and getting ready to come here. Most of you will have already been in touch with folks from the Grad School to apply, of course, but I encourage you to continue to consult the helpful materials they have compiled.

3. The College of Social Sciences (of which the Department of Psychology is a part) has prepared a thorough and helpful [Graduate Studies Handbook](#). There is a lot of relevant information there that you will want to consult now and throughout your academic journey. The folks at the College of Social Science have also compiled a comprehensive set of links, [here](#) (click on “Graduate Student Links and Forms,” okay?). They are very helpful. And of course our [Master’s Program website](#) is always a thorough, accessible, and helpful repository.

4. Find a comfortable and affordable **place to live.** Most of our students live in Carrollton or nearby, and many also commute from Atlanta or other more distant areas. A wide variety of housing options is available. You probably know about internet compilations such as [this](#).
and this, but feel free to check with our present students too. Many have helpful perspectives and experience, and some may even know of available rooms or houses. Ask them about leases and location and all that.

5. Consider applying for a Graduate Assistantship, using this portal. As you can see, we have many internal (departmental) assistantships available for our MA students who meet the requirements (being registered at the time of application, a 3.5 undergraduate GPA, and compatibility of background and interests). Our students also tend to have good luck finding assistantships around campus. Check the appended file for some of which I’ve been notified recently, okay?

6. Those of you who are joining us from out of state will also want to get with the program director regarding filling out a waiver of this portion of your tuition. Please see and review the information about that on the “Assistantships and Scholarships” part of our website, okay?

7. Get registered for some classes as soon as possible, but don’t worry if you are not able to build the schedule you would prefer, just yet.
   a) Remember that for both the thesis and non-thesis option there are only 36 required total credit hours, and remember that we only have two required courses for the Master’s program (PSYC 6000 Introduction to Humanistic Psychology, and PSYC 6021 Psychology as Human Science). Probably only one of these courses will be taught each semester, but there will be plenty of opportunities to take these courses later on, and neither course is a prerequisite for any others in the MA program.
   b) So almost all of your coursework here is electives (at the 5000, 6000, and 7000 level)! So as you settle in and put your plan of studies together in future semesters, do so in conjunction with a faculty member mentor. I’ll be in touch shortly with an e-mail letting you know of a faculty member who has agreed to serve in the advisor role, a good start (mentorship is complicated as you’ll see in that separate rap). You may want to change advisors later (that happens), but for now it will be helpful to at least have a start.
   c) As you think about which courses you may want to take, try to glean what you can from the course titles and from the description of courses in the Graduate Catalog.
   d) Feel free to e-mail departmental faculty teaching courses to ask for a syllabus, or to ask for more information. We welcome these sorts of curiosities and mostly cannot answer on each others’ behalf (so ask the faculty member teaching, okay?)
   e) Remember that you are allowed to apply to your MA in Psychology up to six hours of graduate coursework in departments other than psychology (in Anthropology, in Sociology, in Political Science, in Counseling, for example). Lots of our students do this to broaden their interdisciplinary exposure.
   f) Many of our present graduate students register for more classes then they will keep, so lots of seats tend to open up in the first week or so. There is an override permission form for students to fill out, but my sense is that most grad students just e-mail the professor directly, or just attend classes the first few days and wait for a seat to open. It’s a process, right?

8. Wait to buy your books until you have attended class, usually, and until you have received a syllabus. Most faculty members are aware that students buy books on-line, or even rent some, and they will have some recommendations for you.
9. Most faculty members will use to varying extents our on-line learning platform, called CourseDen. You’ll be able to sign up using your my.westga.edu ID and user name, and usually course materials are available there the first day classes begin.

10. **Jump.** In my view, classes are something we do to occupy our time and put us in relationship so that the more important work of learning and uncovering of vocation can occur. And be aware that graduate school, particularly here at the UWG Psychology Department, may be very different in important ways from the typical undergraduate educational experience (see [here](#) and [here](#), and the other “Director’s Raps” of course). Just watch that process as it happens in you, okay?

11. I’ll be in touch with you regarding an early-semester orientation. But mostly, you already know what you need to know, and just let yourself be on the look-out for suitable companions in text and in relationship.

Welcome. Well, come. Well?

MK
2. Mentorship: What it is, and Why it Matters

“Tell me, where are you going, my brave companion of the road?” - Nanci Griffith

Once upon a time, the story goes, there was a king, a warrior, Odysseus, who was called to do his work miles and years away from home. He entrusted his wife, his household, and most of all his only son Telemachus to a beloved friend, whose diligent tending and overseeing and fierce loyal companionship bestowed this legacy of involvement with his very name. His name was Mentor, and this is a little rap about your journey toward and with mentorship in graduate school.

Just watch, please, how any of these perspectives of mine might dance with yours? I'll enumerate them for clarity, and maybe so we might talk about them at some point in our shared journeys.

1. In graduate school as in life as in road trips, the journey depends on the companion. We're not merely striving for a new, kind, clear relationship so that we might begin to work: the relationship is the work. Know, here at the outset, that from my perspective all of the curriculum, all of the content and paper-writing and course requirements, is nothing more and nothing less than a helpful and insistent ushering of us into the space of collaboration. That is a sacred blistering space, indeed.

2. Be careful who you enlist and allow as your companions. Although you will be assigned helpfully at the outset of your journey to an advisor, and although you will have teachers and supervisors, yours is the work of discernment and courage and caution. Let your work with theory (about wellness, about health, about relationality) flow into your work with its application, in lived relationship.

3. Mentorship is to be established, not assumed. Telemachus (remember him?) was a babe in arms when his father vanished across the ocean. In the waves and troughs of that mystery, the work of Mentor was to set sail with Telemachus toward a gradual
awakening to not only the true nature of the mysterious heroic absent father, but ultimately to accompany an awakening to the heroic presence of Telemachus to himself. (You may read more about that process here if you are so inclined...it’s interesting!). In the ebbs and flows and tides of relationship, you and your Mentor will turn the abstraction of the curriculum into the immediacy of relationship. And...

4. **Mentorship is a process, not an event.** As you experience a deep heroic mysterious connection with a teacher or two, as the arc of your journey bends with theirs, you may have a conversation and punctuation of that relationship: “I need a mentor. Would you be willing to serve with me in that role?” On the other hand, you may never ask, or have to. You may find yourself almost gracefully, and certainly mysteriously, finding yourself accompanied, and speaking that companionship in action (doing several classes, or writing a thesis or a paper together) rather than word. As other relationships, mentorship moves. Be suspicious of stasis, of resolution. “When the student is ready, the teacher will appear.”

5. **Perhaps the greatest gift of mentorship is not similarity, but complimentarity.** You may have the idea that mentorship involves a stamping out of self in the image of the other, a pouring of identity into the mold of the other. But no, not from my perspective. The greatest gift to a teacher is not creation of smaller versions of themself. The greatest gift, it turns out, is to be co-participants in an unveiling of mystery, of reconnoitering jointly the terrain of being so as to sit and stand and dwell in it differently. When asked if he fancied himself a Guru, the teacher and mystic and (yes) Mentor Deepak Chopra invited the interviewer to spell the word. “G, U, R, U.” “Exactly,” replied the teacher. Read it out loud and it will make sense.

Oh, and the end of the story? After two dozen or so years of mystery and absence, Odysseus comes again to his son. Eyes full of inherited idealization and ears brimming with stories of superhuman mythical exploits, Telemachus was blind to the ordinary wonder standing before him. “You’re not that guy! I’ve heard about him....” And then, dear Odysseus: “It is I, Odysseus. No other Odysseus than I will ever come back to you. But here I am, and I am as you see me.”

What a gift that will be, to know of your extraordinary, ordinary wonder, glimpsed in the burnished kind clear mirror of your Mentor. Blessings all over you in that journey.
3. The Ethics of Involvement

For the last few years I have been wearing this safety pin, every day, attached to the front of whatever shirt it is I have on that day. Sometimes (albeit rarely) students and colleagues ask me what it means, and I happily explain. I would like to answer that question here, before you ask it maybe, by way of framing an ethical perspective on involvement with and around our work.

It’s a safety pin, right? So of course I would wear it as a reminder of the importance of being safe. It symbolizes for me, and perhaps speaks to others, two different senses of safety. The first meaning has to do with doing what is necessary to keep myself safe in whatever context or circumstance I find myself. And the second meaning, no less significant and no less difficult, is to be safe, in my way of being around others. I’d like to talk about each one of these meanings as it relates to the ethics of our involvement with each other.

**Keeping safe.** How to keep oneself safe, in the swirling and maelstroming of the work, is big and complicated stuff. It’s nice to pin and wear some ethical reminders, close to the heart, and to have these tangible markers bring close to us our commitment to taking care, to being careful. Here are some of the things I hear that safety pin symbolizing for me, every day:

1. **Establish and honor firm yet porous boundaries.** I got this from Camus, of all people, in his homage to travel (and graduate school is nothing, if not a journey):
   
   What gives value to travel is fear...When we are so far from our own country...we are seized by a vague fear, and an instinctive desire to go back to the protection of old habits. This is the most obvious benefit of travel. At that moment we are *feverish but also porous*, so that the slightest touch makes us quiver to the depths of our being...Travel, which is like a greater and graver science, brings us back to ourselves.

   –Albert Camus, *Notebooks 1935-1942* (italics mine)

   So, stay safe by doing your work to neither let everything in, nor turn everything away. Find ways to bring, not spill, and to step, not slip. But bring, and step.

2. **Pay what you owe.** “What we owe?” I hear you asking. Well, yeah. You have worked hard, I bet, to individuate and separate, and perhaps have come to chafe at authority’s yoke. But I would like to invite you to just notice that hard-earned right to chafe, to soften and move it a bit, and ask not “What do I have to do,” but instead, “What do I owe, to the gift of being, here?” I would like you to consider carefully what you owe the endowment of trust and moratorium that society is bestowing on us, blessed denizens of this sanctuary of ideas and abstraction and irrelevance. I would like to invite you to consider carefully what you owe the discipline of psychology, the sisters and brothers and others who have toiled to gather light and bounce it our way. I would like you to consider carefully what you owe ultimately yourself as a student. I would like to invite you, as would a good parent, to exorcise the ghosts of compulsory education, and at the times when you find yourself in this Masters program asking what you
have to do, asking yourself instead, “What do I owe?” That will land you in a different place, I bet.

These raps (as everything else about our work!) are in part absolutional and confessional. So I need to confess that my own perspective on this ethic of safety in involvement, and my own way of living in “ought,” is undoubtedly skewed and outlying. I have missed exactly two classes since 1984, and I taught many more than one or two when it was exactly what I would have preferred not to do (feverish, or retching, or wretched). But I did. And as a practicing psychologist, I have written by now thousands of psychological evaluations which in humility and gratitude I claim and cherish as not only meeting but far exceeding the standards of my profession, even as they didn’t quite reach the standard of the marketplace in terms of what I charge. I have never been late with a psychological report. To my knowledge, I have never been negligent of a therapy hour no matter how distracted or infirm or burdened solitarily I was. I have never not returned a test or a paper until it bore the marks of my careful companionship.

I take my responsibility and what I owe to society, to my classroom companions, to the discipline of psychology, and ultimately to myself, very seriously. I encourage you to do the same. And I can almost promise you that as you do so, you will have a very different experience. The best self-care, in my view, is the doing of good worthy work, well. Think about that. You will take fewer “personal days,” I bet.

3. **Don’t pay what you don’t owe.**
Nietzsche sketches a journey of metamorphosis from bearing others’ burdens, to being merely powerful, to being whole. We move from the camel to the lion by speaking what he terms the “sacred NO.” Part of the art of staying safe involves a cultivation of courageous discernment, of knowing and coming to choose what to affirm and what to deny, what to take up and what to put down. Others may lay on you the burdens of their lassitude or guilt or seduction or anger. Others may persuade you to do their work for them, or to engage in a different sort of alliance away from good work toward shared indifference or counter-dependence. Don’t do it. Stay safe, and speak a sacred NO to what doesn’t have juice and truth in it for you.

4. **Take courage from your companions.** What a gift it is to contemplate all those who have done their work, sometimes perilously, so that we might take safe refuge in that work in head and heart and hand. We truly may stand on the shoulders of giants, and claim safety there. It also seems to me that we may dishonor and even perhaps profane these gifts if we do not take them up with intention and respect. I am haunted by the experience of my Civil War brothers, massed and marching into gun
emplacements and in many cases the certain and proximate opening of death’s door. The story goes that they pinned their names to the back of their rustic uniforms so that their bodies could be identified. And as we read their journals with an eye toward motive, and bring humble tentative curiosity to their journeys, we don’t see fervent patriotrics or allegiance to slavery or state’s rights. Instead, each says, “I didn’t run because the man next to me didn’t run.” I think about that a lot: I owe it to you my others and sisters and brothers to be here, in part because you are here. I’m going to pin my name to the back of my shirt (I happen to have a safety pin, after all), and march straight into the mouth of uncertainty and humility and collaboration. I owe it to them, to you, not to run, and I am safer in your ranks.

5. **Seek safety in self-efficacy.** There is a big body of research by now that suggests that what gets us through the night is knowing who we are (that’s self-concept), feeling worthy and wonderful in a way that is anchored in what Rogers calls the True self (that’s self-esteem), and being able to do the things that people who get through the night know how to do, and that others struggle with (that, friends, is self-efficacy). And guess which matters most, in getting us through? Right. Self-efficacy. Seek safety in accumulating talents and skills, mad skills, and in bringing those skills to your life and love and work. It’s Rumi: let the beauty of what you love be what you DO. Stay safe by shepherding your doing toward the aesthetic of good work, done well.

6. **Get therapy, but mostly be in relationship with the therapeutic.** Some of you may be very interested in psychotherapeutic change processes, and that’s all well and good. You will have some expert and adequate companions. My ongoing experience as a patient (ety: one who suffers) in psychotherapy, and in a supervision group, is an invaluable ally in my project of feeling safe in the world. But the really helpful gift of psychology is not, in my opinion, therapy. The deep healing thing, really, is moment-to-moment experience of the therapeutic. Pay attention to people in your classes, be they teachers or students (and let’s hope those designations are in-flux), who have the quality of a soothing truth-telling, or a healing presence, or a fierce humility. Hang around them as if your life depended on it (it does, you know). Seek to soothe the parts of you that are overly conflicted, and to rouse and stir and perturb the parts of you that are a little too comfortable in their hubris or fear or arrogance or be-littling. Seek to be in relationships that have healing in them.

I know, this is going on a bit long, but I’m almost done. I just realized something, speaking these words out here on Day 993 of the One Person Make America Kind Again 12,000 Step Daily March: **the things that we do to keep ourselves safe IMPLY that we will be safe in the world.** The very principles I have just outlined for the first “stay safe” ethical project flow into the second “be safe for others” ethical project as well:

- firm, yet porous boundaries: As you keep yourself safe by knowing what to let inside and what to keep outside, and pouring instead of spilling, you will also find yourself
honing these processes in others. Find ways to empathize with others’ fearfulness and joy in this fearful, joyous journey, and find ways to honor their journey along with yours. Get in the habit of asking yourself, “Is there work here? Is the work for me, for the other person, or for us, together?” Like that.

- **pay what you owe:** you’ll be safer around others to the extent that you are doing your work, and that your way of being supports them in doing theirs. That way others won’t have to take care of you, take up your slack, or collude to deny your absence or lack of preparation. And you can expect the same of others, in fierce respectful confrontation (ety: to face together). We feel safer when we are hugged by optimal kind, smart structure.

Maslow, whose name most of you will recognize as one of the founding parents of humanistic psychologies, struggled toward the conclusion of his teaching career to not feel dissipated by sharp and unmonitored response from those he was inviting to be his students. He wound up retreating from the work of teaching, but not until penning this mordant regretful goodbye: *My impression had been growing through the last four or five years of teaching that I was being used not so much as a teacher but as an object upon which some authority-rebellious students sharpened their teeth and claws, as the bear uses a scratching tree.* You can keep people around you safe to the extent that you come to know your teeth and claws, as well as your underbelly and heart, and when you bring these hard and soft parts safely rather than fiercely. Pay your dues to be safe, and help others in that project.

- **don’t pay what you don’t owe:** I don’t know from Nietzsche, but my guess is that the last thing that that Lion or Child would want to do is to lay additional burdens on the Camel’s back. As we claim the right to affirm, and to deny, we find ourselves more respectful of others’ rights to do the same. Pick up some things on others’ behalf. Let them pick up things on yours.

- **take courage from your companions:** I adore this admonition, clasping as it does the two sides of that safety pin. You’ll be safer around your companions when you see them as not only your companions, but your others-sisters-brothers-in-arms, and when you glimpse and bask in their Light, their Buddha nature. The marital therapists remind us to positively connote, to look for good intentions in even heinous or inappropriate doings. *Desiderata:*
  
  **GO PLACIDLY** amid the noise and the haste, and remember what peace there may be in silence.
  As far as possible, without surrender, be on good terms with all persons.
  Speak your truth quietly and clearly; and listen to others, even the dull and the ignorant; they too have their story.
  Avoid loud and aggressive persons; they are vexatious to the spirit.
  If you compare yourself with others, you may become vain or bitter, for always there will be greater and lesser persons than yourself.

And that all sounds like safety to me.
• seek safety in self-efficacy: Yes, be safe by helping others refine their self-awareness ("feedback," and all that), in kind and clear (not nice and slanted) ways. And be safe by helping others know when they are doing good work. Mirroring is good. Above all, enlist others as companions in the buffering and safe work of building self-efficacy. Be a safe companion in that project. **Let the beauty of what you love be what you do.** Do your best and truest work, and support safely others in doing theirs.

Maybe a little story will help clarify my point.

I have a dear friend and colleague who is the chair of another department on campus. And he is that sort of searing teacher who is always looking for ways to help his students bridge what is purely academic to what is lacking, and sorely needed, in the socio-cultural context in which we find ourselves. As a teacher of biology and ecological systems, he built this bridge quite tangibly last semester by securing the donation of a dozen or so picnic tables from a local builder supply. He then asked his students, as would a safe challenging companion, to paint or otherwise adorn those picnic tables to be placed in public spaces, but to do so in a way that wasn’t merely personal. The only requirement of their esthetic embellishment was that the students were required to justify and map their painting or smearing or sandblasting onto some hard-won conceptual notion about place or environment or ecosystem or human and non-human animal interface. Otherwise, they were free to place, or paint, anything they wanted. Of course, the outcome was as would be expected: The tables were not only beautiful and functional, but also adorned in a way that reflected the ethic of care and tending on the part of all involved.

Humans are not, of course, picnic tables. But as you bring your best gifts to others, and to your shared projects, you will find yourself more respectful and more insistent and more diligent in your collaboration, and you will paint good tables.

• be therapeutic. Dear dear companions, ours is complicated and complex work, rife with pitfalls and peril. What I wish for you from the depths of my heart and the hollows of my hands and the crown of my head is a humble commitment to stewing and simmering and familiarizing yourself in this short two years with psychological theory and ultimately with its implications for life well lived. There will be time later for “doing therapy,” maybe. Now is the time to awaken and attune and refine those better angels of your therapeutic presence. Practice, in your way of listening and reflecting and summarizing and paraphrasing (but mostly, listening), what at some places are taught as “microskills.” Perhaps some of you will take a “counseling technique” class, and that will be fine. But please be aware that every class, every conversation, every walk or food pantry offering, is an opportunity to bring your deep gladness to the world’s deep need, to help the world be a kinder and safer place (one apple or idea or laughing-crying friend at a time). In your very presence you may come to convey to others a safety, and a beckoning catalyzing companionship.

I look forward to accompanying you in our beautiful work. I promise, again and again, that I will try to stay safe, and to be safe. May you, if that is a commitment you share, feel accompanied in doing the same.
4. Climate and Conflict

The first principle of ethics is to, “Do no harm.” The second, related principle is to, “Do good.” From these two principles, all related rules and regulations and best practices derive.

In graduate study, you should be aware that there are codes of ethics that elaborate these two larger principles, and that these codes may pertain variously to you and your teacher. For example, as a licensed psychologist, I am bound to adhere to the American Psychological Association Code of Ethics. Those who are otherwise licensed are similarly allegiance and obligated to the ethical codes of their professions, but all of us in university settings are tethered helpfully to a code of ethics regarding our teaching and learning work. You may find that code [here](#).

I encourage you to familiarize yourself with this ethical code, and to consult it as you would a compass during your graduate stay, to orient professionally to what otherwise would be merely personal. It has been my experience that when we neglect the work that others have done to locate our individual suffering or joy in a common context, our feelings of specialness or persecution or arrogance may surface accordingly, so it is nice to know that others have given these questions considerable focus and elaboration. They have crafted a set of masts to which we might be tethered, helpfully. I would like to emphasize in this rap two specificities among those ethically tethering principles.

The first has to do with confidentiality. Some of you are familiar perhaps with the legal concept of privilege. Privilege implies an ownership of material or experience or process on the part of those possessing it. For example, a patient in a psychotherapy relationship has ownership of the material of that relationship (assuming the patient is of majority age), and as a psychotherapist I cannot give that material away to another without the patient’s consent except under extenuating circumstances that have to do with likelihood of harm to self or others.

The ethical principle of confidentiality is related to privilege, but confidentiality is an ethical rather than a legal imperative. Confidentiality implies, demands even, a collaborative respectful holding and safeguarding of our work. It speaks to what happens in classrooms, and in written communication with others in our environment. In sending a faculty member a personal email, for example, you should certainly have an expectation of privacy related to confidentiality, and unless you request or unless the faculty member asks for your permission, you ought to expect that that email will not be shared publicly or even privately outside of the ethical container to which it belongs. Similarly, communications from faculty members to you might be treated with respect and confidentiality and not disseminated broadly. Please ask your teacher and other classroom companions about the extent to which your classroom
products and processes are protected under the wonderful, and sometimes troublesome umbrella of confidentiality. You may read more about privacy, confidentiality, and privilege here. Give it a look?

There are also ethical guidelines for how we manage and address concerns and conflict. For example, during the course of your graduate study you might have a misunderstanding or argument or personal difficulty with one of your graduate student peers. You may feel misunderstood or misjudged or misattributed to by one of your teachers. You may even have concerns about the grades assigned you based on the work you do in your classes. In each of these cases, the ethical principles of respect for one another and for our process applies. And relatedly, a respect for the work we do around the unfolding of our professional and vocational development constitutes a helpful ethical tether.

In addition to these ethical principles there are also (as is common in psychology) theoretical notions that apply to the process by which we might address concerns and do our work together in safety and care. I am fond of a conceptual notion that I will borrow from the systems theorists. It is something called triangulation, like this:

People in systems in which they experience a lack of power or access may look to others with whom to collude or build an alliance, as off against a perceived adversary. You probably remember times in high school or even earlier in your college study when a classmate invited you to solve the problem of intimacy by being critical of another classmate or a teacher or an assignment. You may even remember times in your family of origin in which a parent invited you to be persuaded that the other parent was doing something negative or unwanted, and that the two of you could feel close to the extent that you saw this similarly. You may have even heard others invoke what the social psychologists call “hidden constituencies” that sometimes sound like “We’ve been talking, and lots of us think…” Each of these maneuvers is an attempt to feel powerful and safe by aligning against a third party. The essence of triangulation is an attempt to create just such a stable and strong alliance, and is again very common in systems in which people feel powerless or feel a lack of access to power. This MA program, however, is not such a system. It is my hope here that you need not triangulate, and that if you feel another inviting that sort of triangulation (one of your teachers colluding with you that another teacher is misplaced in his or her thinking, or a classmate inviting a soothing of the difficulty of the material by a conspiracy of blaming the text or the teacher), that you will remember this conceptual ally.

When confronted with triangulation, I first try to understand it empathically, and to decode the implicit messages about powerlessness or fear. I am then obligated as a licensed psychologist
and as a member of the professoriate to safeguard our process, and not to allow myself to participate in this easy collusion. The thing to do when a patient wants to complain to me about a previous therapist, or a student about another teacher, is to honor this experience, and then ask that person where that work needs to be done. It needs to be done in the relationship that gave rise to it to the extent that that relationship permits, and in my experience it almost always does. When I invite students who want to solve the problem of feeling intimate with me by inviting me to see another student or colleague as “bad,” I typically ask what work needs to be done with that colleague or student, and then I ask if there is any reason why that work cannot be done with that student or that faculty member. Again, almost always the answer is “No.” On rare occasions in which the imbalance of power or other considerations demand it, I will offer to accompany the student in a discussion with that colleague or teacher, so as not to be triangulated but rather locate the dilemma as a piece of our work together.

Again, it has been my experience that these occasions are very rare, so I invite you in your graduate career not to triangulate. Do the work that needs to be done with the person with whom you need to do that work. When you find yourself inviting others to stand beside you and have a common adversary or enemy, please take advantage of these opportunities in your self-awareness to begin to carry yourself otherwise in the world.

Navigating interpersonal conflict and tension is one of the projects and purposes of education, after all. The dispensation and memorization of knowledge that occurs in a Masters program could take place much more efficiently and quickly by reading books. It is working through these kinds of interpersonal edges, however, that the essence of education might properly and helpfully accrue.

I hope that is your experience here, and that you feel accompanied and encouraged in your efforts to carry yourself ethically and well in the world. It’s worth doing our work, to do our work.
Grades are nothing if not complicated. If you’re like most of us, they have been at once a container for celebration, for recrimination, for manipulation, for judgment, for leveling, for access, and for gratitude. They have been junctures at which to feel empowered, and crossroads at which to feel powerless. They have been old, in the sense of conjuring our histories in relation to those dispensing worthiness, and new in helping us feel capable and adequate together. They have been paternal, and they have been sisterly and brotherly. Grades are complicated.

And here in graduate school, grades will take on yet additional dimensions. They will by turns seem irrelevant or inimical to your project, and squarely of a piece with it. They may be seen by you as yet another set of strewn obstacles, mere hoops to jump through, or as opportunities to feel called out and called into and called forth into renewed commitment to bringing your best gifts.

I would like to speak here to some general principles that in my experience have come to refract grades as a helpful focus and ally, rather than as a necessary enemy or distractor from our shared project.

1. **Try to wed evaluation and collaboration.** These aspirations may seem at-odds with one another, as orthogonal even. It may seem that every time one of us is charged to categorize and quantify and assay another, that that process necessarily becomes adversarial to the larger project of collaboration in which we are entwined. I would like to suggest, however, that kind and clear evaluation can not only co-exist with collaboration, but can bolster and strengthen and enliven that project. There is something worthy and even beautiful about naming and christening, even when the manifestation of that process is a letter grade or a set of commentaries in the margins of a paper. There is something honorable about taking our work sufficiently seriously to allow its evaluation to matter, as part of our companionship in it. Please explore for yourself the meaning of grades, and allow that meaning to be negotiated and re-negotiated, to be sifted and refined and leavened and tempered, in our work together.

2. **Be careful about who you enlist as an evaluative companion.** Carl Rogers’ (1961) profound and courageous treatise *On becoming a person* includes this not-at-all-flippant observation: *Evaluation by others is not a guide for me.* He elaborates:
The judgments of others, while they are to be listened to, and taken into account for what they are, can never be a guide for me. This has been a hard thing to learn...In later years it has sometimes jolted me a bit to learn that I am, in the eyes of some others, a fraud, a person practicing medicine without a license, the author of a very superficial and damaging sort of therapy, a power seeker, a mystic, etc. And I have been equally disturbed by equally extreme praise. But I have not been too much concerned because I have come to feel that only one person (at least in my lifetime, and perhaps ever) can know whether what I am doing is honest, thorough, open, and sound, or false and de-fensive and unsound, and I am that person. (p. 23, italics added for emphasis).

I have been sufficiently intrigued by that mountaintop pronouncement to delve into the vocational ascent that would find apex in Brother Carl saying such a thing. Kastenbaum (1979), in his parallel entitled biography "On becoming Carl Rogers", elaborates a vivid context for this provocative outpouring: Eschewing external evaluation came at the pinnacle of a life-long process of calibrating an internal evaluator. Carl had subjected himself, and that is probably exactly the word, to numerous experiences of being seen, and yes, measured and weighed, by those he had come to trust and in whose vision he entrusted with a clarity of seeing his work. He had done sufficient work, it seems to me, to assert his ultimate confidence in himself, and himself alone, as the arbiter of the fidelity of his efforts, and of their correspondence, even their congruence, with his best work. He had earned rather than assumed the authority to make that pronouncement.

It is after all no small thing to internalize and actualize internal evaluation. This is not some hasty Oedipal ersatz victory. Rather, Rogers' shouldering of the burden of internal evaluation came at the end of a process, rather than a beginning. It stood as an outcome of abundant attention to the perspectives, judgments, and yes, evaluation of those whom he had entrusted to witness and warrant his game. I hope there comes a time for you, and perhaps for me too, to say “evaluation by others is not...” but my guess is that this is life-long process rather than a hasty, counter-authoritative pronouncement.

3. Evaluation matters, because good work matters. Grades, as complicated and haunted as they are with the ghosts of those who have merely measured rather than deeply seen us, are in fact an important and catalyzing component of our experience together. For grades are no mere judgment or labeling or empty scaling. They reflect at their best a careful collaborative commitment to holding ourselves out to the highest standards of our profession, as yes, seen in the eyes who have done their work to stand as the gatekeepers and assessors of what good and worthy work is. I would suggest, and I do suggest confidently, that your teachers have done their work to discern work that is good from work that is lacking, and that their bringing of their hard-won clear seeing to your efforts, however you may experience it as stern or arbitrary or unfair, is at its best a reminder to all concerned that our work matters.
Sometimes only a text is at stake. Sometimes a broader fidelity to our class process is at stake. And, particularly for classes with a clinical component, safeguarding a public interest may be at stake. A grade is a marker of an ethical allegiance to making certain that no harm is inflicted, through indifference or naivete or flippant casual bypassing, and a similar resonant reminder that our efforts to do good are enhanced by diligent and appropriately rigorous supervision. Grades are one way that that supervision looks.

4. **The Gaussian distribution, at which some cast easy aspersion as “the Bell Curve,” has shifted.** Many of you may have found your way to graduate school by a customary and perhaps comfortable reserved seat in the right tail of that distribution. But what was once abnormal, a departure from the quotidian middle-ground of adequacy, is now a middle-ground of its own. The A work of the undergraduate, which may have distinguished itself less by its inherent excellence than by its departure from the norm, is now perhaps the B or C work of graduate school. I know, some of you might still hold the idea that “Cs are degrees,” or that you are purchasing A’s rather than being given privileged access to knowledge and refinement. But you certainly are not purchasing As in your graduate classes. You certainly are not already entitled to anything except for an opportunity, an invitation, an opening to rigorous relevant pursuit. And evaluation is a necessary and catalyzing part of that pursuit.

So be aware that, at least for many of your teachers here, an A is to be earned rather than assumed. An A denotes excellent, rather than obligatory, involvement with the class content and process. It denotes excellence, not merely effort. It denotes a high level of informed commitment and the outcomes of that commitment, rather than mere presence.

Yes, you might earn a B or two. A B is typically understood in graduate school to acknowledge and name the sort of “middle-ground” adequacy and good faith that perhaps was more reflected with a C in your undergraduate program.

And a C? Well, should that be your lot I hope it is understood by you as ominous, as a wake-up call to put forth your best effort. You may refer to the policy elsewhere on the consequences of a C are for your stay here, but I hope you never need to explore that material.

So I hope that grades and grading are a way to hone your own internal evaluation of your best gifts, given well. I hope that they are markers of your journey toward excellence, accompanied. I hope that your relationship to grades awakens in you a commitment to doing A work long past the time when no hand but yours holds the pen.
6. Diversity and Affirmation

When I consider how we are together as a community, I end up dwelling with two different metaphorical comparisons.

The first image for our gathering is that of a blender, in which we are all lumped together in some suitably sturdy container and a not-so-benevolent eager hand presses a button labeled puree or liquify. We emerge pink, homogenous, and like-minded. We have accomplished a gathering, but we have also deprived ourselves of the rich, savory, wonderful, troublesome, sacredness of our community. Think about that next time you hear the term “melting pot,” or a debate about an “official language,” please?

The second image, far more consonant and faithful to my own notions about community, is that of a pot. It is not that melting pot in which we are all reduced to a common non-diverse essence. Rather it is that sort of pot that is the centerpiece in a favorite and persistent folktale, Stone Soup.

In this old/new story three bedraggled travelers arrived at a village lacking any possessions, money, or anything to eat. Entreating, the citizens for shelter and hospitality, they were turned away, each resident pleading poverty and lack. “I don’t have a spare bed!” “Nothing in my cupboard!” You know. The resourceful travelers decided, in the manner of myth, to turn this dilemma into a teaching, and to conjure a communal meal through a beautifully deceptive ruse. They scrounged somewhere an iron pot, and placing it ceremoniously in the market square they announced loudly to all within earshot that they, having filled it with water, were kindling a fire underneath: “We’re making stone soup!” And with great ceremony they found a suitable stone, brushed off the dirt, and splashed it into the pot. The residents in their curiosity and eagerness gathered around to witness this display.

It wasn’t long before a traveler remarked to one of the townspeople apparently offhandedly that as savory as was stone soup with such a stone and water and fire, that it was even better with some salt, but “too bad, nobody has any.” A village-dweller confessed furtively being in possession of this scarcity and ran to retrieve it, casting a handful of salt into the pot. “Salt makes it even better!” remarked the archetypal trickster traveler. “Too bad there aren’t any vegetables. Oh well....”

The process of bemoaning manifest lack in a way that beckoned latent abundance continued, until the metaphor concludes with nothing short of a communal meal. In the process an
invocation had created a benediction, and a container had created a simmering home for the best gifts of the community, rich and savory and diverse. We’re not talking meat and potatoes and white bread, commonality and consensus, plurality and prejudice and culinary majority rules. We’re talking the thick wonderful, troublesome, synergistic richness of individual best gifts, gathered: sirloin, but stewbone and oxtail; carrots, but parsnip and rutabaga and bok choy; salt and pepper aplenty but epiose and lemongrass and sriracha and cilantro and cumin and coriander and clove and lots of ginger.

The story concludes, as you probably know, with everybody enjoying a beautiful meal in which the individual offerings could still be detected and savored, but had come to be part of a larger whole. And what was created was not mere food, but the sort of nourishing meal that was taken up and taken in as a surface for communal curiosity and wonder and celebration, supped.

I have belabored the telling of this parable a bit because in my view it is richly, and perhaps uniquely, applicable to our coming together. I would like to dip into some of that metaphorical stew.

1. First, there is something about that pot. Unlike the blender that demands a surrender and an undoing of individuality and identity in the interest of consensus and coherence, the pot is both a container and a catalyst. Will you be on the look-out, please, for opportunities to cast your best gifts into our container, and to feel called forth to bringing them?

2. I hope that you feel in your individual and wonderful diverse essence held in something like community. I hope that you might feel that our Master’s program is a more or less adequate container for what you might bring generously and well to our gathering.

3. And that blender...some of us have been extorted to surrender what is unique and individual and true for us, our best savory gifts, in the interest of being reduced to some amorphous and bland “we.” Instead, I hope that this “we,” the working alliance of an “us” that transcends in its plurality and variegation the individual constituents of the “I,” is a rich and simmering broth that emerges dynamically and richly from the process of our gathering.

4. To affirm diversity is not to merely allow or tolerate difference, but to say yes to it, to affirm and celebrate it, as not only a necessary but an essentially catalyzing component of our shared work. So, please feel not merely welcome and accepted but affirmed and celebrated in your various facets of being; a being that includes but is not reducible to any ready categories of gender, political affiliation, sexual orientation, ethnicity, religious or spiritual identification, or any other facets. I hope that above all you feel prized and affirmed.

5. Be careful what you throw in that pot and be careful what you take. Be mindful of the tenders of the fire and steer clear of those who stir or settle capriciously or indifferently. Our work here is not catalyze more than we contain, and certainly not to merely contain without catalyzing. I’m quite sure that you will have occasion to discuss with your colleagues and teachers, and I hope some time with me, your own notions about the pot, the fire, and what you bring to it. I hope that your dipping of your bowl and cup into that wonderful stew is respectful, grateful and I dare say, sacred.
I hope that you also experience this container as a sort of simmering catalyst that is hinted at in this allegory. I hope your experience our stewing and stirring together as in the interest of refining rather than denying your diversity. I hope that you experience over time a savory emergence of some whole that contains what you bring, but does so in a way that calls you out and calls you in towards your best gifts.

May it be so!

For that will be a delicious stew, indeed.