Marianne informed me that I have a maximum of eight minutes to express my gratitude for receiving this award. Eight minutes is too long just to say thank you and not long enough to allow me to indulge in extensive reminiscence. So what I decided to do is give eight of the reasons why I am so grateful to be invited back to Uni High, most having to do with causing me to “remember when”. One per minute – that’s my plan.

Reason #1. The chance to remember my own graduation. It was 56 years ago that I went through my own graduation, and I am most grateful for the opportunity to think back that far. I asked Marianne to send me the program from that 1959 ceremony, and I am ashamed to say I remember very little of it. I do remember being nervous then, as I am now – some things we never get over. I also remember the enormous feeling of accomplishment that we all shared: Uni High was then – and I am sure that it is now – a very intellectually challenging environment. We knew that we had all learned a lot and felt well prepared intellectually to go on, many of us to pretty prestigious colleges.

Reason #2. The opportunity to honor Max Beberman. I am probably one of the very few people here that remembers “Mr. Beberman”. An inspiring and large man, in all dimensions. He taught me in a class or two in the “new math”, which was then indeed new. Uni High was a laboratory school and we were the guinea pigs. For most of us this worked out very well – we ranked very highly in the standardized math tests run by the state. Even I ranked pretty highly, as I recall, though that would certainly surprise some of my colleagues upon whose math skills I rely heavily these days.

Reason #3. A chance to think about what I really learned here. Which was, I believe, primarily to write. My favorite thing was to prepare what we called “research reports”. Going to the library – the university library was my favorite place to hang out – to dig up information in the pre-Google era, synthesizing it and trying to express this synthesis cleanly. We did a lot of that and basically that is pretty much all I have done since. I think that what actually distinguishes scientists – unless they are lucky enough to stumble across something completely unexpected – is how persuasively they can write about whatever they do discover, even when it is not earthshaking.

Reason #4. The chance to remember my classmate and friend Will Spiegelman. It was Will who steered me in the direction of science, specifically molecular biology, by arranging me a summer job with his dad, Sol Spiegelman, one off the discoverers of messenger RNA and a very charismatic individual, who surely should have received a Nobel Prize. I worked in Sol’s lab over in Burrill Hall for several hot Urbana summers and found it to be the most exciting place imaginable – I still recall the atmosphere of wonder and discovery and friendly but deadly serious
competition. I came to believe that understanding the universe and our place in it is our species’ first and most important spiritual task and moral obligation – and I still think that.

Reason #5. To remember the most important decision I made. Which was to leave the comfort and security of Urbana and go off to Harvard. Uni High was intellectually challenging in the extreme, but also supportive and comfortable in a way that much of the world, even academia, is not. I think I knew this, and so was apprehensive about leaving home, and like many of us (and you) who effectively skipped a grade, perhaps a bit too young for an easy transition. Very glad I made it, nevertheless.

Reason #6. Mentors. The rest of my reasons for being grateful aren’t specifically to do with Uni High, but without the superb intellectual preparation we received here, would not have been possible. I had tremendous mentors – Sol Spiegelman here in Urbana, Pap Pappenheimer at Harvard, Charley Yanofsky at Stanford and Norm Pace in Colorado. From each of them I learned a different lesson – and as so often happens, the value of those lessons didn’t become apparent until later in life.

Reason #7. Students. At Dalhousie I found an environment just as comfortable and supportive as Uni High. What challenged me was my own students and postdoctoral fellows. I have been blessed with an amazing collection of bright and dedicated people. I think that evolutionary biology, because it has no immediate practical “deliverables”, attracts those whose motivations are purely intellectual. For those of you who become academic scientists, I’d say that the most important thing you can do is establish a laboratory culture in which being there nights and weekends is what your people want to do, not what they feel they have to do. To the extent I was successful in doing that, I recreated in Halifax the atmosphere of Sol Spiegleman’s lab in Burrill Hall.

Reason #8. I am most grateful for when I was born and where I have been. I think that the rate at which biology has progressed in the last 70 years, roughly since Watson and Crick’s 1953 proposal of a structure for DNA, has been the most astonishing period in the history of any science at any time. I am so fortunate that I lived during this period and that for much of it I was reasonably close to where the action has been, and even played a small part in it. This all started at Uni High, in the habits of mind I acquired in this unique and wonderful environment.

So those are my eight reasons in eight minutes for gratitude in receiving this award. Thank you and good luck.

Max Beberman
Distinguished Alumni Award

The Beberman Award was established in honor of the late Max Beberman, whose distinguished career as a math educator brought him international renown. During his tenure at University Laboratory High School from 1950 to 1971, he founded and developed the University of Illinois Committee on School Mathematics (UICSM), which significantly altered the teaching of mathematics around the world. Max is remembered as being a fantastic teacher whose forte was enabling students to discover for themselves the new math ideas for which he is famous.