The following address was given by John David Dawson at his inauguration ceremony as Earlham’s 17th President on Saturday, October 15, 2011.

*Board Chair Debbie Hull, and members of the Board of Trustees—who love of Earlham, vision, and courage are manifest in the announcement that Debbie just made;

*Students, including our wonderful musicians performing today, and all those who performed and presented in yesterday’s remarkable Student Showcase;

*Members of the Faculty; Staff; Alumni; Parents;

*Distinguished guests and visitors, including former Earlham presidents who are here today: Landrum Bolling, Paul Lacey, Gene Mills, and Doug Bennett;

*All those who helped plan and organize this event;

*Members of the Richmond and Wayne County communities;

*And members of my family who join me here today:

OR,

As we more customarily—and more efficiently-- say around here:

“Friends”—

Welcome, and thank you all for coming together at this exciting moment in Earlham’s proud history.

Today, the Earlham community has gathered to celebrate, by means of high ceremony not often seen in Quaker circles, the beginning of a new journey, one that we will make together.

I am honored by your trust in me and inspired by your devotion to this community and its mission. I am humbled to stand before you today, and privileged to accept the charge you have given me.

I brought two speeches with me today. You will be relieved to hear that I will deliver only one of them. I’m setting aside the speech in the Blue Folder. From a literary and scholarly perspective, it might be the better speech. But nonetheless I’ve chosen to give the speech in the Red Folder—the one that flows more directly from the many conversations I have had with you since arriving in late June. Today I wish to contribute further to this conversation.

This afternoon’s speech has three titles:

Inspired by the Quakers and the Quakerly among us, the title is: “The Cultivation of Simplicity.” Simplicity is one of the historic Quaker testimonies, but it doesn’t mean exactly what one might think. Earlham’s “Principles and Practices” defines simplicity as the capacity “to recognize what is central in our lives.”i The North Carolina Yearly Meeting shifts the focus from recognition to choice, defining simplicity as “the capacity for selectivity in one who holds attention on a goal.”ii So today we will be seeking to “cultivate simplicity.”

Inspired by the liberal arts traditionalists among us, who may or may not also be Quakers, today’s talk has a question for its second title: “How Shall I Live?” This is a slight variation of a question Socrates asks, with a hint of impatience, in a work by Plato called “Republic,” but which we might have called “Community.”iii So this afternoon we will ponder whether we too want to ask: “How Shall I Live?”
And for the younger folks here, as well as those science fiction film buffs among us, I offer a third title, which is also a question: “Do You Want the Blue Pill, or the Red Pill?” (And here, friends, either you watch enough modern movies to know what I’m talking about—or you don’t.)

I not only have two speeches and three titles, but also one request: I ask you to join me in helping Earlham draw on its core identity and values, to face our challenges and fashion a way to flourish, in the present and coming difficult times.

By “difficult times,” I mean the seismic demographic, socio-cultural, and economic upheavals that are fundamentally restructuring all of society—local, national, and global.

Because these upheavals make the status quo unsustainable and change imperative, we should get right to the point: We need a plan for Earlham’s future, a plan that will be true to who we are, but also take us where we need to go. And we must be confident that such a plan will enable Earlham to flourish.

What would “flourishing” mean?

Before we reaffirm the value of a liberal arts education, or recognize “that of God in everyone,” or do anything else so profound, let’s at least take passing notice of four, seemingly more mundane signs of flourishing:

First—Year by year, we would be growing an ever-larger national and international pool of highly qualified applicants.

Second—We would be easily enrolling a class of well over 300 students each year, and many of the students to whom we would be required by our current small size to decline admission would be just as impressive as those we admitted.

Third—Nearly all of the students we enrolled in one year would enthusiastically enroll the following year, nearly all would graduate in four years, and every graduate would be well-prepared for a rewarding post-College future.

Fourth—We would easily construct balanced budgets, which would allow us to direct additional resources to hiring faculty, deepening and adding new academic programs, improving financial aid, and enhancing our diversity.

To flourish in these ways, we must do much more to differentiate ourselves from the other schools with which we compete for students, and this difference must be made more compelling to prospective students. In the simplest terms, Earlham must be—and be seen to be—a better educational value.

Of course, we Earlhamites already know the value of what we do here. And Earlham’s devotion to educating students is also nationally recognized. Our pedagogical passion has placed us 8th among liberal arts colleges with a “strong commitment to teaching,” according to a national magazine lots of people appear to take very seriously.iv Now I recognize that many of us have understandable skepticism about the methodology of such rankings, so I’ll merely note some of the other schools that have also been the victims of such a dubious assessment: At #8, Earlham finds itself behind Swarthmore College at #2, behind Amherst College at #6, and right beside Davidson College, together with a highly-regarded, Quaker-founded school located outside Philadelphia, whose name I can’t remember right now.

For those of us who prefer objective data about educational outcomes collected by a non-profit organization, instead of the results of obscure formulas used by a for-profit company whose primary interest is in selling its news magazine, I can report that Earlham currently ranks 28th among over 1,400 other colleges and universities in placing students into graduate school.v Just how good is 28th, you might ask? Well—I’ll just note—for whatever you think it’s worth—that 28th turns out to be better than all but 12 of what that same news magazine likes to regard as the top 50 Liberal Arts Colleges in the country.

And yet our enrollment challenge shows us that, regardless of how good we think we are, we need to be more distinctive and more compelling to those students we seek to admit. We need to present them with an even more persuasive account of our exceptional educational value. And we need to make sure that our educational value really is exceptional.
How should we do this?

Should we conclude that socio-cultural and economic expectations about higher education have permanently shifted, and that those who continue to insist on a “job-free zone” for liberal arts education are just like those who thought 8 track tapes were the way music would always be recorded? Or are we—perhaps over-anxious in a transient social moment—too ready to give up what’s most important about a liberal arts education in the face of a recession-weary public that does not readily understand or appreciate its enduring value?

Let’s push back to a prior, more fundamental question: what is our vision?

Let’s suppose, in our mind’s eye (which is where non-ocular vision begins), we imagine “having it all.” Let’s say we do not want to box ourselves into unappealing choices between what postmodern thinkers call binary oppositions:

Let’s say we don’t want to choose between positive post-college outcomes and unfettered liberal arts exploration. After all, we already know that a rewarding career after Earlham is very important. And we already know that free-wheeling, intellectual inquiry is fundamental to a truly excellent liberal arts education.

Let’s say we don’t want to choose between disciplined work in the classroom and passionate co-curricular engagement outside it. After all, we already know that education from different directions, undertaken in multiple contexts, is vastly superior to narrow approaches. And we already know that pairing strong academic and co-curricular programs produces a more stimulating educational environment.

And let’s say we don’t want to choose between scholarship and teaching. After all, we already know that in the very best liberal arts colleges, teaching keeps scholarship vital and relevant, and scholarship keeps teaching on the cutting edge of knowledge. And we already know that we have committed ourselves to offering an education in the liberal arts and sciences that is of the “highest quality.”

So we can’t responsibly think of Earlham’s future as reducible to a list of narrow, either-or choices—which is, however, a very different thing than hoping we can chart our future without making any choices at all.

So, let’s say we want even stronger versions of—everything.

But maybe that’s wrong-headed. Earlham is small, so perhaps we should instead play to our strengths, weed out our weaknesses, and do an even better job at fewer things.

Perhaps. And yet, because we are indeed very small, we already have a very big challenge going head-to-head with our peer competitors, most of which have student enrollments at least twice our size, and faculties, facilities and academic programs to match.

But wait: Perhaps we should stop tinkering at the edges and do something really bold: break out of our traditional patterns once and for all. Consider a classic “great books” college: no majors, no departments, it’s fundamentally about books, mainly old ones, and about stimulating, exploratory conversations and the acquisition of intellectual skills spurred on by the ideas those books set in motion. Or consider a distinguished military service academy (perhaps the one right down the road from the great books college): can there really be any doubt that an institution that shaves the heads of all enrolled students knows what it is and what it’s trying to do? We should admire and applaud the exceptional clarity of mission such schools display.

Now Earlham is not going to shape its curriculum exclusively around the great books (though our students read and study lots of them), and we are not going to shave the heads of our students (though some of them will, of course, do that on their own—though they might shave only one half their head . . . and maybe dye the unshaven half neon green).

But, though unquestionably different from these schools, does Earlham have a mission that is equally clear?
And here is where things can begin to get a little fuzzy. Isn’t the education we strive to offer all about discerning nuances, discovering interdisciplinary interweavings, teasing out fine relationships, probing subtle interactions, creating revelatory contextualizations? Isn’t it in part just the nuance, the complexity, that helps make Earlham the special place it is—and frustrates our efforts to “clarify” or “define” ourselves? So maybe what we could use is not a smaller, or more narrow, conception of our education, but instead one that is more clearly framed and more sharply focused—so that we can see it stand out from everything else, and see with greater crispness what it looks like. A frame tells us what is in the picture, and a turn of the lens brings what is inside that frame into focus.

So let’s ask again: What is distinctive and compelling about the education that takes place here at Earlham?

Here’s some of what I see so far:

Above all, I see an education that is taking place in the real world, not in some place removed from it. There have been questions of racism and defenses of freedom of speech; there have been demands to divest, and resistance to those demands; some have asked for the elimination of smoking on the campus, and others have resisted that in the name of cultural difference and individual rights; pure scientific research merges into social concerns about sustainability, environmentalism, and the uses to which scientific discoveries are put; windows have been opened onto the plight of the populations of Somalia, or the Middle East—and countless other places across the globe. Anyone who says college is not the real world clearly has never been to Earlham. I am not saying these kinds of issues do not arise on other campuses—of course they do; I am saying that here at Earlham, they are intentionally and actively cultivated as part of the education we offer, not resisted or evaded as though they were distractions from it.

As a residential liberal arts college, Earlham provides a physical place in which ethically and politically “aware” education “takes place,” 24/7. “Aware” is a dramatic understatement. Education at Earlham is never ethically neutral, or a-political. Ethics and politics are not subjects that can be picked up and set aside at will: they are inescapable contexts for all thought and behavior—they are the air we breathe, the water we swim in. Everything matters here—there is no neutral space.

Sometimes, I think that if Earlham were itself a great book, the pages of its text would be like those ancient Greek manuscripts I once studied—there would be almost no space between letters, words, sentences or paragraphs; there would be no margins.

Of course there are times to relax. But at Earlham, relaxation never quite entirely removes us from the realm of the ethical. Sure, we can take a break and chat with friends over coffee. But somewhere else in the world that morning, there is an absence of peace, a lack of social justice, and human beings are suffering—and some class, or some speaker at a Convocation, or maybe even the person we’re having coffee with, might just say or do something to remind us of that. (“So, just who harvested the beans for that coffee, and how much were they paid to harvest them?”).

Earlham’s comprehensiveness, its thoroughgoingness, its unrelenting ethical, political and social intensity, is very tough—physically, mentally, and spiritually tough. Earlham incessantly reminds us of a truth we would like to forget: Life has no time outs.

Now, make no mistake: We take on a very big challenge here, so we had better be sure we have the resources to face it. Philosopher Charles Taylor, in his book Sources of the Self, warns us that big moral demands require very strong moral resources; he writes:

High standards need strong sources. This is because there is something morally corrupting, even dangerous, in sustaining the [moral] demand simply on the feeling of undischarged obligation, on guilt, or its obverse, self-satisfaction. Hypocrisy is not the only negative consequence. Morality as benevolence on demand breeds self-condemnation for those who fall short and a depreciation of the impulses to self-fulfillment, seen as so many obstacles raised by egoism to our meeting the standard. . . . If morality can only be powered negatively, where there can be no such thing as beneficence powered by an affirmation of the recipient as a being of value, then pity is destructive of the giver and degrading to the receiver. . . .

Whatever else it may do, Earlham’s Quaker-inspired recognition of “that of God in everyone” enables us to affirm “the recipient [of our actions] as a being of value,” and that fundamental affirmation, which is both Quaker and humanist—gives
us the positive resource to face the high moral demands Earlham places upon us. Because “God” (or whatever we choose to call our own highest standard of value) is not somewhere outside the world, the world can be the realm of value, and the arena for our moral action. Earlham’s unrelenting insistence on ethical and political responsibility requires in turn a grounding on the rock of a humanism so resilient that it virtually demands the adjective “spiritual.”

Although Earlham does not invite us out of the world, but always keeps us in it, Earlham also constructs an intellectual distance from the world, and from ourselves—a distance that allows us to look at the world and ourselves, and analyze both with critical and self-critical eyes. Earlham’s critical education can take us out of the fantasy world we’d all prefer to live in—the blue-pill world we do live in most of the time.

That’s what this Quaker imperative, which is also the liberal arts imperative, about “pursuing truth wherever it may lead” really means: it is not a comforting message; it means that Earlham is almost certainly going to take us somewhere we will not want to go. (Though if we are fortunate, it will be a place we later realize we always needed to be.)

The unease, or disquiet, that Earlham stirs up arises because Earlham “educates” in a way most so-called “education” is designed to suppress. An Earlham education is designed to get us to ask just one question:

“How shall I live?”

“How shall I live?” This question is so dangerous that societies do everything possible to make sure it doesn’t get asked. How does society suppress this question? By answering it before we can ask it. Our families, our schools, our religious organizations, our government, the media—all provide ready-made answers in order to forestall this question.

Society blocks the question because to ask it is to call into question the givenness of things. Society says to us: Do not ask, “How shall I live?” Ask instead, “How are things done here?” Or—and here is the really clever strategy—society often says to us: instead of asking first, “How shall I live?” ask instead: “How shall I make a living?” (A good question to ask—but not good first question).

When we ask “how shall I live?” we ask whether what passes for education in our lives truly “leads us out,” which is what the word “education” means. When we receive our diplomas, is that a sign that we are now “set free” (which is what “liberal” in liberal arts means), or does it mean we have just received a lifetime membership in the country club of the given?

How hard it is—to really ask the question, “How shall I live?”

How hard it is—to really believe that things that seem destined to be one way forever, can be—as Neo finally discovered—completely different tomorrow.

How hard it is—not to be, just a little bit afraid of change.

But we choose to come to Earlham not to make things easy, but to make them hard.

Can one hope, then, to capture in a few words what Earlham is all about—to crystallize Earlham’s very reason for existing, to identify for ourselves and others Earlham’s mission?

New insiders like me may have a slight, fleeting advantage here. Before we are beset by what Wordsworth called “the lethargy of custom,” we might be able to see something obvious that older insiders may take for granted because what is so often seen, soon becomes the water in which we swim. (Said one young fish to an older fish: “How’s the water today?” Replied the older fish: “What’s water?”).vii

So, then . . . with the untutored wonder of a new swimmer who is just taking the temperature of the water, or with the hoped-for simplicity of one who wishes to “recognize what is central,” or with the awakened curiosity of a first year Earlham student who dares to ask “How Shall I Live?, or with the decision, in fear and trembling, to accept from Morpheus the red pill—let me take a stab at describing the actual mission I see the Earlham community pursuing.
Friends, I do not make this up; I simply describe what I see.

But let me put what I see, not in the form of a description, but in the form of an imperative, in the form of a call—for missions are what we get called to do.

Let me repeat the call to mission that those of us who choose Earlham hear all the time—resounding in our hearts, whispering in our dreams, firing our imagination:

“Change your life, change the world.”
“Change your life, change the world.”
“Change your life, change the world.”

David Dawson
President, Earlham

Notes

i. “The Quaker testimony of Simplicity invites us to recognize what is central in our lives by listening to inward leanings and learning from others.” From “Simplicity,” in Principles and Practices (http://www.earlham.edu/about/simplicity).


v. Higher Education Data Sharing Consortium (HEDS), 2011 report on “Baccalaureate Origins of Students Earning Doctorates. The HEDS report includes data covering the graduating classes of 1995 - 2004 and includes doctorates earned in U.S. institutions over the period of 2000-2009. There are 1457 institutions in the total report. In that listing, Earlham is 28th on this list (i.e., in the top 2%). As in the past, Earlham is, by a large measure, the highest Indiana school on the list. Earlham also does better on this measure than all but 12 of the top 50 National Liberal Arts Colleges in the US News survey.


vii. I borrow this fish story from David Foster Wallace, Kenyon College Commencement address, May 21, 2005, later published as This is Water: Some Thoughts, Delivered on a Significant Occasion, about Living a Compassionate Life (New York: Little, Brown and Company, 2009).