

Little by Little

Vince Punzo

Baccalaureate Address

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It is a great honor to be asked to bring the message on this day, and especially to this class because we came here together. Your first day as a college student was my first day as a college professor. And so I have always felt, and will always feel, an affinity and a very real affection for the Earlham College class of 1998. It is probably fitting that I should begin by looking back and recalling our first day together in 1994 when we began our journey that brought us here today.

I remember that it was on a Thursday morning in early September when I was in my office preparing my first remarks to my first humanities class which would take place on Friday. At the time I thought that since I was a new and relatively young professor it was important for me to set a stern tone early lest any students think they could take advantage of my inexperience. More specifically, I thought it would be a good idea to start my teaching career by setting down a firm policy on unexcused absences. So on that Thursday morning in early September of 1994 with my office door closed I practiced what I would say to my first class. It was going to go something like this:

"Now part of being in college means taking responsibility. (I was going to wave my finger a lot. I thought that would be a nice touch). It is your responsibility to be in class every day on time. I don't want to hear a lot of excuses about why you've missed class. You're either here or you face the consequences. It is that simple"

Well, I must say I felt the practice session was going remarkably well when my office phone rang. It was my first phone call, in my first office as a tenure track professor of psychology.

I picked up the receiver and said "Dr. Punzo speaking."

It was the registrar Lavona Godsey who had been at Earlham for some 25 years.

She said "Vince, you are teaching section 15 of humanities this term, right?"

"That is correct."

"Did you get the scheduled times for that course?" she asked.

"Yes I did, Monday, Wednesday and Friday at 10:00 am."

Long silence.

Finally, Lavona said, "Well Vince I think I see the problem. Your class meets Monday, Wednesday and Thursday and Friday. You were supposed to be in your first class 30 minutes ago. Vince, I have a first year student from your class who is crying in my office because it is her first day of college and the professor hasn't shown up and she's wondering what she's done wrong."

Lavona then told me that I needed to contact, among other people, the convenor of humanities and professor of classics, Liffey Thorpe to explain to her how and why I had missed my very first class. Now I knew that Liffey was probably in her office at that time so I immediately picked up the phone and called her home. Just as I had hoped I got her answering machine.

When Liffey arrived home from the first day of classes that evening and turned on her answering machine we can only imagine what thoughts went through her mind, (we have to imagine it because I've never had the courage to actually ask her) as she heard the message from the newest humanities professor who, remember, was hired to teach

students how to express their thoughts and ideas clearly and coherently. As best as I can recall the message I left went something like this:

"Hello Liffey, this is Vince Punzo and I'm the new humanities teacher and my class started today but it didn't start today because well it wasn't really my fault but I didn't go today I mean I wanted to go but I didn't go so what should I do and you're not going to tell anyone else are you but if you do tell them it wasn't my fault and I hope I don't get in trouble and well good-bye."

I never did give that lecture I had rehearsed about unexcused absences.

Ever since then on my course evaluations under the question "what are this professor's strengths?" I have a lot of students who write "Vince seems to really understand when you forget to go to class."

So some of you may think that it is extraordinary that I'm here giving this talk after that kind of start four short years ago. But allow me to point out an even more extraordinary transformation. Let me put it this way: I read some of your first humanities papers and if you think I got off to a bad start, I assure you it wasn't nearly as bad as the start some of you got off to.

So it seems that in the last four years we have truly developed. In so many ways, intellectually, emotionally, socially, spiritually, we have all been transformed during our time here.

We are in so many ways different people than we were four short years ago. And there is, I believe, both a beauty and mystery to these transformations. One can't help but

wonder how and when it happens. What was the day, what was the moment that you began to see the world anew? What was the day, what was the moment that you became who you are today?

The answer lies, of course, in the fact that our self-transformation occurs not in a moment or in a day but rather moment by moment, and day by day.

In other words these extraordinary transformations are simply the cumulative effects of the most ordinary decisions and ordinary actions in the most ordinary days: reading a book, choosing a course, spending a little extra time on a paper, asking a professor if there is more that can be done, volunteering your time and efforts for a cause, taking the time to visit a friend, choosing an off campus program or extra curricular activity.

These are the most prosaic of actions and yet, because of these simple acts, little by little strangers become life long friends, little by little intimidating professors become mentors, little by little an interest becomes a cause and a cause becomes part of who we are, little by little the reading, writing and reflection we do turns us into life long seekers of wisdom and truth.

In light of the transformation we have undergone in the last four years, we can't help but wonder what the future holds. The question that haunts the days and nights of many graduating seniors is "what will I do once I leave?" And that is the question we ask you, so many times and in so many ways that soon you grow to dread it.

I just hope that the focus on that question does not make you lose sight of another question. And that question is "not what will you do?" but "what will you be?" In other words, ask yourself, again and again "who is it I hope to become?"

And as you mull that question over I urge you to consider the statement of the novelist Leon Bloy who wrote "There is but one sadness-and that is for us not to be saints."

Unfortunately, the word "saint" seems archaic to us, out of date, a relic from the medieval era that some would have you believe holds little significance today. But I am convinced that in today's world the meaning must not be lost, must not be forgotten. Once we recover the true meaning of the term we realize its importance for our lives and our world.

What does it mean to be a saint?

It means leading a life of heroic virtue,

it means facing the suffering, fear and anxiety which is an inevitable part of every human life with patience, perseverance and moral courage,

it means to pursue justice even in the face of conflict and obstacles,

it means to do what is right, good and true even when it is not popular, one could even say especially when it is not popular,

it means to be driven and motivated by eternal principles rather than ephemeral desires,

it means to be in the world but not of the world,

it means to live in hope rather than despair,

it means to put service to others ahead of service to the self,

and of course, most fundamentally of all,

being a saint means to possess a strong, deep and committed love for others which is everyday, everyday manifested in action.

I am tempted to give a list of names, those saints or moral heroes that we have studied and admired from afar that best exemplifies this notion of sainthood. But I will resist the temptation because providing such a list of exemplars only adds to the myth that

sainthood is rare and far beyond the grasp of ordinary women and men. Rather than give a list I would ask you to think about those saints in our midst: family members, friends, mentors that you admire and cherish not only for what they do but for who they are.

But how does one become a saint? Isn't through a miraculous conversion experience, or a bloodied martyrdom, or historic, revolutionary actions that overnight change the world? For some few maybe. But for most of us sainthood is attained by the same process that other personal transformations occur.

Sainthood is gained, little by little when our daily, most ordinary interactions are motivated by love and guided by wisdom. It is by simple acts of generosity that you become generous, it is by simple acts of courage that you become courageous, it is by simple acts of virtue that you become virtuous.

Fortunately sainthood does not require moral perfection. I say fortunately because we are mortal, fallible beings not capable of sustained perfection. And so as we strive for sainthood we must acknowledge and be prepared for the fact that we are destined to encounter failure along the way. And my experience has been that even when we are given second and third chances, we may still fail.

Let me give you an example of a second chance failure. I already told you of my failure on the first day of class four years ago. Fortunately, I was given a new opportunity to make a lasting first impression when Earlham College reached a new crossroads and Doug Bennett became the new president of the college. One of Doug's first acts was to hold individual meetings with all the faculty.

I thought "great, a chance at redemption, a clean slate, another chance to get off on the right foot." I carefully chose a date to meet with Doug not too early so as to appear

overeager nor too late so as to appear indifferent and awaited that day with eager anticipation.

Two days before our scheduled meeting I had had a hectic day. It was about 4 o'clock in the afternoon and the day had been so filled with meetings and classes that I had not eaten all day. And I was supposed to have yet another meeting. On the way to the meeting I met my wife Diana who quite generously offered me an oversized chocolate chip cookie that she had just bought at the bakery. Because of my by then ravenous hunger, and the fact that I was running late for the meeting, I did something I did not think physically possible. I shoved the entire oversized cookie into my mouth.

At the very second that the last bit of a cookie filled the last bit of my mouth I felt a tap on my shoulder. I turned around to see a man with his hand extended who said "I don't believe we've been formally introduced yet, I'm Doug Bennett."

I remember all too well the very first words I spoke to Doug at that first meeting and the historians in the crowd might want to take note. I said and I quote:

Nice to meet you (garbled).

As I said those unintelligible words one chocolate chip, a few cookie crumbs, and a not insignificant amount of saliva fell out of my mouth and landed on his coat sleeve. To my immense relief he either didn't see it, or chose to ignore it, and eventually turned away from our first encounter with the look of a man who has just come to the realization that the task set before him is far, far more difficult than he had ever imagined.

It was another embarrassing failure. But it was really not so bad because it was merely a failure in social etiquette. The other failures that we inevitably encounter on the road to

sainthood are quite a bit sadder and even more difficult to admit to ourselves: those dreary times in our life when we fail to respond to others with simple kindness, patience, and forgiveness; or when we do not pursue justice because it is personally inconvenient, or when we let others do the thinking and reflection for us because we cannot be bothered.

My point is that these failures are an inevitable part of life but the good news is that a saint is not someone who never fails, rather a saint is someone who, even after many failures, never stops trying to be a saint.

One of the humanities texts that we read and discussed four years ago was St. Augustine's Confessions. Augustine was a man of numerous flaws and failures who, after his conversion, after his decision on who to be, prays in anguish to God "Too late have I loved thee." Too late, Augustine realized, has he tried to become the person he should be. Let us learn from his mistake and not wait too long to become the person we hope to be; the saint we are called to be.

I have learned a lot about teaching since my first day four years ago. And I am still learning, little by little. What I didn't know four years ago and I have just begun to discover in these last several weeks is how hard it is to say to good-bye to the students that have been so much a part of one's life. It is a bittersweet realization. Saying good-bye hurts, but I'm glad that it does, because that pain tells me that the last four years have been good ones and little by little we've grown to mean an awful lot to each other.

Just as my first day of being your teacher went poorly I'm afraid the first time I say good-bye to you, too many of you forever, will also go poorly. But I'll try. In saying good-bye I have no pretense that anything I now say will last in your memories, nor do I have anything extraordinary to give you, certainly nothing more extraordinary than you haven't

already received from your family, friends, faculty, staff and administration in the last four years here at Earlham.

But for what it is worth I can give you a promise. And the promise is this: that for many years to come, long after you are gone, when this day, these people and even this place have begun to fade from your memory, I will hold to the memory of this class, the class I came in with, the class I said good-bye to. And on those days when the memories are particularly strong, and as long as I'm still here, I will make the time to walk to the meetinghouse.

And once there, in the holy stillness, the holy quiet, the holy silence of the meetinghouse, I will say a prayer for the class of 1998 and especially those of you I know and hold close in my heart.

And the prayer will go something like this: May you always remember the friends and teachers during your time here with real affection and fondness. And may those memories serve you as a well-spring of joy and strength throughout your life. May God shower on each and everyone of you many graces: health, happiness, friendships. May you continue to grow, little by little, in faith, hope and love and may each one of you be given the courage, wisdom and grace to become the person you are called to be.

Farewell class of 1998. Rest assured you will remain in our fondest thoughts and most heartfelt prayers for many, many years to come.