

**Earlham College
Baccalaureate Message**

"Gamming on the Green"

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Chase Stage May 7, 2000**

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Given the younger and distinguished colleagues seated behind me, I assume that the only reason I was asked to speak at Baccalaureate is that the best and brightest among you wanted to hear one last word about *Moby Dick*. I admire your taste! How many of you know what a gam is? I am aware that some of you have gone to Webster's Dictionary and discovered that it is a leg. Legging on the Green. That has all sorts of possibilities but I don't think I want to touch any of them. Let us look for another definition. Let us go where the editors of Webster's went and where you too should all go--to Herman Melville! He tells us that a gam is "*a social meeting of two (or more) Whaleships, generally on a cruising ground; when after exchanging hails, they exchange visits by the boats' crew...*" (Chp LIII) Significantly, he adds, that you will not find the practice associated with merchant ships. They are too greedy; they speed on their own way. Nor with men-of-war who do not concern themselves with brotherly love, nor with slave-ships who are in a "prodigious hurry to escape the attention of any passing ship, nor with pirate ships who wisely recognize the potential for trouble when "infernally villains on both sides meet." But whalers are sociable folk who enjoy the "the peculiar congenialities arising from a common pursuit and mutually shared privations and perils." Surely that describes us, here on the Earlham green at the moment of your graduation!

It grieves me that at such a moment I have to offer a confession. I have to confess that I am a coward I don't have the courage of my convictions. For some time now I have been convinced that I should refuse to give my assent to the granting of an Earlham degree to any student who has not given chase to the great white whale, Moby Dick! Since Melville said that being *at sea* was his Harvard and his Yale, surely it is entirely appropriate for me to expect that you who have also frequently been "at sea to make the acquaintance of your fellow passenger." And so it is that every spring, when the roll of graduating seniors is presented to the faculty for its approval, I go into a deep funk: this time, will I be true to my conviction? Ah, there you sit smugly relieved while my conscience roils. In your good fortune lies my pain!

In more ways than one! When I received the invitation to speak at this baccalaureate, I was delighted. It is obviously an honor which I deeply appreciate and for which I am very grateful, but a nanosecond behind my burst of joy and pride came the realization: OH! S...[there follows some "old salt" expressions] There goes my retirement...again. If I were not...more?...paranoid, I'd swear that there is a conspiracy to prevent me from enjoying my well earned retirement. What I have discovered is that the only thing about me that has retired has been my salary.

My pain--the consequence of the honor you have bestowed upon me-- has made me, this past month, an acute observer, listening and watching ever so much more carefully to marvelous

public expressions in which you have participated, like *Hair*, a convocation on biological diversity, the Senior Art Show, the Gospel Revelations, Dance Alloy, Concert Choir and the various instrumental ensembles. I wanted to share your experiences to ferret out what "stuff" [check out Sarah Boada's art project] might be shaping your college memories which you will later recollect in tranquility. Today you are not tranquil. I imagine you to be a bundle of contradictions: I assume you are delighted finally to be leaving this place, and also truly sorry to be leaving this place; that you are eager to get on with your life, and terrified at the prospect of getting on with your life; desperate (in both senses of the word: eager and terrified) to prove yourself in the "real world" which will no longer accept your plea for an extension. After the bustle of comps, final papers, job applications, graduation, packing, farewell to old friends, greeting family, traveling, finding new friends, new lodgings, new responsibilities, etc., etc., etc.-- what are the experiences you will want to relive at your next gam, which we will now define as a "social meeting of two (or more) Earlham graduates anywhere on the face of the globe."

Perhaps your present state of mind is best described by the narrator of *Invisible Man* toward the conclusion of his account of his education, as he prepares to re-engage the world a wiser, more self-aware man. He writes: "indeed, the world is just as concrete, ornery, vile and sublimely wonderful as before, only now I better understand my relation to it and it to me." Isn't Ralph Ellison delightfully mischievous and absolutely right when in describing the world he places the ornery and vile right up against the sublimely wonderful? It is on what you learned at Earlham about handling your relation with that world that I want to dwell a bit. I want to share some thoughts with you on community, diversity, and privilege.

Remember Humanities?! which some of you have had the temerity to call "Inhumanities? Do you remember reading and discussing some of the wonderful stories that Kathleen Norris narrated in Dakota? You may want to revisit that work in a few weeks when you feel the need to fix your latitude and longitude! Do you remember her story about the Benedictine Sisters from the Philippines some of whom participated in the protests against the Marcos regime. Some among the sisters did not think it proper for nuns to demonstrate in public, let alone risk arrest. Norris narrates: "In a group meeting that began and ended with prayer, the sisters who wished to continue demonstrating explained that this was for them a religious obligation; those who disapproved also had their say. Everyone spoke; everyone heard and gave counsel."

It was eventually decided that the nuns who were demonstrating should continue to do so; those who wished to express solidarity but were unable to march would prepare food and provide medical assistance to the demonstrators, and those who disapproved would pray for everyone. (114)

What a creative resolution of their differences, based not on whimsy, or "lets kick some butt" or "why change?" or insisting that my way is God's way, but on fundamental beliefs reconciled so that each could respect the other and remain true to her own conscience. It took imagination, openness to risk-taking, trust in one's self and in one's neighbor, and faith that if they spoke and struggled together they would come to a better place than each one might be by herself alone. They acted upon faith, hope, and love, and created community.

Norris contrasts that spirit of community among the Sisters to a meeting of a church women's group at which a member distributed informational brochures about candidates and issues in an upcoming election. That woman was severely criticized by her colleagues for bringing politics to a women's Bible circle. Norris concludes: "This is a story about fear, a fear so pervasive that even in a small group of people you've known most of your life you can't speak up, you can't risk talking about issues. That meeting had begun and ended with prayer, but no one had a say, no one

was heard, and community was diminished." (114-5) However strong their faith, they had no love.

Let me speak of a couple of our collective gatherings which also opened and closed with a Quaker form of prayer--silence. I invite you to recall one remarkable meeting when this community of students, faculty, administrators, and staff gathered in the old rubber gym to wrestle with the terrible issues of the Erika Eisenberg case. We sought clarity, knowing that truth, whatever it might be, might not emerge, but hoping that as pain was expressed wounds might begin to be healed, and that even in difference we could affirm one another. We brought integrity, expectancy, trust, and engagement to that meeting, and found community.

In my 36 years at Earlham, that was one of the most singular gatherings of community I have had the privilege to share, rivaling in intensity the visit of General Hershey to this campus in 1968 in the midst of the Vietnam War when protests against the draft and the war were at their peak. You may have gained some sense of those days from the production of *Hair* or, better yet, ask your parents. General Hershey was head of the Selective Service, the draft. Of him, Tom Hamm writes: "Probably no one was more unpopular on college campuses in 1968.... A Richmond professional group invited him to address their meeting held in our dining hall which then was the only hall in Richmond large enough to accommodate them. Tom Hamm continues:

"[They] saw this as a way of embarrassing the college, by provoking either a cancellation or an incident. [President] Bolling first learned that Hershey was coming to campus from the local newspaper two weeks before the meeting. {Hershey's hosts} innocently protested that [they] had no idea that Hershey's presence might cause a problem. In fact the college handled the situation better than anyone could have hoped....Bolling invited Hershey to a question-and-answer session with students, an invitation that Hershey accepted. The day before his appearance, several hundred faculty and students paid for a full-page advertisement in the Palladium Item, a condemnation of the war that Paul Lacey had written. When Hershey spoke to [his hosts], a group of faculty and students held a silent vigil outside the dining hall. In the meeting with students, the questions were pointed but polite, with no disruptions. Even Hershey praised student behavior. One local observer wrote, "Earlham students met the flaunting of Lewis B. Hershey with such power and equanimity that we should all be proud." (Hamm, 268)

Each meeting was a profound risk. Nevertheless, trusting in the integrity of one another and under the weight of the urgency and delicacy of the moment, we went forward. There was "that of God amongst us and in us that permitted us to be fully present with our thoughts, feelings and beliefs. Framed by the silences that opened and closed the meetings, persons shared their pain and confusion, asked the questions that troubled them, and expressed their hopes for everyone's welfare.

We want clarity, we want assurances that justice and mercy do prevail, but we discover that life is neither clear nor fair. It is often vile and ornery. We cannot get at all the facts. We want to place blame. At the same time we recognize our own imperfections, our own finitude--our humanity--and seek an understanding greater than our own, a power greater than our own, a truth greater than that which we can grasp. We seek out one another and we seek out God, and on some occasions such as these find God's spirit flowing into and through of our collective meeting. With faith, hope and love, and love the greatest, we achieve the "sublimely wonderful," we achieve community.

Those were powerful moments that brought us together. There have been other times, under more modest circumstances, when you were invited to participate in community. "Return with me to those wonderful days of yesteryear," to Humanities where you experienced the concrete, the ornery and the sublimely wonderful all wrapped up together! We sought to do what was sometimes very difficult to achieve. We sought respect for the other person as an equal in the eyes of God, as containing within him or herself the same spark of the divine that glowed in you. That meant the author as well as our classmates. That meant we read the text carefully, thoughtfully and imaginatively; it meant we listened carefully for the insights and nuances that our classmates brought to the issue. We proceeded with faith in the possibility of understanding and empathizing with the perceptions, experiences, and values of others. We practiced the intelligence to discern lasting principles and discover minute particulars, and we shared these with our classmates. And we exercised the gift of laughter that released pressure and allowed honest dialog to develop. We risked our own tentative and fragile understanding because without venturing and testing, we cannot be clear in our own minds. We anticipated that some truths can more readily evolve out of a collective effort to understand--both intellectually and emotionally. In addition, and this distinguishes Humanities from worship, and analysis from praise: we practiced skepticism--we were open to the truths or the richer possibilities inherent in an issue than our own imagination was originally able to comprehend, but we carefully tested the evidence and the implications of our new-found insight. We trusted and we verified!

One more thing. Adrienne Rich advocates that we "claim our education." ("Claiming an Education") She distinguishes between "receiving" and "claiming" an education: the former passive, being acted upon; the latter active, taking in hand. Take "responsibility toward yourselves" she says.... "[that] means learning to respect and use your own brains and instincts; hence, grappling with hard work.... Too often, she continues, "all of us fail to teach the most important thing, which is that clear thinking, active discussion, and excellent writing are all necessary for intellectual freedom, and that these require **hard work**," (On Lies, Secrets and Silence, 233-5). Humanities, rightly practiced, was hard work.

I urge you to carry into the rest of your life the lessons of community and hard work that you learned in Humanities. I know full well that some of you learned these lessons well before you matriculated at Earlham. And that you and others have learned them in courses across the curriculum. But to go on telling the truth, I will also have to admit that some of you have probably not yet given sufficient attention to these lessons. If you are among the latter, reflect back on the significant events during your college career and go back to Kathleen Norris' *Dakota* for--dare I say--a rereading?

Another concern you might have discerned in Humanities which I hope you will carry with you: Diversity. I keep waiting for politicians and the public to pick up on the essential centrality that scientists credit to biological diversity and transfer that concept and reality to the human community. If diversity is so crucial to the health and survival of the natural environment, why is it not also essential for the health and survival of the human community? At Earlham and in Humanities we have made some progress in this area.

I am ever grateful to a number of Earlham upperclass students and Paul Lacey for inviting me to participate in visioning and leading an Upward Bound Program serving low income secondary school students as part of President Johnson's War on Poverty. Our program, in the summer of 1966, in the midst of the Civil Rights Movement, consisted of about forty students two thirds urban African American, one third rural white, on campus for eight weeks. Today, it is hard to imagine the public perception of the perceived explosive potential of such a group in that period. One evening, as was our habit, we were having a party at one of the off-campus houses--dancing,

blacks and whites together. Imagine that! I suddenly became aware that I was the only person with acknowledged authority in the group--no Earlham tutors, no Earlham faculty. My God! I was on the brink of panic! What if..??!! Then an epiphany! The "Ifs" vanished! Here was a group of young people having a wonderful time, enjoying one another's company, talking, laughing, singing, and dancing. Some even persuaded me to dance (now there is cause for panic!) What an incredible load to be free of when I lost my presuppositions. What a sense of relief.

That was the beginning of my interest in African American Studies, and I can assure you that the pleasure and intellectual stimulation from that engagement have been enormous. Maybe for some of you the Humanities program has invited you to drop some of your presuppositions and to challenge your ignorance. You encountered stories from Charles Chesnutt. You wrestled with Chinua Achebe, Mariama Ba, and Basil Davidson. Most of you found yourself in an alien environment. You had to take risks to make sense of the texts. I hope you developed a habit of risk taking, not just with books and ideas, but also with your fellow human beings, especially those who are different in appearance and background from you. You will find greater stimulation and self awareness in dealing with differences than in dealing with likenesses. You should have learned that in Humanities. Go out and practice it--please, for your sake, for human kind's sake, for God's sake, because we are, after all, in all our delightful differences, all children of God.

There is one matter that has not been addressed well in Humanities. In this matter you have to take greater responsibility for your learning. In Adrienne Rich's sense of the term, you have to "claim this aspect of your education.

Those of you who are graduating and we of the faculty at Earlham are extraordinarily privileged by virtue of having had a college education. Those of us who are, in addition, white, middle-class, male and heterosexual are additionally privileged. I do not know that Humanities has done anything in particular to make those of you who look like me in race, class, gender and orientation aware of the particularly privileged status we enjoy in this nation and throughout most of the world. I suspect not.

Some of you might be skeptical, others confused by my assertion. With apology to those who have heard this before, let me tell you a story. Last May term, a number of us went on a Civil Rights field trip which took us through some places that were significant in the development of the Civil Rights Movement in the South. The Mississippi Delta was one of those places, where whites practiced, during the Movement, some of the most violent racial oppression in the country. While traveling through the area, we noticed several catfish farms and being a curious group, wondered how they functioned. In due time we stopped at one and because the buildings were up a dirt road, a couple of us--myself and a black student--left the bus and walked up the lane to inquire. We came across a black man working off a truck and asked him how we might find out about catfish farming. He directed us to the boss who he said was in the white house farther up the road. I led the way and walked up to the patio of a modular home that could have been an office or private residence and knocked on the door. When there was no response I pushed the door open, stuck my head inside to holler "hello! As I did, I caught a glimpse of the student who was accompanying me and he was back peddling as fast as he could move. His face clearly said: "Man, are you crazy! You don't go barging into other people's home, especially in Mississippi. We are going to be shot! My unspoken response was: "who would harm Lincoln Blake. His heart is pure. His only motive is to find somebody who can answer our questions about catfish farming. Fortunately, in this instance, I was right. Even as our sharply differing concerns were flashing through our minds, a white man came out and expressed himself willing to answer any questions we had. I offer this little episode not to make fun of anybody but to point out two remarkably

different assumptions and behaviors and to illustrate a point about white privilege or white entitlement.

I use the term white privilege or entitlement, not racism. On this campus racism is too charged a word. It is my judgement that white folk at Earlham would rather be called anything than racist. It evokes either an instant denial: "I am not!" or a confession: "Oh God, they have found me out!" My response is "Lighten up! You are a racist. Probably not consciously or intentionally. But as a product of American culture it would be remarkable if you were not a racist." For whites to grow up in American culture, given the past out of which our culture has emerged, it would be an extraordinary person who could escape the cultural forces that are bent towards racism. Slavery, segregation, Jim Crow, intentional ignorance, and willful innocence are manifestations of ways in which we have been shaped and ways in which we respond to the world around us. Of course we don't own slaves. Of course we are sweet and kind and don't offend anyone, intentionally. That is not the point. The point is we are privileged--and the real question is: "How are we using our privilege--are we challenging or perpetuating the status quo? Our culture has been designed to advantage some among us and I stand here as witness to those advantages: white, male, heterosexual, middle class, I am even right handed and a Christian! In America the likes of me have been established as the standard of humanity. Against my type are measured all the rest! I walked into that Mississippi house because I had a sense of privilege and entitlement. I was curious. A black man could have been just as curious as me but his upbringing would tell him, in rural MS, to be cautious, to be deferential, and if at all possible to avoid whites because they represent imminent danger!

The "privilege and entitlement that I practiced was unearned. It was not founded on my accomplishments but on my expectations. Social institutions and values tell me that "of course I can do it. Who is to deny me? That attitude, if joined with a willful ignorance of the needs, the values, and the desires of others, the recognition that we are all children of God, can make me dangerous: a racist if I presume that white is superior, a sexist if I presume that men should dominate women, a classist if I presume that "if I can pay, I can have my way," or a homophobe, if I presume that my sexuality alone is blessed by God. In this culture I must intentionally and constantly strive to examine social values and, as appropriate, challenge them. How will you use your privilege?

Do not bury it under a cover of guilt. Guilt a very fragile base to stand upon, and it is utterly useless to those who do not share your privilege. Accept your privilege with a sense of responsibility. Use it for good. In this culture we must consciously and intentionally strive to counter many of our culture's messages. With good will and humility let us seek to bring out that of God, that of love and goodness and truth and beauty in others. Be curious, be outgoing. Risk yourself. Engage others, particularly those who have been relegated to the margins, and you may find that in doing so you will be thrice blessed, blessed with a richer life, blessed in the friendship of the persons you engage, and blessed in the community you form together. What, after all, does God require of us but to do justice, to love mercy and to walk humbly with our God, and celebrate "that of God in our fellow human beings."

This gam is almost over. You and I are both leaving Earlham, and at the same time taking a part of Earlham with us. In parting, let me share with you a sentiment that I wrote in 1975 at the conclusion of my first Water Wilderness trip. It is not great poetry but it tries to express about as well as I can say at the moment, what you, class of 00, mean to me, and, possibly, on a different frequency, to my colleagues.

You are not my children
Neither flesh nor blood to me.
Yesterday I knew you not
Today you are bound to me
by fragile ties of experience,
Some not to be spoken again
Even amongst ourselves,
Others to be repeated
Even unto our grandchildren.
We have bent to fire, bowed to storm, and broken bread,
Stepped onto space, crossed rugged ground, and moved through cool waters.
I have pressed your kidneys, snapped your spine,
I have felt your anguish, your cold and hunger,
I have held your hand and shared your cup.
I have seen your joy overflow.
On land, like a tall spruce, you stand serene.
In water, you move, a lovely, lonely loon.
Our bodies thirsted more than our spirits
But both have been quenched.
I am not father to you, nor lover.
A companion, a brother for a moment
Brought together by chance and choice
We met as strangers
And became friends.
Let us depart in peace.

Bless you, one and all.

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