

Paul Lacey's Baccalaureate Address:

SAYINGS AND SLOGANS

Paul Lacey, professor of English, has been a member of the Earlham faculty since 1960. Over the decades he has taught humanities, introduction to the study of literature, and poetry, among other courses.

In 1972, Lacey was appointed the College's provost and in 1973-74 was Earlham's acting president. Throughout his Earlham years he has been a guiding voice for the College and valued friend and adviser to his colleagues.

His teaching career has encompassed research and writing, including the book *The Inner War*, a critical analysis of six modern poets. Lacey has written widely about the foundation and meaning of Quaker education.

In 1992, the Council for the Advancement and Support of Education named Paul Lacey "Indiana Professor of the Year." He is one of seven Earlham faculty members retiring this year.

Parents and friends, faculty and members of the class of 2001, welcome to this Baccalaureate service. I hope what I say this morning will have some meaning for each of you, but I have had the seniors particularly in mind as I prepared this talk. I am honored to have been asked to speak to you. Four years ago, when most of you entered Earlham, I knew that we would be graduating together, though, like some of you, I will be back as a super-senior in the fall to do one course. I have enjoyed working with you and have marked your progress toward this day with my own movement toward retirement. This is where I am supposed to remind you that "commencement" means a beginning, not an end, but if you haven't heard that before, you are not likely to be paying much attention to it now.

I am not going to pretend to know you better than I do: I have taught many of you in class; others I have gotten to know primarily by watching you perform on stage, in Dance Alloy, in the orchestra, in The Gospel Revelations, Concert Choir and other choirs, attending an exhibition of your art, visiting in an off-campus house, or sharing in some social or political extracurricular activity perhaps, or at a vigil or demonstration. Some of you got out of Carpenter Hall as quickly as you could after

Humanities, so I know you only by sight or by brief conversations on the sidewalk or in the halls. Sometimes those conversations have been about smoking. When I looked through the New Faces book of 1997, I knew about half of you by name, and recognized most of the rest of you-- though some of you have changed a lot since you were seventeen, some of you haven't gotten around to sending your picture in yet, and one of you sent in a childhood snapshot. HA HA HA, Daniel. I have gotten to know some of you who transferred into Earlham in similar ways. The New Faces also pictures a number of people who left Earlham and a few who, four years ago, were vehement that they would be leaving but who are graduating today. I hope you are glad you stayed. I also miss those who left.

Do you remember who you were four years ago? Nancy Sinex told you that you were from 33 states and ten other countries, and you had already travelled to, studied in or lived in 71 different countries. One hundred sixteen of you had committed significant numbers of hours as volunteers to a wide range of social services. According to the findings from the American Council on Education questionnaire which you filled out when you arrived, 34% of you expected to get a master's degree and 32% expected to get either an Ed D or PhD, and another 13% expected to complete a medical degree. Ten percent of the class were African American and all "minority categories" together made up twenty-four percent. Ten percent of you were Quaker, 9% Roman Catholic, 19% Protestants and 3% Jewish. Thirty-seven per cent of you listed "none" under religious preference and 11% identified yourselves as "born-again Christians." 9% identified yourselves as far left in political views; 56% as liberal; 31% as middle of the road; and 3% as conservative.

Do you remember your chief reasons for going to college? 85% said to learn more about things; 75% to gain a general education; 53% to become more cultured; 51% to get a better job and 40% to get more money. Here are two marvelous statistics: 22% said you wanted to get away from home and 37% said your parents wanted you to go away to college. Four years ago, 9% thought you wanted a career in an art-- acting, fine arts, music or writing. About 32% had identified one of the helping professions--teaching, medicine, law, social work, clinical therapist--as your intended career.

The year before you came to college, 79% of you attended a religious service; 17% smoked cigarettes frequently; 49% drank beer and 62%

drank wine or liquor. Let me underline that all that happened in the year before you came to college. Undoubtedly all the percentages on smoking and drinking have plummeted as you have gotten older and wiser. 40% say you had overslept and missed a class or an appointment. I'm sure that figure has also shrunk markedly. 71% said you had socialized frequently with a different ethnic group. 21% had participated in protests and demonstrations, a figure I imagine has increased considerably. 29% said you were undecided about a career; 23% said you thought the chances were good that you would change your major, 26% that you would change your career choice; and 56% that you would be satisfied with college.

All of that creates a fairly good snapshot of who you were when we first met: widely travelled, socially concerned, at ease with people of different ethnic backgrounds, more interested in what you could learn than in deciding about your careers, not especially worried about making money in your later lives. It also seems a fairly good snapshot of who you are now, more deeply experienced, in some cases severely tested in beliefs and hopes, having discovered causes and careers you had not imagined, having undergone many changes in life-plans and directions, and still idealists, people of strong principles and convictions. One or two of you may still be having trouble with that oversleeping problem.

Harold Hodgkinson has said that college does not create light so much as it is like a lens, collecting and concentrating the light which passes through it. You are very much your own people, but you are also very like the people who have graduated from Earlham in my time here and before my time here, and I believe very like those who will follow after you. The light which collects and concentrates here remains essentially the same. I am glad to have known and worked with you and shared the light with you. What I want to say draws on a lot of reflecting and summing-up of my years of connection with Earlham, but it also rests directly on how I have experienced our life together.

In spring 1961, Earlham's senior convocation speaker was the distinguished philosopher and later President of India, Sarvepali Radhakrishnan. I was very moved by the wisdom, the broad general truths, in what he said, but later that day I heard a senior saying very loudly to another, "He didn't say anything. It was all platitudes. We could have heard the same thing from one of our own professors." It is hard to know what stung most in her words--the sense that she had much higher

standards for judging a talk than I did? The possibility that what I thought were broad general truths were only empty platitudes, commonplaces to which no one should give any credence? I think it was that final comment, suggesting that, if we wanted to hear platitudes, our local talent was sufficient.

That was not the only time that I have recognized that some peoples' general truths, the broad principles by which they want to shape their lives, are somebody else's platitudes--not broad but flat, not truths but empty generalities, stuff everyone knows so well that they have no reason to pay attention. That set me thinking about how we try to tell one another what is important to know, the essential information, dependable facts or truths we have to communicate to others.

My title is "Sayings and Slogans," but the full working title is "proverbs sayings, mottoes, adages, maxims, aphorisms, apothegms, epigrams, old saws, slogans and bumperstickers." The wonderful new edition of the American Heritage Dictionary suggests looking at the synonyms under the word "saying," which it defines as "an often repeated and familiar expression, maxim, a general rule of conduct." Here are a few. An apothegm is a terse, witty, instructive saying; an aphorism is a tersely phrased statement of a truth or opinion; an adage is a saying that sets forth a general truth and that has gained credit through long use. Sayings have in common that they are terse, often witty, instructive, and familiar through being repeated; they express rules for conduct or general truths which have gained credit through long use. Those qualities which make adages, maxims and aphorisms memorable and useful, also make them potentially dangerous, for even the most memorable sayings are usually only partial, both in the sense that they don't tell the whole truth about their subject and in that they may reflect a partial and too familiar opinion. Their very wittiness and familiarity can make them a substitute for thinking.

For example: Time is money, but haste makes waste. Time and tide wait for no one, but slow and sure wins the race. Better safe than sorry, but no pain, no gain. If you want something done right, do it yourself, but two heads are better than one, though too many cooks spoil the broth, and the camel is a horse put together by a committee. Each saying captures a partial truth, perhaps, so we can pick and choose among them for what we need at the moment. Some neat, memorable sayings are deeply

destructive, however. For example: You can be anything you want, if you just want it hard enough. Second place is first loser. Some sayings are dangerous because they foreclose discussion. Think of Robert Frost's poem "Mending Wall." Every year, the speaker in the poem and his neighbor meet to repair the stone fences between their two properties, because, the neighbor says, "good fences make good neighbors." The speaker wonders about that rule of conduct. Fences are important to keep cattle in or out, but why are they needed between an apple orchard and a pine forest? The speaker puzzles over who or what is being fenced out or in, wonders what it is that does not love a wall. But his neighbor is content with what he has always been taught. Frost's speaker says, "He will not go behind his father's saying/And he likes having thought of it so well/ He says it again:"Good fences make good neighbors." The neighbor "moves in darkness," the darkness of the saying itself, a familiar rule which closes off other ways of being neighborly, ways of living in the open, not walled in. The neighbor has turned proverbial, conventional wisdom into an absolute and therefore totalitarian principle.

Consider a few sayings from the Vietnam War era: America: love it or leave it. Make love, not war. Back our boys. Draft beer, not boys. No more Munichs. One, two, three, four, we don't want your stinking war. There is light at the end of the tunnel. All we are saying is give peace a chance. Everyone here has heard, spoken, perhaps sung or chanted these or similar sayings. Each encapsulates a powerful bit of history; each announces a point of view, asserts a principle of action and general truth, and gives comfort to the community which holds it. Each is also a slogan, a word from the Irish which originally means a war cry. Over my lifetime I have taken part in many vigils and demonstrations. I have marched in Washington to oppose American policies in Vietnam and Central America, taken part in demonstrations against the manufacture of biological weapons, for civil rights, for a woman's right to control her own body, for peace in Ireland, for so many other causes. Like many of you, I have stood or marched among a lot of over-simplified slogans. I have marched in protests among people chanting "draft beer, not boys," and "make love, not war," and though I always approved of those sentiments, I never thought the advice offered adequate solutions to international conflict. In November, 1969, I was part of that great moratorium gathering which sang over and over again, "all we are saying is give peace a chance," and even as I was moved by our singing, I knew the words expressed only a deep longing, not a solution to the complexities of the war. Some in the

crowd were impatient with our peaceful words and broke in to chant "Ho, Ho, Ho Chi Minh; Viet Cong is bound to win."

Slogans always have an implied opponent, even an implied enemy, and that is their greatest danger, for none of us wants to worry about subtle distinctions, careful delineations of position, when we believe we are going into battle for some ultimate cause. But if you are chanting your slogan against me, I am likely to chant mine against you. A war cry rallies one's friends, defies one's opponents and at its very best strikes terror into their hearts. Some of us have heard slogans chanted to drown us out. And some of us have tried to drown others out with our slogans.

When sayings become slogans, they can also become, in Alfred North Whitehead's phrase, "inert ideas," or what the sociologist Robert Lynd has called "of course" statements. They do not generate new thought or insight because we have stopped using them as means to thought. We simply repeat them as truisms to which the only acceptable reply is "of course." In a letter of 1802, Samuel Taylor Coleridge says, "My mind misgave me...that thousands who would rather die than tell a Lie for a Lie, will tell 20 to help out what they believe to be a certain Truth." (Letters, Vol II, p 861) It is not that we will deliberately lie to support our beliefs-- though we know that can happen; it is that, if we start from assertions which may not be doubted, make them our certain truths, we may dodge unpalatable contrary evidence, paper over intellectual doubts, in order to "help out" what we have always believed. We may give our souls away to what may quite rightly be called "dead certainties."

Some of the most cherished, sacred principles around which we organize our lives, get expressed as "of course" assertions. Consider one such truism, popularly held among us, that violence never solves or accomplishes anything. Recently I have heard about a personal friend, a life-long pacifist of broad experience, whose integrity and wisdom and courage I trust, who found that the war in Kosovo raised fundamental questions for him whether non-violence can work in every situation. But if we go behind the "of course" truism that violence never solves anything, with its corollary that nonviolence can provide a solution to every problem, we come face-to face with a grim truth: violence has solved a great many problems, in the sense that it has made them go away or annihilated one side in a conflict. Violence starts wars and ends wars. It has turned societies upside down and preserved the status quo. Violence

has permanently dislocated huge populations so others could take their place. It has successfully wiped out whole languages, races and peoples. It has determined what languages people speak and what they may not speak, what religion they practice and what religion they may not practice. It has given some of us the land we live on, the wealth we enjoy. As a pacifist I wish with all my heart to repudiate violence, to live by the principles of nonviolence, but I can't do so on the premise that violence never works. It works all too terrifyingly well. To put a whole lifetime of belief and action under such scrutiny thus, as my friend has, is courageous and deeply painful. Much of that pain, in my experience, comes from rejection by lifelong companions who see your questioning as lack of integrity or failure of nerve.

Another deeply-held general truth to which many of us respond "of course," is "all life is sacred." But what happens if we go behind this saying? On the anniversary of the Roe v. Wade decision this year, I did what I have done in other years and joined the demonstration in support of the right to legal abortions and women's right to choose in front of Planned Parenthood. There were also demonstrators for the right to life. I believe all of us on both sides of this particular issue would have said we believe in the sacredness of all life. We would have disagreed about how to test that principle against other principles, or other applications of the principle. How do we untangle its implications for how we will live and act? Do we oppose all war and violence? Do we oppose all capital punishment? Do we become vegetarians? Do we also oppose mercy-killing to relieve excruciating terminal illness? Do we oppose abortion? Consistency and personal integrity require some people to take all of those positions from the premise that all life is sacred, and I respect such clarity of purpose, even as I recognize that the general principle does not lead me to their consistency. I believe that all life is sacred, but I also believe in the right to abortion. I also believe in mercy-killing, the right of people to end a life marked only by excruciating pain or a vegetative state. If the last days of someone I love are marked by such suffering, I hope I will have the courage to help her or him find final peace. If my last days are so marked, it would be an act of love to help my life end.

The last time Gwendolyn Brooks came to read at Earlham, we studied her poem "The Mother" in Humanities. In "The Mother," the speaker recalls the babies she believed she had to abort. It begins "Abortions will not let you forget./ You remember the children you got that you did not get."

The speaker reflects on what the children's lives could have been like and on the joys of mothering that she lost. The poem concludes "Believe me, I loved you all./ Believe me, I knew you, though faintly, and I loved, I loved you all." I asked my students whether they thought the poem was pro-life or pro-choice. They answered, it was neither, it took us into the life of a suffering mother but made no judgment on her or on what she had done. The poem makes us imagine the reasons--poverty, inability to raise them, desperation, which lead to the decision to have the abortions, but it never suggests that they took place in anything but grief.

When I told Gwendolyn Brooks my students' response to that question, she said, "They are very wise readers." Both pro-life and pro-choice groups had asked permission to reprint the poem, but she had always refused all such requests. My students were wise readers. We cannot go to the poem merely for emotional support for our position. When I read it, the poem makes me live with the torment of choice; and I assume it leads someone arguing for the right to life of the unborn feel the torment of bringing children into the world when one cannot see how to feed, clothe, raise them. The poem raises and organizes our emotions, not under a slogan but by making us ask questions.

I march in protests and stand in vigils but rarely find a sign to carry which expresses all the complications of my stand. For example, I oppose capital punishment, but sometimes I read about a crime so horrible that I say to myself, "if ever a crime deserved the death penalty, this would be it, BUT..." If you are a death penalty opponent, you probably don't want me standing next to you holding that sign. Yet some killings are that horrible, some killers that cruel, and I can't help out a certain truth, that all life is sacred, by sentimentalizing evil. The general principle can only work for me as a call to struggle with its meanings; it is useless to me as merely a slogan.

Another slogan much favored among Earlham people is: "Question authority." My wife and I often see it on car bumpers when we walk our dog. I must tell you, after we have seen it a certain number of times, the rest of our family has to be on the alert to prevent Margie from sneaking off at night to improve it to read "Question Authority. WHY?" (I want to reassure everyone that Margie understands that the first amendment protects car bumpers.) Those who know my wife realize that she is not a sheeplike devotee of authority. Her asking "Why" invites us to go behind

the saying and perhaps be surprised by what we find there. Who is telling me, in such a tone of authority, what to do? There are some good answers to Margie's question "WHY?" Because a traditional authority may no longer have any experience to draw on. Because conditions may have changed enough that the old authoritative answers are mistaken. Because the ostensible authority may be self-interested, unaware, oppressive. But what about "because I said so"? Is the maxim addressed to an audience needing to be encouraged to think freshly, or is it designed only to make iconoclasts feel pleased with ourselves? When does a general truth become a platitude? Perhaps when it has been stripped of argument or the weight of lived experience, when it cannot persuasively answer the question 'why?'

William Butler Yeats says that out of our quarrel with others we make rhetoric, but out of our quarrel with ourselves, poetry. Elsewhere he says that the rhetorician wants to deceive others, and the sentimentalist deceives himself, "while art is but a vision of reality." I want to claim that the arts, literature, natural and social science, philosophy, religion--all the modes of discourse which we treat seriously as the stuff of education--can surmount the limits of what Yeats is calling rhetoric and sentimentality. Each can be such a vision of reality. In each mode of discourse, however, the hard work is to pursue the quarrel with ourselves, to go behind our fathers' sayings, to refuse to slant the evidence so as to help out the undoubted truth.

While I was framing what I understood "discourse" to mean, I had a conversation with a student about how the teaching-learning process helps us find our own "voice." As she and I talked, those two words, "discourse" and "voice" seemed at odds with one another, and since that was a conclusion I could not accept, my friend's comments made me substantially recast what I am about to say. When I was in college, we frequently spoke of "universes of discourse," by which we meant the world of a particular discipline, with its peculiar subject, method of study and rules of evidence, its own vocabulary, grammar, syntax, and ways of testing whether one was talking sense or nonsense. One way to describe what we try to do in a college curriculum is to say that we are introducing students to as many worlds of learning, languages of learning, universes of discourse, as we can. When you said four years ago that you wanted to learn as many things as possible, to gain a general education, you were identifying yourselves with those goals.

But as we have worked together, we have learned that such a picture of education is inadequate. Disciplines are not little worlds with absolute boundaries, and working between and across disciplines requires challenging established rules of evidence, fixed vocabularies and grammars. What constitutes data, information and knowledge is open to question. Furthermore, speaking primarily of learning the discipline's language seems to say that the only way to find one's own voice is to learn to speak the authoritative language. If we think of them as polarities, discourse seems to be by and from the book; voice seems to be by and from the heart. Discourse sounds objective, rational, impersonal and formal; voice sounds subjective, intuitive, personal and informal. I imagine a very frustrating conversation going like this: "learning to speak the language of the discipline will liberate you;" "but you only want to hear me say what you tell me." "I am inviting you into the discourse;" "you do not want to hear my voice."

Richard Eldridge says the most characteristic form of utterance in Quaker education is the query. If we think about a process of questioning, incorporating the tentativeness of question into even our most categorical assertions, as the means to reconcile personal voice and systematic discourse, we recognize that the question has to be the most characteristic and fruitful form of utterance in all education. At its most genuine, the question is a request for information, a probe of argument and evidence, a confession of doubt and vulnerability, and an invitation into a community of discourse.

The kind of teaching and learning you and I have tried to practice together has sought to overcome the apparent polarities of discourse and voice, not automatically valuing one over the other, but bringing them into a synthesis where each challenges and enriches the other. William Perry, Carol Gilligan, Mary Field Belenky and the other authors of *Women's Ways of Knowing* document how hard the work is to intertwine our intellectual and ethical development. William Perry, who pioneered such study in *Forms of Intellectual and Ethical Development in the College Years*, describes a common trajectory from believing that there are clear, right answers to questions, to believing there are such answers but my teachers won't tell me them, because they want me to find out for myself, to doubting that there are answers at all. That is a point of profound crisis, and many of us experience it as a loss of faith in all

received authority, all attempts at systematic discourse. Belenky and her colleagues describe the conflict to resolve the pull and tug between rejecting received knowledge and discovering an inner and personal voice which speaks with ethical integrity, and then connecting the inner knowledge with the outer world by learning how to use the rules of a discourse, learning what they call "procedural knowledge," that knowledge which helps us know when we are playing fair with both the information and the rules of evidence for our subject and therefore are speaking with integrity. William Perry calls that moving to a position of "multiplicity." Having rejected the absolute authority of received knowledge, having challenged it from the standpoint of inner knowledge, people can learn to integrate and connect procedural and inner knowledge, to live with multiple views of what is true and nonetheless choose which are most intellectually and ethically persuasive to them. And that is very hard, frequently frustrating, sometimes heart-breaking work.

We do not make that quest from doubting received authority, through discovering the inner voice, to learning to live ethically with multiple truths, once and for all. It must be done over and over again, all our lives. At every stage of life, with every new challenge, we may find ourselves at a dead end, frightened back to the security of authority or to living in a closed world whose inner knowledge rests on repudiation of all contrary evidence. William Perry says that going to graduate school tends to shove us back, at least for a time, to passive acceptance of received knowledge. What is true of the student also holds for the teacher. The connection is profound between quest and question. Teaching with integrity requires that we offer the most accurate data and most comprehensive theories known at the moment. Our intellectual and ethical development demands that we keep up with our fields, maintain the highest level of discourse in study. Yet every one of us knows that most of what we have taught will be open to serious question or superseded in a very short time. We must keep up to date; but we know we will soon be out of date. We must give what we have, knowing that--if things work out for the very best--you will far surpass our best work and accomplish things we would never have the strength or knowledge to achieve. You will ask, and perhaps answer, questions it is beyond our capacity even to frame. The interplay of formal discourse and personal voice enacts the poignant, bittersweet struggle to live with multiplicity.

The world we live in is bombarded by sayings and slogans--advertising slogans, political slogans, religious slogans. It is a world where discourse is marred and voice distorted by platitudes, unexamined sayings and unreflective slogans, where a searching question may be taken as a sign of disloyalty. You will need to find ways to live with integrity in that world. But, my dear friends, my colleagues, my companions in so many causes--as I look at the struggles of my adult life and think about my work as a teacher, and the life you and I have shared together, I fear that we have not given you enough tools and strategies to work in that world. I worry that you and I have too often given ourselves the false comfort of our discourse communities, we have conversed with each other too often in "of course" statements, slogans and sayings we have not gone behind. For many of us, student and teacher, man and woman, young and old, the greatest crises of ethical and intellectual maturation occur when trustworthy ways of testing information and experience come up against conviction so deeply held that it resists the best evidence. That is another way of describing how shattered we feel when our "of course" conviction comes up against irrefutable new information. It is the moment when we do not want to lie but find ourselves going to great lengths to "help out" what we are certain must be the truth. That is what happens when a community of belief or conviction clutches too hard at its sayings and slogans--it begins to help out the undoubted truth--exaggerating the information, fudging the data, evading the questions. Speaking of the conflict in Northern Ireland, Seamus Heaney acknowledges how important it is for people to find solidarity with one another, but he says we must also find ways of "holding a space open" beyond our own group, embattled political or faith community. Otherwise, he says, "the solidarity becomes a calcification."

We need sayings, mottoes, maxims, slogans. They are bits of wisdom and history, they help us organize our thoughts and emotions, they connect us with our discourse community of belief or opinion, they give us a shorthand expression for what we think is right for the moment. But no one should live only by sayings and slogans. We also need questions; not trick or delaying or rhetorical questions, but the questions from our deepest selves. Listen again to part of Denise Levertov's poem:

Just when you seem to yourself
nothing but a flimsy web
of questions, you are given

the questions of others to hold
in the emptiness of your hands,
songbird eggs that can still hatch
if you keep them warm....
You are given the questions of others
as if they were answers
to all you ask. Yes, perhaps
this gift is your answer.

No mode of discourse is guaranteed to be free of the deceptions of rhetoric and sentimentality, but what we try to do, when we work with our fullest integrity, is to enter whole-heartedly into the struggle with ourselves, to challenge our most comfortable and assured opinions and convictions, to test what we believe and think we know against our experience, against the integrity of our opponents, against the promptings of our hearts as well as our minds, against what lies behind our sayings. No discourse is worth engaging in which does not allow us to challenge even its fundamental premises; no discourse community has vitality if its borders are sealed against other discourses; our voices can have no efficacy if no one listens to us. Our voices will be thin and lack power if we do not listen to the voices of others. We need good questions and a questing spirit.

At the end of every school year, I find myself pulled two ways-- between joy in what we have accomplished, pleasure in working with people I love and respect, and sadness at what I have not been able to achieve, the shortcomings in vision and understanding which flaw my work. Coming to the end of this year certainly intensifies those feelings. I wish you and we had more time to learn from each other, more time to enrich and deepen our discourse communities. But I am grateful for your idealism, your generosity of spirit, your courage, the skills you have and those you will develop. The world will be the better for your work in it. I urge you to treat your inner lives tenderly, to keep spaces open between yourselves and those you disagree with, to keep faith with your questions, to keep trying to hear as many different voices as you can, to welcome as many different perspectives as possible into the discourses of your lives, to speak from your ideals and to let your voices be heard. If you do, you will go far beyond where your teachers have reached, and we will rejoice in the fact.

