

Baccalaureate Address:
Playing Good Books, Reading Good Roles

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I am grateful to the class of 2002 for inviting me to speak this morning. It moved me deeply to be asked.

It also surprised me a little. I know a good many of you as students and friends, but we have had our differences. Specifically, a certain ugly incident in my Humanities A class in the fall of 1998 makes me wonder why you'd invite me to talk to you. I wasn't entirely sure we were on speaking terms. To cut to the heart of the matter, I lost my temper one day right in the middle of class and walked out on you. Right in the middle of class! It was a day late in the semester, eight o'clock in the morning. You were tired, I was tired. I think we were reading Thucydides, whom I love passionately and you hate just as passionately. You decided to have me do all the work while I wanted you to do most of it. I lost it. Out I stomped, in a huff, papers flying in the wind. I think I forgot to grab my coffee cup on the way out and had to return for it, which made me look irredeemably foolish.

People keep reminding me of that ugly scene. Certainly the incident was on your mind when you wrote evaluations of the class at the end of the semester. Ouch! A year or so ago I read a little piece in the Word in which one of you, with a veiled reference to the incident, expressed frustration with teachers who wanted you to talk in class. And just this fall another Humanities teacher, walking with me through the Carpenter parking lot, asked me if it was really true what a student had told him, that I had lost my temper and walked out on my class in the middle of the period. The good Sarah Tyson told me the other day it's one of her favorite Earlham stories. It's time to put this thing to rest!

To that end, I have four things to declare. First, if you invited me to speak this morning because I still owe you twenty minutes of my time, fine. I am a man who puts in a full day's work for a day's pay. Second, although I owe you twenty minutes on Thucydides, I won't do that to you. There, see, I really do want to make peace. Third, I promise not to stomp off this morning, no matter how you treat me. Even if you refuse to laugh at my jokes, I'm staying right here. Finally, I hereby declare that ugly incident a lover's quarrel. Let's let bygones be bygones and make up. But first, like any lover, I must try to say something to restore my image in your sight.

I imagine that tomorrow morning more than one of you will wake up, your eyes as big as saucers, with this question: What now? What in the world do I do with myself now that I've graduated? In part this is a question about what jobs are available, but in part a question about what you want to do. And that, ultimately, is a question about who you want to be. It's not so much what job you want, but what kind of person you want to be, what life you want to fashion for yourself. That is an enormous question, as you know

very well. If Earlham has done its job, that is a more complex question than it was four years ago. Earlham has opened your eyes, I hope, to more possibilities than you had when you entered. But Earlham has also given you more ways to answer that question than you had when you began here. This morning I ask you to think about the way that the books you have read--all of them, in every course--have invited you to become a certain kind of person. Adrienne Rich, in a prose poem entitled "As If Your Life Depended on It," suggests that we read as if our lives depended on our reading:

You must write, and read, as if your life depended on it. That is not generally taught in school. At most, *as if your livelihood depended on it*: the next step, the next job, grant, scholarship, professional advancement, fame; no questions asked as to further meanings. And, let's face it, the lesson of the schools for a vast number of children--hence, of readers--is *This is not for you*.

To read as if your life depended on it would mean to let into your reading your beliefs, the swirl of your dreamlife, the physical sensations of your ordinary carnal life; and, simultaneously, to allow what you're reading to pierce the routines, safe and impermeable, in which ordinary carnal life is tracked, charted, channeled. Then, what of the right answers, the so-called multiple-choice examination sheet with the number 2 pencil to mark one choice and one choice only?

To illustrate Rich's point, here's a true story, but one stranger than fiction. This is a story about the most amazing reader I've ever heard of, at once the best and worst of readers. He is Heinrich Schliemann. Born in 1822 in Germany, Schliemann made a huge fortune in business, part of it in the gold rush in California. A brash man, he visited the White House apparently unannounced and had an hour and a half conversation with Millard Fillmore. Schliemann was a language genius. He knew twenty different languages. Turkish officials said his Turkish was better than that of most native speakers. But Schliemann's great passion was not money, politics, or language-learning. It was Homer.

Schliemann fell in love, head over heels in love, with Homer. In a phrase I'll be repeating a lot this morning, Schliemann played the role Homer wrote to the very hilt, even to the point that it became his character. He decided to reshape his life around the vision of family that Homer celebrates, especially in the *Odyssey*. The first order of business was to marry a Greek woman. But that also required a quicky divorce from his first wife. So Schliemann came to the divorce capital of the United States in those days, Indianapolis. (While in Indianapolis, by the way, Schliemann met Eli Lilly, who wrote a book about him.) Schliemann then named their children Andromache and Agamemnon, after Homer's characters. And how about this: he even began addressing Homer's deities in his private devotions. But the best was yet to come. Schliemann then went off to the site of ancient Troy, Hissarlik in modern Turkey, to find the ancient city. Later he went to ancient Mycenae in Greece to excavate Grave Circle A in search of the grave of Agamemnon. Wherever he excavated, he was a bull in a china shop. Dust flew, walls fell, pots were shattered. At Mycenae in his enthusiasm he dug too deep to find the grave of Agamemnon. Schliemann passionately wanted to embrace the Homeric life. (Most of my information on Schliemann comes from Joseph Ward Swain's *The Ancient World*, vol. 1, 277-279.)

For years I've thought Schliemann a little strange. He reminded me of the man at a play who leaps on stage to prevent the play's villain from attacking the hero. But after reading Wayne Booth's *The Company We Keep*, I've changed my mind a little. Booth argues that the best readers do exactly what Schliemann did, though usually with less single-minded intensity: they play the role the author creates for them. And if this role seems good, they practice it until it becomes part of their character (See chapter 8, "Consequences for Character: The Faking and Making of the 'Self'" and chapter 9, "Appraising Character: Desire against Desire"). Reading well, then, is for Booth not extracting ideas from texts. Nor is it discovering some message one might assume the author is sending in the text. It is instead submitting to the text and allowing it to mold us in the shape it would have us take. Every text, maybe even the telephone book, has a cluster of values it embraces and others it opposes. It often asks us to see one person as superior to another in some respect. It invites us to become the kind of person it celebrates. Or, as Booth puts it in his *Rhetoric of Fiction*, authors create their readers just as they create their characters (2nd ed., 138). My college text in physics and chemistry shaped me into a more precise person than I had been before. If you read the assignments from Isaiah well in Humanities A, you were, at least for the duration of your reading, a person of faith. Think of the wonderful power of a great piece of music to change the way we think and feel about the world as we submit to its energies and rhythms. I cannot imagine being capable of hate as I listen to Bach's *Mass in B Minor*. And now for a negative illustration of the point.

Recently I found an advertisement that invites me to play the role it sets. At the top of the page I read this injunction, "Live what you believe." Before my eyes ever travel down the page to discover what that might mean, I find myself wanting very much to be this kind of person. I see here a call to a life of integrity, a life without the cowardly compromises that tempt us all. I want us all to live what we believe. In the middle of the page are pictured three timber wolves walking toward me. This suggests to me that living what I believe will include acting on the rugged instincts I imagine I share with the wolves. Like them, I'm untamed by society. As we all know, society will corrupt the best of us if we're not careful. At this point I'm ready to embrace a role that invites me to be so authentic, so genuine, so ruggedly individual. That's who I want to be. Only at the bottom of the page do I discover exactly what this role entails. This is a tobacco advertisement. The Pinkerton Tobacco Company wants me to play the role of the rugged individual, acting on my deepest beliefs--and so unafraid to chew its tobacco. When I glance to the left side of the page I see the warning that "this product may cause mouth cancer." So in addition to showing how almost all texts define a role for me to play, this one also reminds me that I had better exercise some critical judgment in choosing my roles. Here, clearly, I'm reading as if my life depended on it.

But reading to find a role, a self, may well involve more than myself. If Rich urges us to read as if our *lives* depended on it, a playwright you and I have studied and seen urges us to read as if our *city*, our *world*, depended on it. Of course I have in mind Aristophanes's *Frogs*. Aristophanes composed the *Frogs* in 405 B.C.E., just before Athens fell to Sparta at the end of the Peloponnesian War. In this play Aristophanes has the god of theater, Dionysus, travel to the Underworld to bring back a poet to save the city. While in the Underworld Dionysus stages a contest to discover which of the two

candidates, Aeschylus or Euripides, seems better qualified to help. He eventually chooses Aeschylus, though that did not, in fact, save Athens.

Aristophanes nicely illustrates Booth's view that we ought allow authors to give us a role to play, even to shape our characters. In addition, he shows that our reading is important not merely for our own private selves, but for the community in which we live. The roles we play in a democracy, the characters we build for ourselves, matter to the health of our community. And finally, he shows a rough and ready kind of literary criticism that still has some things to teach us. Obviously dead playwrights cannot save the city, but if we allow their works to provide us with good roles to play, we might do so. But first we have to determine what kind of self we need to allow ourselves to become. Aristophanes asks, Does Athens need to be the heroic fighter Aeschylus celebrates in his plays or the clever intellectual we see in Euripides's plays? Aristophanes knows that Aeschylus and Euripides are cultural icons for his audience. It will be difficult to choose one over the other because both are highly respected. So he subjects both to delightful ridicule. In so doing he elevates his audience to a level of superiority over the characters in the play in order to encourage criticism.

Suppose, then, that we take up Aristophanes's project for ourselves and ask now what books we might read that would build in us the kind of character who might save our city. That, I think, is a wonderful question for us to ask. In fact Earlham began the school year with this question when Doug Bennett asked us to read W.E.B. DuBois's *The Souls of Black Folk* for his opening convocation. And in the last couple of weeks I have talked to a number of Earlhamites to ask them what books they think would nurture in the rest of us the kind of character that would be good for us individually and good for the world in which we live. Here are some suggestions: Joyce's *Dubliners*, The Book of Job, the whole of the Bible, Robert Coles's *The Story of Ruby Bridges*, Ellison's *Invisible Man*, Martin Buber's *I and Thou*, Plato's account of the trial and execution of Socrates, Martin Luther King Jr.'s *Letter from Birmingham Jail*, Wordsworth's "Tintern Abbey," Milton's *Paradise Lost*, Ursula Le Guin's *The Left Hand of Darkness*, Cervantes' *Don Quixote*, Gandhi's *Autobiography: The Story of My Experiments with Truth*, Rachel Carson's *Silent Spring*, Darwin's *Origin of the Species*, Freud's *Civilization and Its Discontents*, Yeats's "Easter 1916" and "Meditations in a Time of Civil War," Wallace Stevens's "Sunday Morning," Richard Pipes's *History of the Russian Revolution*, Shakespeare's *King Lear*, Wordsworth's *The Prelude*, The Dalai Lama's *A Policy of Kindness*, John Woolman's *Journal*, Peter Kropotkin's *The Conquest of Bread*, Eric Hoffer's *The True Believer*, Ann Fadiman's *The Spirit Catches You and You Fall Down*, Ann Frank's *Diary*, George Eliot's *Middlemarch*, Langston Hughes's *Selected Poems*, Paul Reps and Nyogen Senzaki's *Zen Flesh, Zen Bones*, Angela Carter's *Nights at the Circus*, Joseph Lash's *Eleanor and Franklin*, Daniel Boorstin's *The Discoverers*, Freeman Dyson's *Disturbing the Universe*, Richard Feynman's *The Pleasure of Finding Things Out*, Adrienne Rich's "Edgellit."

But I have some suggestions of my own. They're books that have been on my mind all year, primarily because of what's been in the news all year. One day last summer I found myself watching a CNN debate between a Palestinian and an Israeli. It was a painful, bitter debate over the suffering each side had endured--based on the number of children each side had lost in the conflict. I don't need to say anything about September 11th. The terrible news from the Middle East we see every evening on television only brings

this whole matter back to my mind. As I think of all this, the following four ideas work on me:

1. Power is paradoxical: it is the source of great benefits and great danger. It is at once the source of both security and insecurity. It is especially dangerous in a democracy. A democracy will expand its power to the point that it forces its neighbors into a hostile response (see Thucydides 1,23,6).
2. "War is a violent teacher. It makes living difficult and reduces the mood of most people to the level of their circumstances." Above all, it destroys morality (see Thucydides 3,82,2).
3. "They [those involved in the civil war] changed the customary meaning of words to fit what was happening, according to their own pleasure." War drains moral words of their content so that we ultimately lack the words to communicate the very values that might save us (see Thucydides 3,82,4).
4. "Defeat goes deeper into the human soul than victory. To be in someone else's power is a conscious experience which induces doubts about the ordering of the universe, while those who have power can forget it, or can assume that it is part of the natural order of things and invent or adopt ideas which justify their possession of it." (Hourani 300-301)

You may have a vague recollection of some of these ideas. The first three come from Thucydides's *History of the Peloponnesian War*. The fourth comes from Hourani's *A History of the Arab Peoples*. And so I am going to make a case that these two works, if we allow them to define roles for us to play, perhaps even building them into our characters, might help us save our city. I know very well that many of you intensely dislike these books. And I think I know many of your objections. I will address some of these as I proceed.

What kind of role do these two historians create for us? What kind of character would they build in us? How might that save the city? I propose three **qualities of character** these two books offer us: **patience**, **respect for the past**, and **sensitivity in choosing a voice**.

First, I propose that we adopt as part of our character the **patience** of a Thucydides or Hourani. **Patience** is for me both a moral and an intellectual virtue. The word **patience** comes from the Latin word that means **suffer**, so intellectual patience means some suffering. It reminds me of the phrase "pains-taking detail." Thucydides covers some seventy years of Greek history, in great detail. A modern translation of his work will run to about 600 pages. In the opening paragraph he tells us he began the *History* when the war itself began (1,1). He tells us that he was banished from Athens for some mistake he made as a naval officer, but this 20 year banishment allowed him the freedom to travel around observing the Spartan side (5,26). In other words, Thucydides's *History* is the work of nearly a lifetime. So is Hourani's. Hourani begins in the seventh century and concludes near the end of the 20th century. That's nearly 14 centuries. He covers a number of various Arab-speaking peoples. No wonder it's so long! I do not know how long it took him to read the books in a bibliography twenty-nine pages in length,

including multi-volume works in six languages, and then to write nearly 460 pages of text, but it's safe to say it was no all-nighter. I imagine you can already see where I'm going with this.

It is agonizingly obvious to us all that the problems in the Middle East, like the ones in the western world, are not about to yield to any quick fix. Tidy pieties and bumper-sticker slogans won't cut it. We'd all like the certainty that the bumper-sticker promises, a kind of portable code of ethics requiring no work and promising that we'll always be morally superior to those who have to stop and weigh alternatives. We'd all like the *Cliff Notes* short-cut to peace in the world, but we know it won't happen. Instead of reaching for the *Cliff Notes* guide to world peace, let's instead embrace the raw complexities of the world. Let's cultivate in ourselves the patience of a Thucydides or Hourani.

Many of you have made great progress in developing intellectual patience in your four years at Earlham. On a whim I asked Amy Mulnix to name some students who exemplified intellectual patience. One name she mentioned was Beth Smith's. No doubt many texts (and teachers) have helped Beth develop this patience. But I'm daring to hope that the two heavy-weight historians I'm recommending made some contribution to that development. More important, Beth's intellectual patience is part of a foundation of qualities of mind and character that will equip her to save the city.

Second, let's borrow from Thucydides and Hourani **respect for the past**. Both historians help us appreciate the enduring realities of the world by studying the patterns of the past. Thucydides discovers something he calls "human nature" (1,22,4) in the repeated patterns of behavior he sees. He is so certain of this "human nature" that he dares to rely on it to anticipate some things in the future. Hourani calls our attention to the enduring sources of stability in the Arab world. He begins with the life story of Ibn Khaldun, who lived in the 14th century. Ibn Khaldun was a scholar who traveled a good bit through the Arab world and wrote of changes in power in that world. Hourani tells us that Ibn Khaldun's life shows two things. First, it shows what Hourani calls "the frailty of human endeavour" (4). Shifts in power could, and did, play havoc with the lives people tried to lead. (Notice how familiar that sounds.) They sought ways to balance their lives with stabilities. These stabilities include the Arab language, a "body of knowledge" (4) in the teachings of Islam, "places of pilgrimage" (4) in Mecca and Jerusalem and, finally, "belief in a God who created and sustained the world" (4). So while there are the deep uncertainties brought by shifts in power, there are some certainties that restore balance to life. These certainties are a tradition central to the lives of the peoples of the Arab world. We appreciate the immense, enduring authority of that tradition only by studying the past. Surely we have no hope of addressing the problems of the Middle East if we act in ignorance of such enduring realities.

In addition to showing us the enduring realities of life, the past helps us explain. It shows us the causes of things. To address the problems of the Middle East we surely have to know what causes them in the first place. Paul Lacey poses the useful question, How far back do we go to understand the current conflict in the Middle East? To yesterday's body-count of children killed? One month? One year? To the 1967 War? To the Holocaust? To the European imperialism of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries? To the Balfour Declaration of 1917? Even to the Crusades? My guess is that most of us

would go pretty far down this list beyond the events of yesterday to understand the roots of the present conflict.

I cherish my image of the Earlham graduate who writes the next great history of the Middle East. Someone more careful, more circumspect than Schliemann, but with his amazing initiative. Carol Hunter was telling me the other day of Erin Zavitz, especially focusing on Erin's appreciation of the value of knowing the past. I want to believe my heavy-weight historians contributed something to this. But more to the point, Erin's appreciation of the importance of knowing the past will help her save the city.

A third quality of character that we should borrow from Thucydides and Hourani is **sensitivity in choosing the voice** with which we speak. Thucydides came of age during the time when scientific medicine was coming into vogue. That seems to have influenced him deeply. His voice reminds us of the physician describing an illness. And he cautions his reader that his words will lack romantic glitz and glamor. He warns us he is not trying to tickle our ears (1,22,4). Just as he patiently works through the symptoms of the plague that struck Athens in 430 B.C.E. (2, 48), so he patiently works through the symptoms of the ills of the city-states in conflict (1,22,4). And notice how appropriate this voice is for his aims. After all, do you want your doctor to add to her other responsibilities that of amusing and entertaining you?

I think the very dryness that turns so many of us off in Hourani has its place. Edward Said, who is of Palestinian descent and who is passionately involved in the controversies of the Middle East, appreciates this in Hourani:

What Hourani does with particular effectiveness, is, I think, to tell the story in most of its aspects without alarmism or sensationalism. To an Arab or Western reader there is thus the opportunity to see the almost hopelessly exacerbated circumstances of today in a calmer, more reasonably adumbrated setting, one in which the excitements and passions of the moment give way to an encouraging pattern of mutuality through which Arabs and Westerners can understand themselves, and each other. (*Los Angeles Times* 2/17/1991)

In other words, the very dryness of Hourani's voice offers people of differing views a place in which they can meet without having to respond to this injury and that insult. One wonders how the debaters urging their claims on the body count of children slain could ever sit down together to make peace. I've heard students complain that Hourani is boring, which is bad criticism. If they mean that he is not interesting, I remind them that "interesting" comes from the Latin interest, which means "makes a difference." If they mean that it makes no difference whether we understand the Arab world, they're fools. If they mean that Hourani is dry, they should understand that that is itself a conscious choice on his part, and one that may serve us all well. As Said says, perhaps Arabs and Westerners can agree to read that book together, even to start from that narrative to bring things into a healthier perspective.

Unfortunately, it's not this simple. I have to admit that Hourani's distant, dry voice comes at a price. Real blood has been shed, millions of lives lost in the shifts of power he recounts. He says little or nothing of this. I believe the CNN debaters were telling the

truth about the children each side had killed. In avoiding such details Hourani sacrifices some part of the real truth. His bloodless history is to that extent false and misleading. It follows, then, that choosing our voice in speaking of the Middle East, as in speaking of our own world, is a matter of serious ethical discernment. I am going to call it an art. I propose that we all cultivate the art of choosing the voice with which we speak of the conflicts in the Middle East.

When I think of Earlham seniors well on their way to mastering the art of choosing words with a view to their truth and with a view to their effect on their audience, two names come to mind: Nate Clifford and Mary Garboden. Both are both superb class discussants and skilled tutors to other students. While I don't imagine that either will claim they owe it all to Thucydides or Hourani, I'm going to imagine for my part that the example of these two didn't hurt. More important, both Nate and Mary will contribute to the saving of the city with this talent.

So, if we read as though our city depended upon it, here's a role to play, perhaps even a character to fashion for ourselves in addressing the problems of the Middle East. To reiterate, (1) cultivate in yourself the **patience** of a Thucydides or a Hourani. (2) Cultivate in yourself a **respect for the past**. (3) Cultivate in yourself **the art of choosing a voice**.

It would be quite reasonable at this point for you to object that such roles are not you. It would be hypocritical for you to play them. Wayne Booth has a response for you. First, this stubborn individuality you have in mind is itself a modern invention. That self you cling too is a product of a certain place and time (*Company* 237-240). It's the self the Pinkerton Tobacco company relies on to persuade you to ignore the suggestions of society, not to mention the Surgeon General, to sell you its tobacco. Think of yourself, instead, as a unique meeting place of a broad array of roles which you practice toward perfection. Playing the roles we read is, in this case, like practicing swimming or a musical instrument, building something. In the case of playing the roles we read, it's building character. And do not worry that we read, and play, conflicting roles. Indeed, the sad thing about Schliemann is that he had only one, quite consuming role (*Company* 282). One wonders if he ever really knew Homer because he couldn't test Homer with any other text.

So, Class of 2002, one final assignment. When you wake up in the morning puzzled and bewildered, think first of all you have to be grateful for. Be grateful--even thank God--for the parents who invested so much love in you. Be grateful for the support they have given you in your time at Earlham. Be especially mindful of the opportunities you have had to read so fully and so well. But then think of all that needs to be addressed in this imperfect world. The city still needs saving. And finally think of who you might become to address these imperfections. Think above all of the roles you have in fact already played in every Earlham classroom. Think of the articles you've read in science classes. Think of the musical compositions and works of art you've studied--these too are texts. Think of those magnificent lives you have already lived, albeit in miniature, in the roles you have played in every human composition you have studied carefully. Think hard about the roles you want to extend into the future. And then play them to the hilt, to the point that they become your character.

If I have had any success in persuading you to play a role as you read, and if I have had any success in making that seem urgent, even a matter of building your character and saving our city, it remains for me to deal with this ugly little lover's quarrel.

But as I think about what I've said, I confess I'm embarrassed. I want to take it all back now! I've tried to excuse my temper tantrum by making the case that we were in the business of saving the world in our classroom. How absurd! What has come over me? These must be the ramblings of someone deeply smitten. I am helpless! I love you, Class of 2002.

I wish you a lifetime of playing good books and reading good roles.

Author's Note: I am deeply grateful to Paul Lacey and to Mary Garboden for reading an early draft of this talk and for making helpful suggestions.