

Earlham College
Baccalaureate Address
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If I Forget You . . .

Gordon Thompson
Professor of English

Intro

Good morning.

Good morning especially to the class of 2003, their families and friends.

I am grateful--at least I am partly grateful--to the members of this class who nominated me to be your baccalaureate speaker.

I am, myself, within a year or two of "graduating" from Earlham.

I rather like the idea of joining one of my favorite classes in a formal leave-taking.

Remembering and Forgetting

I have been encountering increasing signs that it is time for me to graduate-- that is, to retire.

Most of them involve Remembering and Forgetting, which are the themes of this talk.

In my case, these signs are mostly failures of memory.

1. With increasing frequency, I find myself in the middle of a Really Amusing Anecdote, one that has tickled classes in the past, when something in the expressions on my students' faces--the glazed over eyes and the heavy mouth-breathing perhaps--tells me that these students have heard this anecdote before.

In fact, these days, they may have heard it earlier in the same class period.

2. For a long time, former students have shown up at my office door, 5, 10, 20, 30 years after graduating. They almost invariably begin by saying, "You probably don't remember me, but I was in your Humanities class" or "I was in your 18th Century English Literature class." They're right. I don't remember them, at least not right away. They're usually fatter, balder, and wearing suits and ties--and those are the women.

What's different, though, is that some of the people who show up on my doorstep saying "You probably don't remember me," are students currently taking my classes.

3. Indeed, even my children have begun to open conversations saying, "Dad, you probably don't remember me, but . . ."

I interrupt right away and say, "Don't be silly, of course I remember you. You're my oldest son Boris."

The child then replies, "No, Dad, you don't have a son named Boris. I'm you're youngest child, your daughter, Elizabeth."

"I know that," I respond. "I was just testing you."

4. The final signal that it's time for me to graduate came earlier this academic year when I received a letter from the president of the college. I wasn't the only one to get the letter. It went to all faculty and alumni and friends of the college. In it, Doug Bennett celebrated the revision of the curriculum that was under way at Earlham. He said it was high time for a curricular revision

since there was no one still on the faculty who was teaching at Earlham during the last revision of the curriculum, in 1967.

Well, one of the few things I do remember is that I began teaching at Earlham in the fall of 1966.

I suspect that what Doug meant to say was that he wished there was no one on the teaching faculty who was here in 1967.

So, anyway, since my time for departure is just about here, I am happy to be invited to participate in the baccalaureate services on your graduation day.

My Humanities Class

Let me add one more reason why I am grateful to be participating in this graduation. Four years ago, I had fifteen of you in the greatest Humanities class in the history of that program.

In fact, I modestly assert, that was probably the greatest class in the history of higher education. (Unless, of course, memory fails me and the class I am thinking of was 25 years ago.)

The group I have in mind read DuBois and Woolman and Ehrlich.

We ended the semester finally settling the feud between the Hatfields and McCoys. I would like to claim sole credit for the excellence of that class.

But, in fact, it would be impossible to go wrong with a class that included:

Hannah MacDermott and David Roberts

Jacob Blickenov and Caitlin Pierce

Julia Koch and Boulder's own Jesse Gritton

This group was so good I told most of them they ought to be English majors (That's my idea of the highest compliment you can pay a student.)

Like most Earlham professors, I have a deep belief in the liberal arts.

Also like most Earlham professors, I believe that students who major in a discipline other than mine have somehow lost their way.

I love it when my friend, Ray Hively, tells me of an English major who was good enough to have majored in Physics. (This happens not infrequently.)

Ray will say to me, incredulously, so-and-so could have majored in Physics--but she chose ENGLISH!

"I know," I say in fake commiseration, "I feel just terrible about it." (He, he, he.)

Of course, there are times when the situation is reversed, and a student who could have been a great English major picks Physics instead.

Then Ray gets to pretend to commiserate with me.

Anyway, out of the world's greatest class, at least Abbie Evans and Sarah Hartzell took my advice and majored in English.

But Oh, the misguided others!

Erin Taylor chose Classics!--All those dead languages!

Katie Baum went to Sociology/Anthropology--All those weird cultures!

Errin Kramer-Wilt picked Biology--All those southern accents!

And Anna Einstein fell for HDSR

Anna, your father was an English major at Earlham! "How sharper than a serpent's tooth it is to have a thankless child." They probably don't teach much Shakespeare in HDSR, Anna, but your dad can tell you the source of that quote.

Oh well, even if most of them didn't take my advice, it moves my heart to be able to share this day with that wonderful Humanities class.

From the Back of the Faculty

I said I was only partly grateful to be your speaker today.
The ambivalence I feel has to do with your moving me from the back of the stage to the front of the stage.

I always sit in the back during graduation.
That's where my kind of people hang out.

Let me do a little cultural analysis for you here.

The people on the front of the stage are very serious, mature individuals.
They all got straight As.

They wear their many honors with maturity and dignity.

At home, they tend to wear their caps and gowns around the house.

And, as they sit there, they are dreaming dreams of even greater personal distinctions.

Vince Punzo is pretending that he is the president of Cal Tech.

Trayce Peterson is pretending that she is the president of Princeton.

Doug is pretending that he is the president of Earlham.

But the back of the faculty, where I always enjoy graduation, attracts a different population.

In terms of maturity level, most of us are still in junior high.

We amuse each other with songs and animal sounds and a running obbligato to the speeches.

We learned early on that you can carry almost anything in the sleeves of a doctoral gown.

A book.

A pillow.

A deck of cards.

A small refrigerator.

We are at our merriest during the graduation ceremony itself.

We feel it our duty, as resident sociopaths, to provide an audio background for many of the graduating seniors.

I remember one year, for example, when one of our graduates hailed from Speedway, Indiana.

As soon as he was introduced my friends and I shouted "Gentlemen start your engines!" and made race car noises. Brrrrmmm.

Clever, huh?

Graduates from Nashville have heard Travis Tritt and Dixie Chick imitations.

Classics majors have been honored with a few lines of Pig-Latin.

And when it's time to sing the unsingable Alma Mater, we sing off key (which comes naturally to most of us) and substitute even more treacly lyrics for the treacly lyrics on the program.

But I'll let you in on a little secret.

The back-benchers behave like fools during graduation--in part because we are fools,
And in part because we are hiding our heartache.

We know it's time for you to go.

But, at the same time, we hate to see you go.

We know that we will never forget the ones among you we got to know best.
We may forget your names, or what you look like.
(Especially since most of you are planning to go out and grow older.)
But we will never forget your special spirit, your personality, your unique cast of thought,
When a former student shows up at my office and says “You probably don’t remember
me . . .”
I usually have to ask for a name, and a year, and the name of the course we had together.
But it doesn’t take five minutes for the special quality of that student to come flooding
back to me.
As we chat, more of the magic of a unique human personality comes back

We have about three or four very intense years in which we get to know you
And now you’re leaving, and that is bittersweet for us.
The folks in front hide their melancholy with their awesome dignity.
The folks in the back mask their feelings by eating candy bars and throwing pebbles at squirrels.
(When the weather’s nice. Indoors we eat candy bars and trade baseball cards.)
We all know, that at some level, we will never forget you.

Why Do Alums Forget Earlham?

I don’t think you will forget us either.
I am sure you won’t forget each other.
But, if you are like previous graduating classes, there is a way in which many of you will forget
Earlham.
Financial gifts to a college are an important measure of alumni devotion.
By that standard, we are an oft-forgotten institution.
Something less than 40% of Earlham graduates give the college any financial support at all.
I find this stunning.
Earlham seems to me such a wonderful place; it attracts so many nice people to teach and learn
here.
So many great programs, so many good classes.
Above all, the college is most distinctive--to me anyway--for its pursuit of goodness.
Together, we are determined to find ways to live ethical lives
We seize every opportunity to promote peace, toleration, environmental responsibility
And yet a majority of our alums view their alma mater with anger or alienation or
indifference.
I keep racking my brains to try to figure out why this is so.

I am especially perplexed when I compare Earlham to my own undergraduate institution.
My dear college, to which I contribute regularly, had no discernible interest in goodness.
What it offered, implicitly and explicitly, was prestige and power.
Most of my classmates did become men of wealth and influence.
(The rest of us became teachers.)
The way that prestige and power were acquired on campus, so far as I could tell,
was by spending every weekend and most weekdays--vomiting on snow banks

(Let me say parenthetically to parents and guests, that I'm pretty sure that the graduation planning committee chose me as the baccalaureate speaker because they knew I would add great dignity to the occasion.)

And yet, the graduates of my college make enormous financial contributions to the school, and over 70% of all alumni give something.

Does Amoralism elicit fonder memories than the pursuit of goodness?

It looks like it.

One day, a few years ago, I finally figured it out.

Earlham is forgotten by many of its graduates BECAUSE it strives for goodness.

There is something self-righteously annoying about Earlham values.

For one thing, they are so lofty they can never be fully achieved.

What we seek, after all, is merely kindness, peace, simplicity, mutual understanding, fairness, economic justice, and a clean environment

Every Earlhamite knows the feeling of betrayal when we fall short of our goals

And when that happens, we experience one of the most satisfying little thrills of all--

We can be mad at Earlham.

Nothing is more fun than being mad at Earlham.

We can accuse the college of hypocrisy.

We can proclaim that Earlham's mission statement and community code are frauds.

Most fun of all, we can intone those immortal words, "Community is dead."

In my history of Earlham, which I haven't quite finished writing yet--

In fact, I haven't even started it--

In my history of Earlham, there is an important scene that takes place in 1847 after the first day of classes.

As you know, Tom Hamm of the history department has already written a fine history of the college.

But Tom, as an historian, is bound by rules of evidence and availability of documents.

My field is literature, so I just make things up including what I fancy to be Quaker names..

At the end of the first day of classes back in 1847, one teacher turns to the other and says: "Rufus, what are we going to do about the problem of busyness?"

And the other teacher says,

"Barnaby, We can't do anything about busyness--community is dead."

Goodness, I maintain, is not only often unattainable; it is frequently annoying.

Let's face it, most of the lessons we learn in college are painful ones.

In the last four years, if you are at all typical college students,

You have probably been told, several times, that your behavior was inappropriate.

(That's an awful thing to have to hear, especially when it's true.)

You have been told that your thinking is muddy and your writing is incoherent.

You have ruined love affairs with your own selfishness and inconsiderateness

You have had your sloppy research methods and your intellectual corner-cutting pointed out to you.

The undergraduate experience is painful everywhere, but it's especially painful at Earlham.

Why?

Because the person pointing out your flaws is either nice--or thinks she's nice
At Earlham, you don't just have your failings pointed out--
They are pointed out by someone wearing a look of unbearable Quaker caring
You know the look, the furrowed brow, the honest eyes, the grimace of constipated
Christian concern.

At other schools, you get reprimanded by remote teachers and impersonal deans.
Here, you get elderd by someone who likes you, who believes you have God inside you.

It is ghastly, really, and often it looks like sanctimony, hypocrisy, moralism.
I'm surprised we get any money from our alums at all.

And, friends, I wouldn't have it any other way.

I will take Earlham's quest for goodness over other school's get-rich agendas,
Even though it hurts us at fund-raising time
I think the quest for goodness ought to be at the center of every college education
And I think it is that search for goodness that binds us to each other
It is the fact that, for a few years anyway, we pursued goodness together that makes your leave-
taking so difficult (no matter how ready you are to go).

It is that shared enterprise that means, in some sense, we will never forget each other.
Let me try to illustrate what I mean.

A Test Case: Psalm 137

Last fall I taught a Jewish texts class devoted entirely to 15 psalms in the Hebrew Scriptures
Twenty-four students took the class, including some of you, like Julia Prosser and Greg
Kiefer and James Graves and Boulder's own Sia Urroz

One of poems we studied was Psalm number 137.
Most of you probably know it. Or at least part of it.
It is the Psalm that begins "By the waters of Babylon" or, in the JPS version,
"By the rivers of Babylon"

It is a beautiful poem of heartbreak--the heartbreak of exile from one's city and land.

It is a poem spoken by the children of Israel after their defeat by the Babylonians in the
year 586 BCE. Their temple in Jerusalem, the Temple of Solomon, has been destroyed

They have been carried into captivity, away from the land they love and the city where
they worship

Their captors torment them and order them to sing songs of Zion, but they refuse
Let me read it to you.

By the rivers of Babylon,
there we sat,
sat and wept,
as we thought of Zion.

There on the poplars
we hung up our lyres,
for our captors asked us there for songs,
our tormentors, for amusement,
"Sing us one of the songs of Zion."

How can we sing a song of the Lord
on alien soil?
If I forget you, O Jerusalem,
let my right hand wither,
let my tongue stick to my palate
if I cease to think of you,
if I do not keep Jerusalem in memory
even at my happiest hour.

You don't begin to "get" a poem until a second reading, so listen to it yet again.

We talked in our class, as we always did, about our various personal encounters with the psalm.
Most of us had heard at least a line or two before.
The two best known lines were "By the waters of Babylon" and "If I forget you O Jerusalem"

Some students who had gone to Quaker camps recalled singing "By the waters of Babylon" over
and over and over, well into the night. No other lines were sung.

Just "By the waters of Babylon," "By the waters of Babylon" again and again and again.
This confirmed a suspicion I have long held that at Quaker camps they don't really have enough
for the kids to do.

Many students knew of the Jewish custom of breaking a glass at a wedding.

They knew that one explanation for this custom is that it is a reminder of the temple in
Jerusalem which was destroyed

The temple being recalled at Jewish weddings is the second one, not the first.

(We Jews seem to have trouble hanging on to our temples.)

No matter, the custom works perfectly with the poem.

Smashing the glass fulfills the vow of not forgetting Jerusalem

"Even at my happiest hour."

There can be no occasion, no moment, so joyous, that I can forget my people's great loss.

Some Jewish students recalled Hebrew school experiences where the poem was used to talk
about the importance of Jerusalem.

Some of those students learned about the centrality to Judaism of a certain city in the
middle East.

Others learned that that particular city itself may not be so important, for there are stories
in Judaism that treat Jerusalem as a metaphor--a metaphor for what is most precious in the world.

In many ways, for the last 2000 years, Judaism has been a portable religion.

One rabbi said, for example, Jerusalem is with me wherever I go.

Jerusalem is God and Torah and tradition, and that is in my mind and soul.

Other students had heard that some Palestinian Arabs had adopted the 137th Psalm

I had heard that also.

The psalm speaks to Palestinians because they are now the people in exile from the land.

They are now silenced by their tormentors.

They are the ones vowing not to forget Jerusalem.

“If I forget you Al-Quds, let my right hand wither, let my tongue stick to my palate.”

I hope what those students and I have heard is correct.

I hope the 137th psalm has been appropriated by Palestinians
That would confirm me in my conviction of the power of great literature.

Great poems are written at a specific time for a specific people.

But they cannot remain the possessions of a specific time and a specific people.
Over the years, poems can speak forcefully to other peoples

Hence, poems are borrowed and adapted and reexperienced.

Poems know no national borders, no time periods. There are no check points for poetry.

Everyone who knows exile, knows how to long for Jerusalem.

Now for a change of pace.

As many of you recognized, I did not read all of Psalm 137 to you.

There is a second section.

The second section is not sung at Quaker camps and it is not part of the Jewish liturgy.

It is omitted because it is horrific.

Yes, this beautiful poem of longing turns vicious at the end.

The captive Israelites call upon God to wreak vengeance on the Babylonians and their allies, the Edomites.

The Israelites call down a blessing on whatever earthly military power conquers Babylon
And they look forward with special satisfaction to the murder of Babylonian children.

Here it is.

Remember, O Lord, against the Edomites

the day of Jerusalem's fall;

how they cried, “Strip her, strip her

to her very foundations!”

Fair Babylon, you predator,

a blessing on him who repays you in kind

what you have inflicted on us;

a blessing on him who seizes your babies

and dashes them against the rocks!

Sorry about this but, according to my practices, you have to hear it again.

My, isn't the Bible a lovely book!

When I read all of Psalm 137 I sometimes think of a family custom of my friend and colleague Michael Birkel.

Michael and his wife begin each day by reading a Psalm aloud with their two children.

That strikes me as a beautiful practice, but I wonder if they read Psalm 137

I love the picture of Michael reading about smashing babies against rocks and then saying,

“Have a nice day kids!”

One day I asked Michael if he and Gwen read Psalm 137, and he admitted they did not.

I asked my Jewish Texts class if the second half of Psalm 137 should be dropped from Scripture.

To a person--and I will always love them for this--they said no.
They said that psychologically, the second part of the psalm is perfect.
For the dispossessed, first comes heartbreak, then comes humiliation, then comes rage.
We spoke of the images from the Middle East we get without end on our TV screens after every outbreak of violence.

First come the tears of loss from the grieving family and friends.
And then come the promises of retribution.
Even my privileged and comfortable students and I can imagine what that feels like.
The poem seemed to us, emotionally just right.
The Bible is a great literary text, a great repository of psychological insight.
Leave the poem as it is.

On the other hand, the poem seems ethically just wrong.
Psychologically just right, Ethically just wrong.
The desire to smash babies is what we do feel when we are dispossessed.
But, if there is to be any hope for peace and justice in the world--
It is a feeling we must resist, maybe even a feeling we must overcome.
The power of the 137th Psalm, for me, is as an ethical test case.
How, I hear the Psalm asking us, can you prevent the second part of the poem from happening?
How can one remember his or her Jerusalem, without wishing for the suffering of his enemy's children?
I think it's a good enough test case to apply to an Earlham education.
What happens on this campus that might separate the first half of Psalm 137 from the second half?
That, to me, would be an education in goodness.
How can we long for Jerusalem without hating those who are keeping it from us?
I want to suggest some ways that students and faculty have tried to do that.
Some of our practices, I believe are more effective than others.

Direct Action

There is quite a bit of what we might call "direct action" on this campus
There is, of course, the inspiring example of service activities by Earlham students in the Richmond community. That is a miracle and a story all its own. It is local direct action.
When the world explodes and war threatens, we engage in letter-writing campaigns, we call up congressmen, we go to Washington or New York or Cincinnati or Indianapolis on protest marches, we hold vigils on the heart, we paste improving stickers on our cars.
On the local level, the efficacy of direct actions by EC students is stunning.
At the national and international levels, I'm less sure of our success.

What I probably need to confess here is that I'm not really a direct-action kind of guy.
It's hard to throw yourself into a cause when you're only 61% behind it.
Direct action is great when you are 100% sure you are right.
Then you can march in parades, carry big signs, write angry letters to the editor.
You can put signs in your yard, circulate petitions, leave phone messages with congressmen.
All these activities require one to get behind a slogan

But slogans only work when you're 100% sure you're right. And I'm never 100% sure.
I was opposed to our recent war in Iraq, but I was only 61-62% opposed to it
I found that I could not line up behind many of the protest activities on campus.

I haven't joined a vigil on the heart in years.

The activity just doesn't work for me. I'm never exactly sure what I'm vigiling for.
The last time I joined a vigil--I can't even remember exactly what the world crisis was--but it had something to do with the middle East

It was one of those occasions when people kept joining the circle by breaking in wherever they could

It was a hot day, we were all holding hands, our hands were slimy with sweat
I looked to my right and saw that I was holding hands with a student who had recently taken one of my classes

He had cut heavily, read few of the books, written cynical papers and then ripped me on the course evaluation.

I looked to my left and saw that I was holding hands with a colleague who had been bad-mouthing a program that was dear to my heart.

So there I was, not altogether sure of the purpose of the vigil, holding hands with two guys I didn't like, schpritzing like a pig, and the student starts giving my hand little squeezes of solidarity, as if to suggest we're all on the side of the angels in this circle.

And then, after I'd made this huge sacrifice, the situation in the Middle East didn't improve anyway.

The problem with so much direct action of this sort is that it's just a festival of like-believers

This is the experience of the protest march

It feels so wonderful to be in a crowd of people who see things just the way you do
You see all those bright banners with their clever slogans

It looks like there are millions of people marching and they all support the same cause
The organizers of the march estimate the crowd at 800,000; the police say it was 230.

Everyone enjoys some good singing and some good chanting.
It's so dispiriting to come back home and find that nothing has changed.

Much of my bad attitude can be summed up in the experience of the brother of my colleague, Mary Lacey.

He participated in the big New York march before the War in Iraq was launched.

As he was marching down the street, he noticed a sole counter demonstrator

The guy was standing on the sidewalk with a sign that said "Bomb Iraq"

(How's that for a good argument?)

On his way back from the march, an hour later, Mary's brother noticed that the "Bomb Iraq" guy was still there; but he was being engaged in debate by one of the protesters.

Well, that's not quite accurate.

He was being engaged in debate by a demonstrator with a sock puppet.

It was the sock puppet who was doing the debating.

Can't you just picture it?

"Hinkey-Pinkey says No More War!"

And we know what eventually transpired.

Even the best efforts of a sock puppet could not stop this war.

So much direct action feels to me like that vigil and that New York march.

They are gestures, they feature slogans, they feel good, but they do little

Such actions don't do much to prevent the second part of the 137th Psalm from taking place.

But I am glad we do them; I wouldn't want to teach at a school where people did not go on marches or stand in vigils or call their congressmen

On the scale of goodness, it's way ahead of burning a town because your team won a football game or because you're enraged that they closed the bars early.

And symbols do matter.

At least they remind us of who we are and what we care about.

On many college campuses these days, Jewish and Arab students seek only to silence and insult each other;

It is symbolically significant that at Earlham, Keren and Suad can share a microphone.

And it is gratifying to this Jew that when I finish yammering here--Musa akhi

Musa, my Muslim brother, will give the benediction

These little gestures won't, by themselves, do much for peace

But, as I said, they remind us of the kind of world we long for.

Indirect Action

I am more impressed by what Earlham contributes to Goodness through what we might call "indirect action."

There are habits of mind and habits of interacting with others that are practiced and taught all across this campus, every day.

To the extent that those habits are diffusive, to the extent that they are carried out into the world and modeled for others--they are real contributions to mutual understanding, to peace, to respect.

When these habits of mind and behavior become inextricable parts of our beings, we can vow never to forget our Jerusalem without calling down blessings on the murderers of children.

I am going to describe, briefly, three kinds of indirect action

Three kinds of indirect action which, as practiced at Earlham, fill me with pride.

Critical Analysis

First, for the last four years you have had to practice a kind of critical analysis I don't mean anything very fancy by this.

All I mean is a conscientious attention to evidence,
a rigorous restraint in drawing conclusions,
a respectful attention to the views of those who disagree with you,
a willingness to perform one more experiment, even when you think you have done enough,
a commitment not to let your ideology determine your conclusions.

Above all, I mean a readiness to turn your critical capacity against your own most cherished beliefs.

It means questioning the rightness of causes to which you have devoted your life.

It means analyzing--or even more painful, listening to other people analyze--the conduct of people to whom you are utterly devoted.

The place I see the kind of critical analysis most boldly practiced at Earlham is in the natural sciences.

Earlham scientists constantly impress me with their insistence on attention to data.

The almost joyful way in which they say "But I may be wrong" and invite rebuttals is, frankly, inspiring.

I assure you that most of us in the humanities are much less responsible about this. We fall in love with our own conclusions and relinquish them with reluctance.

But should Earlham get any special credit because its scientists adore data and insist on proof? Isn't that just the nature of science? Don't scientists everywhere do that?

Perhaps. Certainly science simply vanishes if passion and politics take over.

But Earlham scientists are researchers and teachers, not just researchers.

And because they teach at this school, they model scientific precision with what I would call an ethical intensity.

To use the language of my little talk today, they connect science and goodness.

The discipline where I think critical analysis is most difficult and most important, however, is History.

Historians take on the most vexed issues, the most politically charged questions, the collisions of peoples over land, power, justice, human rights.

The struggles of today always have a past, and we just have to think critically about the past if we are to do anything good in the world.

And yet the temptation to avoid critical analysis, to think a-historically, or to pay attention to only some of the evidence, or to arrange the evidence so that our cause looks just--is almost overwhelming,

Only the bravest historians can make themselves honor the evidence.

The conscientious historian, it seems to me, is an enemy of slogans.

The tortured events that have led to our current crises require the most rigorous thought, the most balanced consideration, the most thorough study

Good historical work cannot be reduced to a "Bomb Iraq" poster or the squeaking of a sock puppet--though I rather like the image of Bob Southard delivering a scholarly paper by means of a sock puppet.

This semester, I taught a Humanities course for first year students devoted to the history and literature of Israel/Palestine.

It was not a particularly successful course.

The students were great, but I did not plan the course very well--

and I did not teach it very well.

But I did all the reading!

And as I did my reading, a curious thing happened.

I frequently found myself deeply moved, sometimes almost to the point of tears, by the scholarship of Palestinian and Israeli historians.

How could this be?

I am constantly moved by imaginative literature--indeed I read literature in order to be moved--

but how could I be welling up over the painstaking analysis of old documents from the Ottoman empire, or exchanges of letters among 19th century Zionists?

What moved me was the intellectual integrity that these trained Palestinian and Israeli historians showed.

Even though they saw themselves as belonging to a people, even though they were committed to justice and safety for their people, even though their writing could influence the outcome of this most painful of situations--

They calmly presented evidence--including evidence that did not redound to the credit of their respective peoples--and offered careful, reasonable judgments.

This does not mean that they agreed with one another's conclusions.

But they did agree upon the right way to do history.

They did agree that it is necessary to avoid chauvinism and emotionalism and the polemics they inspire.

The last two years have left me deeply despondent about the Middle East, thoroughly pessimistic about any chance for a peaceful resolution of any kind.

Reading scrupulous historical scholarship--the kind that first year students at Earlham hate because it is full of what they call "dry facts"--gave me a little hope.

Critical analysis is a kind of indirect action in the cause of the Good.

Sympathetic Imagination

The second habit of mind I want to address is the Sympathetic Imagination

This also is not a difficult concept

It is the ability to feel what others feel

To see in ways you have never seen before.

To hear sounds you have never heard before.

To visit places you have never visited--and maybe never will visit.

To begin to know what it is like to live in a culture you did not grow up in.

To experience the world as it is experienced by someone not your age, not your religion, not your sex, not your ethnic group, not your political persuasion.

Sympathetic Imagination is essentially an emotional experience,

But it is disciplined emotion--not at all wild, uncontrolled emotionalism

What I hope you have discovered at Earlham is that you can train your emotions.

Because I am a "Words" person--

Because language is my chief joy

I use literature, mostly, to direct my imagination

I need stories and poems to put myself in minds unlike my own.

I preach the powers of the literary imagination so relentlessly that my students are quite sick of it

And so are the people behind me, who have heard a version of this sermon too often

But I do subscribe to the dictum of the great 19th century British novelist George Eliot

who maintained that the world will become a better place only if we learn to feel what others feel.

As she once wrote in a letter to a friend, literature increases our powers of empathy, or it does nothing ethically.

George Eliot's empathy is what I mean by sympathetic imagination.

But literature, of course, is not the only means of training the imagination.

Art, and Art History, requires you to see things in new ways

To pay attention to what is beautiful around you, and what others have found beautiful.

Music, too, is marvelous discipline for the affections.

You can inhabit Bach's mind as well as Shakespeare's

And sometimes I think that Theater is the greatest imaginative experience of them all.

Actors pretend that they are people they are not

and audience members pretend they are present somewhere that they are not--

And all this pretending helps us think about life in new ways

I hope you have painted and sculpted and acted and sung and played instruments while you have been at Earlham--

If not, I hope you have listened to other people perform and watched other people act

I hope you have studied artistic productions of many kinds

Your experience of the world is richer for it and your powers of imagining lives other than your own are increased thereby

Of course, literature and the arts are not the only trainers of the imagination

If you wrote an ethnography on foreign study, you used your imagination.

If you learned a foreign language, you did much more than pick up new words and verb tenses.

You used your imagination to enter a new culture.

If you studied a religion other than your own, you used your imagination.

What is endearing about Earlham, I believe, is the cultivation of the imagination for ethical purposes.

George Eliot would have liked Earlham very much, I believe.

To point out the obvious, if you are accustomed to seeing the world as others see it,

then you will be able to see the world as your enemies see it.

Your own sorrow will not be diminished thereby; but your rage will decrease.

You will be less inclined to move from the first part of Psalm 137 to the second part.

Jerusalem vs. "Jerusalem" (Dostoevsky and Amichai): The Sacred Person

My third, and final, concept of an indirect action conducive to peace is also quite simple.

It is an unshakeable belief in the absolute sanctity of the individual life.

By that I do not mean the sanctity of individualism.

I mean the deep, deep conviction that life itself is holy, that life is a sacred gift

As such, each life must be regarded with awe.

My life, your life, every person's life is a wonder

Every life is--potentially--a gift to humankind, a gift to the earth.

Therefore, the loss of life is simply unbearable.

In this assertion, I limit myself to human life

Some of you, I know, extend this sense of awe to all life, and I respect that.

(I just don't like cats.)

A couple of weeks ago, I got to teach *The Brothers Karamazov* to a Russian Literature class for the last time.

(I'm at that stage in my career where I am ticking off the books I'll never get to teach again.)

Your classmate, Jim Buckles was one of the students in that class.

There is a rather maudlin scene near the end of the *Brothers Karamazov*--
Where the drunken and pathetic Captain Snegirov tries to talk to his dying 12 year old son, Ilyusha

Ilyusha says to his father, "Don't ever forget me, Papa," and then urges his father to visit his grave with another nice little boy who might--in a way--take his place.

Captain Snegirov bolts from the room, runs into the street and roars out some words that I hope are familiar to you by now:

He says, "I don't want a nice boy! I don't want another boy! If I forget thee, O Jerusalem, let my tongue cleave . . ." and he falls choking to the ground at that point.

(Actually, all Dostoevsky characters fall choking to the ground sooner or later.)

Someone asks why this man is yelling about Jerusalem when his son is dying.

Alexei Karamazov says:

"It's from the Bible: 'If I forget thee, O Jerusalem' means if I forget all that is most precious to me may I be struck . . ." and he leaves the thought unfinished.

Once again, that old Hebrew poem has crossed another boundary.

Now it forms part of the most passionately Christian book ever written.

And, once again, we encounter someone for whom Jerusalem is not a city

Jerusalem has become the most evocative word for what is most precious
For Captain Snegirov, what is most precious is the life of his son.

For us, the readers, we are made to feel that all life is precious beyond calculating
Or, rather, each life is precious beyond calculating

One life cannot be exchanged for another; one life cannot replace another.

And while I'm on the subject of life's preciousness--

One of the delights of my life at Earlham has been to live in a community informed by the values of the Society of Friends, the people called Quakers

The teachings and practices of Friends affirm the value of each life more beautifully than any other tradition I know.

Earlham is a real Quaker community, I believe, even though most of the people here are not Quakers.

We are, rather, what one wag has called "running dogs with the Quakers."

The glorious thing about this institution is the way we are constantly reminded of life's sanctity.

It is present in teachers' attitudes toward students and students' attitudes toward one another, where we really believe that wisdom can come from surprising places.

At Earlham, we collaborate rather than compete because we know we waste lives and wisdom if we leave people behind.

Our community, appropriately, is informed by a pacifist ethos, so that people like me, who are not pacifists, must always explain ourselves to people who believe that no cause is worth taking a single life.

Quaker silence is a lovely thing, too, where we sit together and seek wisdom in mutual trust and affection. This, too, affirms life.

(I must point out, however, that silence is a relative thing; usually we sit and listen to lawn mowers and bull dozers and foul language from the athletic fields.)

For all these reasons and many more, I maintain that Earlham's Quaker community is a wonderful place in which to nurture in one's heart a loving respect for life.

After Earlham, I hope it will be hard for any of us to put some cause or some city or some object ahead of a single life.

Allow me one last literary allusion.

The magnificent Israeli poet, Yehuda Amichai, has a wonderful piece called "Tourists" It is a Jerusalem poem.

Actually, it's kind of a prose poem about Jerusalem. Here's the last section:

"Once I was sitting on the steps near the gate at David's Citadel and I put down my two heavy baskets beside me. A group of tourists stood there around their guide, and I became their point of reference.

'You see that man over there with the baskets? A little to the right of his head there's an arch from the Roman period. A little to the right of his head.'

'But he's moving, he's moving!'

I said to myself: Redemption will come only when they are told, 'Do you see that arch over there from the Roman period? It doesn't matter, but near it, a little to the left and then down a bit, there's a man who has just bought fruit and vegetables for his family.'"

I shouldn't belabor the obvious, I suppose, but I do love the way Amichai tells us that-- no monument, no historical site (and, by implication) no religious shrine or political symbol is more important than this little guy with his fruits and vegetables.

And I love the way he asserts "Redemption will come" only when we recognize that person matters more than place

Peace will come, justice will come, the divine presence will come only when we recognize that lives matter more than things.

Sorry about this, but you know the rules. You have to hear the poem again.

The lesson of Amichai's poem, I suggest, has been taught to you every day you have been on this campus.

Conclusion (If I Forget You)

So, there you have it.

I have tried to tell you why I think Earlham is a place you should not forget.

Or rather, since place is not of supreme value,

Earlham is a time in your life you should not forget

Or rather, Earlham is some precious lives with which your precious life once intersected.

You tried to get launched on a Good Life here

That is, you tried to get launched on a life of Goodness here.

Much of what you learned was difficult and painful; I hope some of it was joyful.
I'd like to think that Earlham has become not just a place you can remember.

I hope it is a memory you can cherish.

This afternoon, when you receive your degree,

I will no longer, Thank God, be on the front of this stage.

I'll be in the back row with the other eleven year olds.

As you cross the stage, if you listen carefully, you may hear--

The honk of a Canada goose

or the bell of the bull elk during the September rut

(Every Colorado boy can do that one.)

You may hear a few lines of Jabberwocky

or the sounds of a sliding semi on wet concrete.

Or I may be shooting a rubber basketball

and unplugging the sound system just for fun.

But whatever happens, you should know that every person up here

teaching faculty and administrators alike

has a litany of names running through his or her mind.

The names are different for each of us, because we have gotten to know different ones of you--different ones of you have transformed yourselves from our students into our friends.

So this afternoon some of the faculty will behave with great dignity

Others of us will hide our emotion with low-level insubordination.

What I can promise you is that each of us---using our own private mental lists of your names---

each of us will be thinking something like this:

If I forget you--Hannah Hoover

If I forget you Andrew Graham

If I forget you Joe Marciniak

If I forget you Lacey Boland

If I forget you Keren Gilboa

If I forget you Karla Fribley

If I forget you Andy Webber

(Don't stop me now, I'm on a roll)

If I forget you Steven Hansen

If I forget you Josh DeCou

If I forget you Corliss Harris

If I forget you Susan Malsbury

If I forget you Hannah Bloom

If I forget you Martina whose last name I can't pronounce but I bet I come closer than Dean Len

Clark does this afternoon--

If I forget you Martina Zamykalova

If I forget you,

let my right hand wither

let my tongue stick to my palate.

As you leave here and go out of my life, leaving me with a real sense of loss,

I assure you, that I will never be so happy, I will never experience such pure joy--that I will cease to think of you.

I will keep you in memory even at my happiest hour.

For, you see, at Earlham, we are each other's Jerusalems.

Your teachers and I are grateful to you for coming here in search of a life of goodness.

And we are grateful to you for helping us, in our own searches for lives of goodness.

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