

Just Isn't So.

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Baccalaureate Address

5/7/05

I want to thank Troy for that wonderful introduction but honesty compels me to admit that I am only here because of a mis-communication that occurred between the seniors and our registrar Bonita Washington Lacey. I was told that right before casting votes for baccalaureate speaker Bonita told the seniors “Choose carefully, because this is the **last** person you will hear from on your graduation day.” Well, a lot of you evidently misunderstood and wrote on your ballots “The **absolute last person** I want to hear from on my graduation day is Vince Punzo.” And Bonita counted all those as votes for me. Perhaps next time you’ll pay a little closer attention to instructions.

I think it might be useful if I begin my comments by telling you how I prepared for this talk. Late last night I was sitting at home, eating pizza, watching TV, and talking to a friend on the telephone. I had not yet started writing this talk, but I wasn’t worried. Over the last four years this class has emphasized to me time and time again that it is perfectly reasonable to put off working on a project until the morning of the day it is due. So I knew I had plenty of time.

At one point in my phone conversation my friend said “You know Vince, by choosing you to give the baccalaureate address this class has given you a real gift.”

I said, “My gosh, you’re right. I have to get them a gift in return.”

My friend disagreed, saying “No, no, Vince Don’t you see? Your gift to them will be your talk.”

At that time my talk consisted of a few notes I had scrawled down on the top of the pizza box. And so I said “I don’t think that’s going to work.”

So rather than getting started on the assignment that was due the next morning, I decided to go do some late night shopping instead. Is that a familiar experience for any of you?

Unfortunately, it was pretty late and the only store that was open was Wal-Mart. Well, as I was scrounging through the frozen food section one of the workers came up to me and asked if I needed help.

When I told her of my predicament, that I needed to get a last minute gift for a whole graduating class, she said she could better help me if I told her a little bit about your class. And so I did.

I told her that in the last several years our daily lives have been interwoven in extraordinary and remarkable ways. There were, of course, classes, study sessions, meetings, and discussions; but there were also performances, celebrations, meals, road trips with sports teams, summer days spent with the MAT students, and through it all, a daily sharing of ideas, hopes, dreams, problems, frustrations, some tears, and much laughter. And I went on to tell her that if I had to specify the unique characteristic for which I will always remember this class it would be the generosity of spirit with which you welcomed me into your lives.

The Wal-Mart worker seemed moved by my words and said “That all sounds wonderful. And I bet they invited you to some of their great parties too.”

And I replied “ You know, I’m pretty sure this class didn’t have any parties, because I never was invited to one. In fact, I don’t think anyone at Earlham has parties because the faculty has never invited me to one either.

“Well,” she said “those seniors sound like a pretty special group of people anyway.”

“Yes, they are. They truly are.” I said. “And for as long as I live, I will never forget them. But there is still one more thing you should know before we pick out their gift.”

“What’s that?” she asked.

“I don’t want to spend more than 5 dollars on it.”

Anyway, I think we came up with a good solution. I knew that after graduation you’d be doing your own cooking for the first time, so I decided to get this oven mitt for you. I didn’t have enough money to get you each one but I figured you could all share this one.

The problem is when I got home from shopping I was pretty hungry again. So rather than getting started on writing the talk I decided to make myself a batch of chocolate chip cookies instead.

When they were ready to come out of the oven, I realized that I didn’t have my own oven mitt and so I had to use this one. And it worked pretty well. But since I used it, I wouldn’t feel right giving it as a gift, so I’m just going to keep it for myself after all.

So the upshot of all this is I don’t really have a gift for you now. But I promise I’ll get one to you later. I know that’s ok with you because over the years you have taught me that even if you should have done something long ago there is no shame in asking for a last minute extension.

I know from conversations I’ve had with many of you over the last year that you are a little anxious about what you are going to do in both the immediate and long term future. Questions of jobs, places to live, and finding new social networks are foremost in your mind.

These are crucial questions but I hope you are also asking the other questions that I believe are even more fundamental. When you ask “What should I do?” you should also ask “Who should I be?” When you ask “where should I live?” you should also ask “How should I live?” And when you ask “What will be my job?” you should also ask “What is my vocation in life?”

These are not easy questions. And no one can answer them for you. But I can tell you of my own attempts to answer those same questions in the hope that my reflections may be of some use in your journey.

When she was just eleven years old, Helen Keller wrote to a friend “the best and most beautiful things in the world cannot be seen or even touched, they must be felt with the heart.” If this is true, and I believe it is, we must find a way to respond to that of the world that transcends our senses. We must find a way to first acknowledge, and then embrace, that mystery that Keller speaks of that touches our hearts and envelopes our lives. And I believe that mystery is most fully embraced by living a life of faith. Once that choice is made, once the gift has been accepted, we are transformed. For in faith our temporal lives become eternal, our prosaic actions become extraordinary, and our human nature is imbued and restored with grace. Once ignited by the light of faith our very lives become evidence of that which we seek, we ourselves become proof of the unseen whisper in the heart.

But too often we live not in faith but in the shadow of faith. We are, by our nature flawed, limited creatures and so it is inherent in our condition to be tempted by doubt, tempered with fatigue, tainted by cynicism. And that is why to live a life of faith we must also abide in hope. While faith directs us to things not yet seen, hope directs us to things of which we have been promised but have not yet attained. Hope does not mean wishing nothing bad happens in our lives. Rather, during those times when we are faced with grief, loss, and sorrow it is hope that gives our lives purpose, direction, and meaning. It is hope that saves us from our worst selves, the self that looks for a way out, the self that wants to close in on itself, the self that seeks to withdraw into lethargy. True

hope that is, hope stripped of illusion but fortified by faith, allows us, even in our darkest hours, to never lose sight of the inner light that illuminates each and every life including our own.

A life of faith and hope naturally directs us outward, brings us out of ourselves, and leads us to seek out others with which to share our lives. And it is, of course, love that builds the bridge from our anxious, isolated selves to the community of family, friends, and fellow travelers who ease our burdens and share our joys. It has been said that “we seek each other in love so the world itself may come into being.” And so it is in love that we find the embodiment of the truth that we seek. Love is, of course, our true vocation, it is our calling, the fulfillment of our nature. Surely it would be a great sadness, perhaps even the greatest sadness, to realize at the end of a life that one did not love as much as one could.

This message of the primacy of faith, hope and love, in finding one’s path in life is, I am sure, familiar to most of you. In fact, you might recall that it was a central theme in Willa Cather’s “Death Comes for the Archbishop” which was the first novel you read 4 years ago in Humanities.

I thought about testing you one last time by asking if you knew which book I was referring to but, to be honest, the thought of some of you failing a quiz in front of your family and friends on your graduation day was just too depressing to even contemplate.

At this point I very much want to tell you a story of a life changing moment in Humanities. I want to tell you a story of how the class, under my guidance and leadership, reached a profound new understanding of Willa Cather’s views on a life of faith, hope, and love. I very much want to tell you that kind of story. The problem is, I can’t remember anything like that ever actually happening. In fact, I even contacted the students who took Humanities from me to see if they could recall any such great teaching moments from that class. Not only couldn’t they remember such a moment, most of them told me they couldn’t even recall ever taking a class from me.

Nevertheless, I hope you can recall that Cather's novel led us to see that a life of integrity isn't accomplished in a single dramatic moment, rather it is forged daily, and often painstakingly, in the particular time, landscape, and circumstances in which we find ourselves.

We discern this truth not only in fictional narratives but also in the lives of family members, friends, loved ones, and mentors who touch our lives. Many of us at Earlham, student and faculty member alike, have been privileged to witness just such a life from Professor Gordon Thompson and the gift of 39 years of enlightened teaching, relentless truth-seeking, and unassuming integrity, that he has so generously given to this college. I know that I voice the sentiment of many others when I say that my life at Earlham has been enriched by Gordon's presence and will be diminished by his absence.

And by watching and studying the lives of those we wish to emulate we discover that a life of faith, hope, and love necessitates more than good intention or right feeling. What is needed, first and foremost, is willful action.

And so for those of you who seek to undertake such a life, my message is a simple one: Act as if you have faith and faith will be given, abide in hope and you will be sustained in hope, commit to love and, in the end, your own wish for love will never be left wanting.

Last December, I received a letter from a member of this class. The letter contained the writer's reflections on how quickly her time at Earlham had passed and on her sadness that she would soon part from those who had meant so much to her. And she ended her reflections with the words "It seems to me that it just isn't so."

And those very words came to mind as I began to write the last part of this talk, the part which begins with all of us, teacher, student, family member, friends, gathered here together in common celebration and which will end when we go our separate ways. It is the part when I must, when we all must, say good-bye to all of you.

It seems to me that it just isn't so.

But it is so. It is.

For one of the poignant mysteries of our existence together is that as we grow more fully into life we are both blessed with gains and equally, and although more harshly, blessed with losses. If we are to truly live in faith, hope, and love we must, as Andre Dubus writes, find a way to embrace all of our lives, even the losses, with gratitude and a whole heart.

And so let us celebrate our remaining moments together, in just that way, with gratitude and a whole heart. And this afternoon, when we are gathered for one final moment on this campus, under this sky, let our farewells be expressed with gratitude and a whole heart. And then, throughout our lives, when time and distance separate us from those who we once learned with, laughed with, and grew with, let us remember one another with gratitude and a whole heart.

It will be difficult for me, at times, to retain that sense of gratitude, that wholeness of heart when faced with the reality of a campus bereft of your presence, of activities replaced by memories of activities, of smiles, handshakes, and hugs replaced by email updates. And yet surely we have discovered during our time together on this Quaker campus that much that is good and holy takes place, not only in the fullness of a shared life but also in stillness, silence, and solitude.

And so if I can share just one last thing with you before you go, I'd like to tell you how I will fill some of those moments rendered empty by your absence.

In recent years it has been my custom at the end of the day, when the last class has ended and the last meeting has been brought to a close, to stop by the athletic fields to spend

some time watching the sports teams practice and even, at times, to join the cross country team on a late afternoon run.

But in the coming weeks and months when you are no longer here, at that same time of day I will instead experience the more muted joy of running alone. For whatever reason, perhaps simply it is the act of hope that is inherent in steadfastly approaching the receding horizon, I find that time conducive to prayer.

And so, as I run, it has become my habit to pray for my family, friends, and loved ones, some still with me, some long since gone, and then, last of all, pray for the students that have graced my life.

When I pray for former students I try to remember as many of them as possible, so that each name becomes a single bead on an ever lengthening prayer chain. And then, knowing the limitations of my memory, I pray for particular classes, such as this one, with which I have enjoyed a special relationship.

These prayers that you will never hear or see, uttered by a former professor on a solitary jog in the hushed stillness of the Indiana twilight may, I suppose, seem of little consequence to some. But for me, that prayer, simple as it is, is the best way I know of staying connected with distant students and keeping them alive in my heart. And those prayers provide me moments in which to bring my scattered, distracted self into focus with what is, in essence, a statement of faith, an act of hope, and most of all, an expression of love.

In ways I can't fully explain or even fathom, I believe that you will be touched by the prayers that I and others say for you. They may only be felt lightly, no more than a breath of hope, a tremor in your vision, or perhaps a whisper in your heart. But I nevertheless dearly hope that even the gentlest of touches will be enough to lead you to reciprocate the gift of prayer that you have received. And may it be, that in that mutual

exchange of distant blessings, we will all thereby be granted the grace to create and sustain the lives we were meant to lead.

Farewell class of 2005. Rest assured you will remain in our fondest thoughts, and most heart-felt prayers, for many, many years to come.