

EARLHAM COLLEGE

Earlham College
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Was It Good for You?*

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I am deeply grateful to the Class of 2006 for your invitation to speak this morning. You will always remember the day you graduated from college, and I am moved and honored that you asked me to be part of the occasion.

My aim this morning is simple. I want to celebrate the love you have found with the help of your teachers at Earlham College.

But I know well that you will object at the outset to the claim that Earlham helped you to find love. I can imagine the words and tone of this objection. I picture someone like Tyler Stewart or Mel Orr, both exceedingly difficult to persuade on certain topics, putting it this way:

“Steve, Steve, Steve, you’ve got to be kidding. Can you seriously imagine that Earlham helped us find love? Think for a minute, Steve. We knew all about love before we ever came to Earlham. Research has shown that every teenager has fallen in love eight times by the time he or she graduates from high school. And even supposing, even *supposing*, we hadn’t already experienced love, do you really think we’d come to someone like you to learn how to love? Steve, we know you care about the truth, so here it is. In the first place, what are your credentials? Do you have a Ph. D. in love. I don’t think so. Second, I’m afraid I have to bring up the matter of age. No doubt you did once fall in love. Maybe more than once. But that was a long time ago. A very long time ago. People spoke Latin then. I just don’t have much confidence that you remember what it’s like. And while I’m being blunt, just turn around and look at that bunch behind you. Not a whole lot more promising. So, Steve, I have to worry that you have spent so much time reading all those books, years and years by now, that you’ve forgotten what it’s like to fall in love and forgotten that college students already know that in any case.”

So I have two objections to respond to here. One is that I’m so old I’ve forgotten what it’s like to fall in love. The second is that students already know all there is to know about love when they come to Earlham.

In response to your first objection, that I'm too old to remember what it's like to fall in love, you're mistaken. In fact, I barely made it to college because I spent so much of my time in high school completely distracted, completely smitten. In Freshman Biology I submitted the very worst leaf collection ever submitted in the history of Noblesville High School. My teacher, Mr. Abel, thought I was making fun of the assignment and of him. I wasn't, really. It's just that my soul was possessed by Judi Rush. In my sophomore year it was Susie Nevitt. She is the reason I couldn't pass Geometry. I'd sit in class and stare at her absolutely captivating eyes. Too old to remember what it's like to fall in love? The truth is I still can't tick off the presidents of the United States because I couldn't read the textbook or listen in United States History class. This time it was Vicki Ogle's eyes. Ogle eyes. Ogle eyes. I was Ogelized. As the philosopher Socrates observed over two and a half millennia ago—back when philosophers didn't piddle around as they do now, but studied the truly important stuff—it's really all about the eyes (*Phaedrus* 255b-d). The eyes. The eyes. The eyes. And so I entered my junior year with a dismal academic record but a haunting host of Siren eyes in my head.

This was when I fell in love with Patty Goodwin. Now my parents were at their wits' ends trying to figure out what to do to get me through high school. But they found some hope in Patty. Patty was a straight A student, valedictorian of her senior class. My parents believed something I've heard our own professor of Psychology Nelson Bingham confirm, that the way to straighten an errant young person out is to get him or her to fall in love with someone who will provide the right influence. But I was the exception that proved the rule. My academic record did not much improve. I carefully explained to my parents that I fell in love with Patty's eyes, not her character or brain. In fact, so smitten have I been with Pat, now my wife of 37 years, that I still explain my neglect of school and life itself on the grounds of love. Why don't I get your papers back sooner? I'm looking into Pat's eyes. Why don't I have more insightful things to say about the books I teach? Pat's eyes. Why don't I pay attention in faculty meetings? Many things to blame here, but mostly Pat's eyes. Indeed, why am I rambling right now? Pat's eyes. So don't you tell me I don't know what it means to fall in love.

Now to your second objection, that you already knew all there is to know about love when you arrived on campus. If that is indeed your objection, Class of 2006, I must chide you for forgetting what one of your Humanities A books told you about love. In your very first semester at Earlham you studied Plato's *Symposium*.

Here you encountered a claim, put in the mouth of a wise old woman, that we misunderstand love when we limit it to the craving of one person for another. Diotima says that there are many instances of our erotic desire for what we think is good. Each is a kind of love. We love other human beings, we love making money, we love athletic activity, and we love truth, goodness, and beauty. It's just that we have restricted the word "love" to one of these, using it of the others only as a metaphor (205a-d).

But Diotima says that love of athletic activity or of truth, goodness and beauty is no metaphor. These are every bit as *real* as the love of one human being for another. Accordingly, we shouldn't worry that we can't *really* love athletic activity or truth, goodness, and beauty. For Diotima these loves are every bit as *real* as any other. In her view, we have lost sight of something terribly important. We have forgotten that we naturally love learning. *Really* love it.

Here is the heart and soul of my talk. Diotima argues that the pursuit of knowledge is an *erotic* activity and, on top of that, one that will make you a morally better person (212a). I submit that this is a huge claim, with profound implications for your life. And now, after four years of pursuing knowledge, it's time to assess the claim in the light of your experience. So, Class of 2006, after four years of this erotic pursuit of truth, goodness, and beauty, my question for you is, "Was it good for you?"

If I have had to borrow my question, "Was it good for you?" from the bedroom where one lover asks the other if the sex was good, that is because, again, we have lost sight of some part of reality. Of course it's embarrassing. Several students and faculty have asked me about the title of my talk, all with a knowing smile. We know, you and I, how to talk about sex, but we have forgotten how to talk about learning. We have forgotten, you and I, that learning too can be erotic and be good for us—maybe (believe it or not!) even better for us than sex.

So why is it that we've forgotten that we can love learning truth, goodness, and beauty? Social Psychologist Robert Levine thinks he has an answer. In his *The Power of Persuasion* he shows that we have obscured the fact that we can love truth, goodness, and beauty by over-rewarding ourselves for the effort required to acquire them. The logic is simple. We give so many rewards for learning that we unwittingly imply that it must not be a pleasurable thing in itself. We give ourselves so many *extrinsic* rewards for pursuing truth, goodness, and beauty in school that we lose sight of the *intrinsic* satisfactions of this pursuit. Levine describes an experiment in which nursery school students were divided into two groups. One group of students was given a reward for drawing pictures and a second group was not. A week later the first group, the students who received rewards, were drawing pictures less frequently and with less skill than the students who received no reward. Rewards diminished both the quantity and quality of the drawings. Levine concludes that the *extrinsic* rewards obscured the *intrinsic* satisfactions of drawing in these students. A psychology teacher himself, Levine notes that his own students cheer when he cancels a class and always want to know if the material in today's lecture will be on the exam (194-195). So here's what has happened:

- (a) We want students to love learning.
- (b) So we reward them for doing it.
- (c) The result is that they hate it.

But I know from personal experience it is possible to fall in love with learning in an Earlham classroom. Here is my evidence. In the spring of 2001 I fell in love. Once again. I had originally planned to spend this sabbatical studying Roman drama. And I did do this. Just before the semester began, entirely on a whim, I called Dan Graves to ask if I might sit in on his Bach course. Dan, ever the accommodating soul, claimed he'd be honored to have me. At times during the semester I know he wished he hadn't said that. For example, sometime in the second week of the semester it dawned on this slow learner that one assumption in this class was that the students could read music. Can you imagine! I am sure Dan worried that my presence would suggest to his students a sad decline in standards and rigor.

In fact, I had once known how to read music and was a musician in my junior high school band. But in high school I had to make a choice between continuing in the band and playing football. Someone told me that young women threw themselves at football players so I gave up music for, essentially, women. What my mentors failed to tell me was that any interest women had in football players did not extend to those who spent their time on the bench.

I had never intended to take Dan's class very seriously. I had imagined I'd attend most classes and sit in the back of the room taking in whatever caught my fancy. Two problems with that idea. One, that's not possible in a Dan Graves class, Two, Dan made me fall in love.

I recall first falling head over heels in love when Dan played and analyzed the *Fourth Brandenburg Concerto*. I remember leaving that class determined to have that CD in my hands within the hour, by hook or crook. But it was Bach's *Mass in B Minor* that completely claimed my soul. Possessed me. It was, and is, the most powerful experience of beauty I have ever had. I couldn't get enough of it. I still can't get enough of it. It led me to try to learn to read music again. I pulled a cheap electronic keyboard out of a closet, dusted it off, and tried to play Bach on it. I decided to try to learn to play the flute because it seemed so beautiful and easy to carry around. I pictured myself playing the flute music of the *Mass in B Minor* for appreciative students. Dan finally had to take me aside to caution me that it's not as easy to play the flute as it looks. People faint trying to do that. Then I decided I'd learn to play the piano. I told Pat I was bringing one home from the College. That never happened, but you see how smitten I was. By this time I was a full—if quite unimpressive—participant in the class. I even wrote a first draft of the term paper. In this paper I demonstrated a real and lasting truth—namely, that Dan Graves has a generous tolerance for well-intended but inept work. In spite of all, though, every day I grew more enchanted by Bach. My very favorite part of the *Mass in B Minor* is from the *Gloria* section.

This section is so indescribably moving to me that I'm going to have it played for you. It consists of a duet in which the tenor offers his affirmation of faith and then the soprano, hers. Then they ex-

change parts. Each sings the other's affirmation. Next they repeat the same affirmation but in reverse order. Finally they join in unison to sing together. The intimacy of the affirmations is matched by the developing spiritual intimacy of the two singers. I know Bach won't be everyone's idea of beautiful music and I know hearing it for the first time may leave you cold, but here it is.

I am not even going to try to tell you how beautiful I think this is. In one poem Emily Dickinson says "The fascinating chill that music leaves/ Is Earth's corroboration/ of Ecstasy's impediment" (1480). In another she cautions us not to try to analyze beauty but to equate it to Heaven (988). In both poems she echoes Plato's Socrates who says that beauty dislodges us from our normal procedures (*Phaedrus* 249c)—that's what *ecstasy* means—and is the most we can recall of the time when we lived among the gods. Indeed, Socrates makes my argument for me today when he asserts that beauty is the most erotic, *erasmiotaton*, thing we encounter (*Phaedrus* 250d).

But that is not all Socrates would see in this astonishing beauty we have heard. He argues that beauty not only seduces us with its erotic power but also makes us morally better than we were before we encountered it. I wonder how many person-to-person erotic encounters could make that claim. When one partner asks after sex, "Was it good for you?" the person wants to know if the sex was good. What I want to know is if our erotic craving for knowledge is good for us.

In her excellent interpretation of Plato's theory of love, Iris Murdoch thinks so. She begins by reminding us that falling in love is an emotionally violent, wrenching experience. Think back to the first time you fell in love. You found the "centre of [your] significance" "ripped" away from yourself. Your "dreamy ego" was "shocked into awareness of an entirely separate reality." You abandoned yourself and enslaved yourself to another (*The Fire and the Sun* 36). No wonder I couldn't study in high school!

Murdoch then goes on to explain how for Plato falling in love with something terribly beautiful can make us morally better. She sets falling in love with beauty over against the insistent demands of the ego. In Plato's *Phaedrus* Socrates portrays the ego as an ugly beast within us which *uses* others for its own satisfactions. It demands we make it the center of our lives. It requires all of our strength to control it (*Phaedrus* 253d-e). Murdoch identifies as instances of the beast obsession, prejudice, envy, anxiety, ignorance, greed, and neurosis (46-47). Beauty is the perfect antidote to the ego because when we fall in love with it, it redirects our attention outside ourselves. We thereby allow the ego less sway over our lives (Murdoch 36-37, 45, 46-47, 59). My soul is like a chariot according to Plato (*Phaedrus* 246a-b, 253d-256e). It can go in only one direction at a time. Instead of enslaving you to myself, I enslave myself to this beauty. For Murdoch, then, beauty of the kind we see in Bach's music turns our attention to something outside ourselves, we are *ecstatic*, and we make something outside ourselves, not our ego, our agenda. I recall reading the confession of an old man who said he looked

forward to death because death alone could free him from the relentless and obscene demands of his ego. Plato has a more optimistic view. Beauty gives us a new agenda in tension with the ego's agenda. It *liberates* us from the tyranny of the ego. But it's better than that.

Because our attention is fixed on an awesome beauty, we sense the place of our ego in the larger scheme of things. There may be any number of things that would be strong enough to rip the center of significance out of the self and to shock the ego into awareness of an entirely separate reality, but some are better than others. Bach puts our egos in their place by holding out for our attention something more compellingly beautiful than the small-minded and comparatively *ugly* claims of the ego. Notice that I am now calling my unethical ego, *ugly*. This easy shift from the moral to the aesthetic makes more sense in Greek than it does in English. The Greek adjective *kalos* means both beautiful and ethical. Bach's beautiful music is to the ancient Greek both aesthetically and morally powerful. It stands high above the ugly immoralities of my ego and seduces me from these to itself.

If Plato sounds naively optimistic to you, there are two things to keep in mind. One, Plato suggests that this reorientation of the ego in the face of beauty is a gradual process (*Phaedrus* 254d-e). It happens over time. It's a matter of the habits of the heart. Second, Plato is not claiming that everyone who has gone to college will be more moral on account of this experience. He would no doubt acknowledge that there are some well educated people who are perfectly evil.

But my love affair with Bach does more than this to make me a morally better person. If it brackets the demands of my ego as relative, it brackets some other claims as relative as well. I know very well that I looked foolish trying to play Bach on a ratty old keyboard. I could see that in Pat's eyes too. I am sure I sacrificed some dignity in the eyes of colleagues and students when they heard me gush about my love affair. After all, we expect Classics professors to display a staid, sober decorum. Others will reject my love affair as elitist. Maybe an affectation. Still others—and I am certain there are such people in this community—dismiss the arts as morally frivolous and peripheral to our central aims. Bach has driven a wedge between these views and me. But for Plato it's always good to be reminded that I can't rely on my community to tell me what is true, good, and beautiful.

If I allow it to, the society in which I live will program me or, as Socrates puts it, reduce me to a social animal, a bee or ant (*Phaedo* 82b). In freeing myself from the tyranny of society I risk being called mad, but sometimes this madness is good and healthy (*Phaedrus* 249c-e).

In his *Phaedrus* Plato suggests that the chief task for moral education is to enslave the ego, which seeks to enslave others, and to liberate the intelligence, which will free us from the tyranny of the ego and from the tyranny of society (256a-b, 249c-e). Insofar as my encounter with Dan Graves and with Bach has done these things, it has been terribly good for me.

But no mention of what's been good for me at Earlham can omit you. The world's best Humanities A class in 2002 made me think I could teach. My Humanities B class the next semester punctured that sweet illusion, but nonetheless stayed with me through a thousand pages of *Don Quixote*. If the greatest peril of age is complacency, you have worked to keep me young. You have shown me I still don't know how to teach a Plato dialogue well. You remind me that I never quite get a discussion right. I have more work to do to persuade Lauren McKown that Virgil is as great as Homer. I have more work to do to persuade Gav Eggert that *Oedipus Tyrannus* is antiquity's greatest play. Paul Christiansen will cut me no slack in details about the past. Toby McNulty demands my clearest logic. A number of you have made Ovid a greater puzzle after our many discussions than he was before. I count it as a blessing of God, an act of grace, that I have had the amazing good fortune to work with Earlham students.

But what about you? Has Earlham been good for you? Have your four years at Earlham helped you fall in love with learning? I am convinced that there are Bach-like beauties everywhere at Earlham. There is the elegance of a scientific explanation. There is the explanatory clarity that makes sense of the chaos of the past. There are beautiful poems such as the Emily Dickinson poems we heard this morning. There is the beautiful sound of a foreign language well spoken. There is the beautiful sentence that says so well what couldn't be said in any other way. There is the sharp clarity—which is some kind of beauty—that anyone who writes a good paper achieves. Yes, you heard it here first: even writing a good paper can be an erotic activity, and one that is morally good for you. If it has happened that you too fell in love at Earlham—with ideas, with writing, with music, with logic, with the laboratory, with organizing, with volunteering, with athletics, with performing on stage, with all else that we encounter here, count that as a blessing. I cannot imagine a better thing happening to you than such loves. Let's us celebrate these love affairs.

And if you have fallen in love in one or more of these ways, has it been good for you? This is something you must answer for yourself. But if Plato is right, I have to believe your pursuit of these loves affairs has over time worked to tame your ego and to measure its claims against an ever-higher and more compelling standard. Beyond that, your love affairs may have bracketed the claims of a dull, leaden orthodoxy that dismisses your passion as embarrassingly irregular and out of step. That too is cause for celebration.

But now you leave this seductively erotic college. Whatever erotic experiences you have had here—of the kind I celebrate—will have established a counterweight in your soul in tension with the claims of the ego and society. There is no promise of blissful joy in this tension. Like me, you will fight to resist the ugly claims of the ego, and sometimes you will lose that fight. You will fight to resist the claims of society too, and sometimes you will win when you shouldn't and lose when you should win. But through it all these erotic relationships you have developed have the possibility of enabling you to make good and strong choices.

What is next for you? I once heard Gordon Thompson advise a student who was anxious about the next step in her life to remember what it was she loved doing and to have faith that pursuing that would earn her a living and secure her a life as well. When some years later I heard Gordon say his passion for reading was erotic, I understood that he himself had taken the advice he had given the student. And today I cannot think of better advice to offer you. Review your four years here and ask yourself what you've learned to love. Then have faith that pursuing that will bring you a livelihood and a life as well.

So, like the nursery school students who kept on drawing—who in fact drew more beautifully without the distractions of rewards because they loved what they were doing—I hope you keep on drawing for the rest of your lives. I believe it will be good for you.

*I am grateful to John Howell for his helpful suggestions on an early draft of this talk.