

EARLHAM COLLEGE

Earlham College
Baccalaureate Address
May 8, 2010

The Tyranny of Certainty

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Thank you, Callie and Jonathan, for that wonderful introduction. Thank you, Class of 2010, for the great honor you have bestowed upon me by giving me the chance to share these words with you.¹ And thank you to all of you who are here to mark this beautiful moment. In the finest traditions of the academy, I hope you will bear with me as I deliver this speech to you today in Latin: *Quantum voluptatis praestat hoc glorifico die in hac schola doctrinae superiori dedita convenire*. All right, I'm kidding. I hear there's a rumor going around among the students, a story that holds that one faculty member, who shall remain nameless, once joked that if I had taken his or her class when I was an Earlham student, as just one small addition to all the excellent courses I got to take, I'd probably be teaching at Harvard now (where they do in fact give the speech in Latin). Now this jesting exchange probably never happened, but if it had, I would have told him or her, "Thank you very much, but you know, I am exactly where I want to be. This is, after all, where I'm from: my beloved alma mater."

The title of my talk today, "The Tyranny of Certainty," comes from the fact that I wanted to speak in some sense to the complex emotions the graduates might be experiencing today. I mean not just the utter relief and jubilation that attend having completed everything the institution told you you needed to do, to be handed those diplomas and all they signify; but also: the anxiety of not knowing what comes next. How can you possibly answer that question everyone has been asking you with increasing persistence in the last few months: "What are you going to do with the rest of your life?" That is one anxiety, but more profoundly, you might also be struggling with the suspicion that a world you know is about to be lost. Perhaps you have the sense that you might not even be able to imagine what it is you might be losing. Perhaps you are wondering how to traverse the space between the "already-there" and the "yet-to-come" and whether that space can even be traversed.² These anxieties arise in part by the design of this moment called graduation.

The weight of received wisdom passed down in generations of prototypical graduation speeches holds that you are about to cross a line, make a definitive break with all that has gone before, and venture forth into a world that is said to be full of possibility. That's the standard line. Actually, it's true that in one sense you are indeed about to cross a line and enter into terrifying worlds that will surprise you. (Of course I am talking about the new post-graduation ritual of friending your now former professors on Facebook and maybe seeing a side of them you wished had remained hidden.)

¹ This speech is dedicated to the Class of 2010 and in memory of Francis Bossuyt and Laura Trent, both of Earlham College Class of 1990.

² Judith Butler, *The Psychic Life of Power: Theories in Subjection* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1997), 18.

The standard narrative holds that there will be no return, no turning back. I stand before you today as reminder that not only *is* there return, but — perhaps — there might be nothing *but* return. It is the *form* of return that remains uncertain.

You, the Class of 2010, might not know just how meaningful this moment is for me, for it was exactly 20 years ago that I was sitting where you are sitting now. (20 years next month, actually, since Earlham was on trimesters then.) {I am tempted to say that the weather today is making the case for trimesters. But I won't say that.} And I never imagined, and could not have imagined, that I would be standing in this position now. As I attempt to imagine what *you* might be feeling right now, I am pulled into my own attempt to remember — to reconstruct, retroactively, a sense of anticipation from long ago.

I have a memory of a strange and singular moment on one of my first days on campus as a student. I was standing on the edge of The Heart directly opposite Earlham Hall, and listening to the music blasting from a window in EH. (This is a true story.) The lyrics streaming across The Heart said: “Well the first days are the hardest days, don't you worry anymore. ‘Cause when life looks like easy street, there is danger at your door.”³ Strangely comforting lyrics for a first-year student to be hearing. (Thank you, Robert Hunter, lyricist for the Grateful Dead.) Now, maybe I should not have attributed such significance to this lyric at this moment; after all, anyone who was here in the '80s knows that the sound of the Grateful Dead was just part of the landscape of campus at that time. And I grant that maybe I am remembering a moment that was not even in my first days here; perhaps it happened much later, or not at all.⁴ But there is more to this memory than being comforted by a random lyric, for what I most remember is having an eerie sensation coming over me, which was that as I was taking in this scene — with the loud music on the sun-drenched day, with the frisbees flying, and the hackysack circle going, as the parents and the newly arriving students were carrying lamps and beanbag chairs and typewriters — this eerie sensation was coming over me, and I was thinking to myself, even before experiencing Earlham, “When it's time to leave this place, I am going to miss this place.”

Talk about a problematic a priori assertion. Granted, I did have some experience with Earlham. I had just returned from Wilderness, after all. {Water, baby, all the way. The long-standing dispute between Water Wilderness and Mountain Wilderness is what we refer to in Peace Studies as an “intractable conflict.”} So, I knew Sara Penhale, and she is someone I knew I'd miss when it was time for me to graduate. And Chuck Yates is a long-time friend of my family, and face it: who doesn't love Chuck? But I didn't yet know Steve Butler, Dan Rosenberg, Mickey White, Michael Birkel, Trayce Peterson, Wes Miller, Mark Pearson, Bill Buskirk, Brent Smith, Cosmic Ray, Jonathan Diskin, or Bonita Washington-Lacey, among other notables whose presence has spanned the time from then to now. Nevertheless, there I was with that eerie and overwhelming sensation: “When it's time to leave this place, I am going to miss this place.” Indeed, as I now remember this moment I am certain that

³ Grateful Dead, “Uncle John's Band,” *Workingman's Dead*, 1970.

⁴ Jacques Derrida, *Spectres of Marx: The State of the Debt, the Work of Mourning and the New International*, trans. Peggy Kamuf (New York: Routledge, 1994).

I was quite sure — devoid of all uncertainty — of the state I would feel when I left. The seeming certainty of that statement was part of its eeriness. (After all, I didn't know *what* I was going to miss, only that I would be missing *something*.) But turned around, it could be said that it was a moment of embrace of uncertainty, for what I was telling myself I was surely going to miss was nothing but a giant question mark.

That might be appropriate, for in the years since I first left this place, I have come to see that what I have most loved about Earlham College is that it is a space of questioning, and a rare one at that. But, I doubt that when I was so certain I would miss this place I even saw Earlham as a space of questioning, as a space in which uncertainty not only thrives but also is cultivated.

Now, I know quite well that some of you have felt tormented by the impositions of the academy, the rules — I am quite sure it's not just PAGS majors who have felt this — but say what you will, the academy is a place where questioning is sanctioned. The academy can bolster the workings of the — quote — “real world,” to be sure; but when it's at its best, the academy stands in an opposition to “the real world.” What is “the real world,” after all, but so-called common sense, the “known,” with its certain unfolding, “incessantly reinstituted,” reproducing the status quo? If it were otherwise, how could we all speak so freely of its workings with such easy authority? What allows this “certain” unfolding, this continual repetition of moment reproducing predictable moment is certainty itself, the anticipation and expectation of sense.⁵

Edward Said has said, of the current historical moment with the imposition of its all too certain order, “Never has there been a consensus so difficult to oppose nor so easy and logical to capitulate to unconsciously.”⁶ For Said, intellectuals must enact a commitment to justice, so he places the responsibility for the opposition to this untoward consensus squarely with the academy, demanding that the academy be the place of questioning. Intellectual engagement on the side of justice requires responding to the indicative mode of the status quo — the world of “as is” — in the voice of the subjunctive — the voice that speaks both “what if” and “as if.”⁷

At Earlham, we take this responsibility seriously, and as a Quaker institution of higher learning, we take this questioning even further. Quakers of course have been known for taking action on the side of justice, which might read to the world outside as though Quakers believe that they are already equipped with the answers, or, at the very least, that they have arrived *easily* at the place from which they come to action. But this reading does not do justice to the primacy of place that the question holds in the Quaker tradition.

Who else, after all, spends such time and such love as a Quaker college on that peculiar art form known as the query? Queries are one form through which we challenge the status quo, marked as it is by closure, with opening.

⁵ Butler, *Psychic Life of Power*, 122, 124.

⁶ Edward W. Said, *Culture and Imperialism* (New York: Vintage Books, 1993), 323.

⁷ Victor Turner, “Body, Brain and Culture,” *Performing Arts Journal*, Vol. 10, no. 2 (1986), 31-33.

This art form of the query — and it is an art form because it has to both direct our attention and allow engagement of a range of possibility — arises from long-standing tradition within Quakerism, rooted in the very understanding of access to and experience of the divine.

Robert Barclay, in 1675, in speaking of the search for knowledge of the divine, noted the importance of holding open possibility. He warned against allowing ourselves to be lured into a “false peace, and a certain confidence, which is strengthened by the mind’s unwillingness to enter again into a new doubtfulness, or the former anxiety of a new search.”⁸ Nearly three centuries later, Quaker mystic Rufus Jones would speak of “expectation” rather than “faith,” but it was a kind of expectation *without* expectation because for Jones, the “still small voice” does not bring a plan, but rather a vital urge to life, in all its messy complexity.⁹

Indeed, the still small voice is anything but certain and anything but expected. Thus, Quakers have long understood the connection between the willingness to stray from the path of what is expected, on the one hand, and the possibility of transformation toward greater justice, on the other. When we hold too closely, with certainty, to what is expected — including to what we ourselves expect — this constrains both what is invited and what is allowed. This constraint can operate so severely that it can paradoxically alter what might have arrived — as surprise, as difference, as change — transforming it into the utterly predictable, more of the same. Thus we must constantly, ceaselessly, be questioning, and opening as many spaces as possible for questioning to occur.

Responding to Said’s call, we want to stand in opposition to the — quote — “real world,” but to do so without relying upon the imposition of a boundary, for the academy fails when we maintain a boundary between this within and that without, when we wall ourselves, safely, within the so-called bubble, rather than seeking to expand the seam of questioning.

So, as much as Earlham rightfully prides itself on engaging the world, we recognize that this isn’t just about our stance in relation to the world “out there.” We recognize the responsibility to turn back on ourselves, to interrogate ourselves, always seeking to unsettle our own assumptions.

This becomes a tedious world indeed if we move through it confident that we know exactly what is around the corner, and all the endings to all the stories. Yet this is more than just about breaking the tedium of the status quo. When we allow ourselves the comfort of certainty, and arm ourselves with answers, we are ostensibly only treading known geographies, but we are about to enter a terrain that is dangerous — and deleteriously so.

Therefore, when we open the query, we must also ask ourselves: how then do we listen? Are we writing the ending before the script has played out? Or, just as detrimental, are we placing ourselves in the role of director, writing the script for others? (Insert self-deprecating joke here about being director of PAGS and having made the mistake, more times than I can count, of trying to play the role of director in other realms of life, and trying to write scripts for other people. I meant to write a joke there, but didn’t manage to pull it off, so that will have to suffice.) If we insist on making others speak in a way we can apprehend, if we demand that our interlocutors tread on ground that is

⁸ Barclay quoted in Dean Freiday, ed., *Barclay’s Apology in Modern English* (Alburtis, PA: The Hemlock Press, 1967), 26.

⁹ Rufus Jones, *The Testimony of the Soul* (New York: The Macmillan Co., 1936), 29-31.

comfortable for us, this is the stilling of life itself, for movement arises only from the manifestation of difference. The one who listens well plays the jester to the tyrant, and tries to manifest difference, shifting certain ground into interrogatory terrain, hinting, “You are not where you thought you were,” and asking, “What is it that you are missing?”

So, just as we should try to move through life uncertain of the endings of the stories, neither should we allow ourselves to be certain of what someone will say before she says it, nor even that we know all that she has said once she says it.

We must listen for the words *under* the words. What is it that remains unspoken, cannot be spoken? What *might* we be missing? Of course we can never know all that we are missing, but holding ourselves in a place of uncertainty is the radical requirement for the opening toward possibility that Barclay calls us to. (And please understand that an acceptance of uncertainty need *not* preclude *clarity*, as long as that clarity is constantly tested.)

Quakers have long understood the importance of allowing for this difference, challenging the world not with an insistence upon sameness, homogeneity, and replication of the taken for granted, but rather with an appreciation for the unique, for within the processes of the collective wisdom-seeking that give rise to consensus, it is *difference* to which we must listen most closely (and seek neither to shut down through exclusion nor include through unfaithful translation). Difference must be allowed to remain in the form of difference, and not translated.

We have tried, together here at Earlham College, to find ways to learn to practice that difference, and not simply seek to reproduce the tried and already known. One recent attempt at this undertaken by the Peace & Global Studies majors, among most of the seniors here, was their senior thesis. In the quest to help them make an original claim, I told them one approach was to write a thesis that they themselves found surprising. “It should shock you!” I coaxed them, deluding myself into thinking that this would somehow be taken as potentially emancipatory as I intended it to be. I told them, “You already know where you stand. I want you to tread on ground you’ve never covered, try to go into a space that is or might be utterly groundless and see if you can build a grounds under you as you go.” Well, this was obviously a scene of trepidation. One student responded to this trepidation with a very clever question of her own, saying, “Well, how are we supposed to be surprised by our own words once we conceive of the idea? As soon as I write it, it can’t be a surprise anymore.” (These are Zen-master poets, our students. And yes, that was Faye Rowell.)

Alas, as much as we might try to make the Earlham experience an enjoyable one, I think we all (and I mean all of us, on both sides of the stage) share the sneaking suspicion that for the most important kinds of learning to take place, *discomfort* is required. Learning must push us beyond our known boundaries, and beyond certainty, which is never comfortable. Yet it is also the case that learning has little to do with comfort because frequently, learning is far less about acquisition and far more about loss. As we learn, we shed the assumptions that sustained our former selves, and in this loss we become more complex, even to ourselves. Does this *sound* like a pleasant process? It isn’t! But hey, here at Earlham we pride ourselves on from learning from our students, so believe me, those of us on this side of the stage repeatedly subject ourselves to multiple forms of discomfort as well. We are all in this together.

So Earlham strives to encourage a comfort with the discomfort that arises from the acceptance of complexity and ambiguity, but it is more than ambiguity with which I hope you will make a certain peace: it is the very ineffable, that which resists translation and cannot even be expressed in words, let alone captured.

When I was 20 years old, a close friend of mine told me: happiness is the perfect balance between sadness and joy.¹⁰ While I was unsure of their meaning, his words struck me deeply, and I wrote them in my journal. Why was he making “joy” only a *part* of “happiness,” two words I had believed to be synonymous and thus perfectly coterminous in their meaning? I think, now, that he was describing a perfect moment on the edge of melancholy, and it might have been that which was giving me such an eerie sensation as I stood on The Heart that day.

Some of the most beautiful moments in life, the most painful and the most profound, are those in which we find ourselves longing for the very thing we are experiencing, because of our awareness that that which we are experiencing is shifting, changing, disappearing before our very eyes, moving beyond our grasp, becoming lost to us. This is the perfect balance of sadness and joy, and I think it arises from an acceptance of incessant loss, bearing the loss in the fullness of the loss, as “permanently inaccessible,” not insisting on capture, allowing ourselves to miss.

There is a haiku that speaks to this. And even though it’s my favorite haiku, I haven’t been able to track down the author of the poem. For a long time I was sure I had heard it on NPR many years ago, and that it was read by a male voice, but now, not being able to locate it, not even with the power of the series of tubes comprising “the Internets,”¹¹ I concede it’s possible I dreamt it. The speaker of this haiku is a traveler, just passing through. Tokyo is not his home, although it’s become a kind of home, and he is about to leave it. He is staring at Mt. Fuji, moments before he leaves, and he projects himself into the future, into his own absence from that place, collapsing the anticipation of that future moment into the present one he is experiencing. And he writes:

“Even now, looking
at Mt. Fuji in the rain,
how I miss Tokyo.”

Yes, you are about to leave this place, and the world you have known here is now becoming lost to you. You might not know what you will be missing, but do not despair, for all is not lost, and there will be return.

In closing, I will remind you that from your first days here, you’ve been witness to a very short story, seemingly simple, but one that speaks powerfully to the beauty of open-endedness, rather than the closure of a certain ending. The story to which I refer is the one written on the fireplace in Saga: “They gathered sticks, and kindled a fire, and left it burning.” There’s something I have always loved about that. It starts with two certainties, in standard narrative form, and then ends without ending, pregnant with possibility, an homage to potentiality.

¹⁰ Pio Celestino, February 1989.

¹¹ With gratitude to Jon Stewart and Stephen Colbert for keeping alive in the collective memory these references to the Internet by Ted Stevens and George W. Bush, respectively.

The form of the return is anything but certain. One of you will probably be giving this speech in exactly 20 years. Maybe it will be Julianna Renzetti, who had the courage and the tenacity to major in both Philosophy and PAGES and thus has more than proven her commitment to questioning. Maybe it will be Andrés Guzmán, whose classes students will covertly be canceling on April Fool's Day. {[To Andrés]: I told you I was going to call you out.} Maybe it will be Brian Buesing, whom students and colleagues alike will still know as "Sunshine."

This is my wish for you, as you leave this place: May your stories be complex, may they change with each telling, and may you never know the ending. (And when they ask you what you're going to do with the rest of your life, don't feel the need to answer, certainly with not any certainty, but you might say, "Good question.") Trust uncertainty, to bring you to clarity. Keep the fire burning.