

Earlham

COLLEGE

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“Are We There Yet?”

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Good morning. I want to begin by thanking the seniors for the invitation to speak at this Baccalaureate service, in effect to have “the last word” on behalf of my faculty colleagues. I consider this one of the highest honors I’ve received in my 41 years at Earlham.

When I was a child, in the 1950’s, we had little money for entertainment and we did not even have a TV until I was 12. We did buy a family car when I was about 8 years old and one of the highlights of our week was the Sunday afternoon drive. We would set out to explore the area and either I or my younger brother would often utter the question so well-known to parents — “Are we there yet?”

I thought of that question as I reflected on what to say to all of you today. As Sharon Daloz Parks has noted, we often think metaphorically of life as a journey. But what kind of journey is it? Some journeys, like our Sunday afternoon drives, are essentially wanderings, with no actual destination, other than eventually going back home again. Other journeys do have a goal. We might set out to visit a friend or family member for example. Or, for those of us who are fans of *The Lord of the Rings*, we might engage in an epic journey with a purpose but with the intention or hope of returning home. Bilbo Baggins’ memoir was entitled “There and Back Again.” Not all journeys, however, have the intention of ever coming back. In 1872, some of my ancestors left Germany to eventually settle in Milwaukee, never again to go back to their birth home. So, what kind of journey fits your life?

The journey metaphor, however, does not refer primarily to geography. Rather, it has to do with who we are and how we live our lives. I am a developmental psychologist, which means that I tend to think about individuals in terms of how their thoughts, feelings and behaviors change over time. This process of human development is, I think, the most wondrous, complex phenomenon there is. We psychologists study this scientifically, from the outside. Through the miracle of self-consciousness, however, each of us can experience and reflect upon this amazing process subjectively, from the inside.

For the most part, we take for granted today that we experience development throughout our lives. That was not always the case. One hundred years ago, Freud described human beings as reaching a stable identity in the teen years that tended to remain stable throughout our lifetime. In 1950, Erik Erikson published a book, *Childhood and Society*, in which he described eight stages of our identity that extend over the whole lifespan, viewing humans as being on a **lifelong** developmental journey, essentially, the journey on which you find yourselves today.

It is important to note that Erikson, and indeed, many psychologists who followed him, simply extrapolated the stage model of development, which had proven useful in describing **child** development, into the adult years. They made the assumption that each stage built upon its predecessor in linear fashion, constituting an orderly sequence of issues, each of which had to be resolved as a basis for grappling with the next one. So, for example, adolescents confronted the issue of identity formation, which, in turn, allowed them to address the challenge of intimacy in young adulthood.

Subsequent to Erikson, a number of other psychologists have described and analyzed specific life stages. Most recently, Jeffrey Arnett has been a leading proponent of a developmental stage that he terms “emerging adulthood,” focusing on the years of 18-29 as a distinct time in which individuals find themselves “in-between” the status of “child” and that of full adulthood. This is the time in which all of you seniors now find yourselves. It is characterized by the challenge of finding independence from one’s family of origin and of accepting increasing responsibility for one’s own actions. This is a time of crafting one’s identity in at least three realms — love, work, and worldviews. Arnett indicates that the emerging adult years, with their relative absence of “enduring role commitments” allow for a degree of “experimentation and exploration” that is more difficult in later years. In terms of the issue of developing one’s worldview (including a philosophy of life, religious/spiritual beliefs, political values), Arnett sees emerging adults as deepening their commitments to beliefs and values that are important to them.

To his credit, Arnett did acknowledge that this distinct period of emerging adulthood may exist only in industrialized cultures that permit or encourage “a prolonged period of independent role exploration during the late teens and twenties.” His theory, however, is still embedded in the stage model of human development. He has simply inserted a **new** stage within the life cycle. Other theorists have offered a quite different view of development. Arthur Chickering, for example, depicted development during the young adult years as organized around seven “vectors” of change — achieving competence, managing emotions, becoming autonomous, establishing identity, freeing interpersonal relationships, clarifying purposes and developing integrity. The key idea in Chickering’s model was that development along these vectors or paths occurs not in sequence (as with stages) but in parallel, with change occurring at differing rates and in different patterns simultaneously throughout the young adult years. Even Chickering, though still assumed that there is a point at which development along these vectors is sufficient that one can reasonably be considered (and consider him/herself!) an “adult.”

So, now, with these theories in mind, I’d like to talk with you about **your** life journey. Four years ago, for example, most of you arrived at Earlham ready to pursue your education, with 83% of you expressing the intention to seek a graduate degree. Many of you had a specific field of study in mind (and some of you have actually stuck with that original major!). It is likely that, like most emerging adults, you did not (and many of you still may not) consider yourself to be fully an “adult.” So, what is it that will lead you (or did lead you) to embrace that status? And what role did you expect Earlham to play in that process? What brought you to Earlham?

There is a lot of discussion these days about how students do (or should) select a college. Much of that focuses on preparation for a career, preferably a career that will provide for the standard of living that one desires. For most, this involves money. One of the prevalent concepts in this discussion is that of ROI (return on investment). This is typically couched in terms of how specific colleges compare in terms of lifetime earnings vs. tuition costs.

Now, let me be clear. I am not suggesting that preparing for a career and finding a job that fits with your values (which **might** include earning a lot of money) are unimportant in choosing a college. Indeed, this is fundamental. It is analogous to constructing a foundation when building a house. You definitely want a solid and durable foundation. That foundation, however, is not the house in which you will live. The details and design of that house rest upon that foundation, but those details are what give real meaning to that house as a place to live one's life. That is also true of one's career. This is not to say that your career and the meaning of your life are separate things. In his inaugural address, President David Dawson posed two questions that are at the heart of pursuing a liberal arts education. How will you make a living? And how will you live your life? Each of us must work out how these two relate. I will confess that my career has been and remains a crucial part of my identity. But, my identity entails far more — marital partner, father, son, brother, friend, civic participant, Quaker, citizen — and, hopefully, yours will too.

I want to suggest, though, that the payoff on your investment goes far beyond monetary terms. It turns out that Payscale.com surveys graduates of over 1000 institutions regarding the salaries they earn just out of college and at mid-career. On this measure, at first glance, Earlham does not fare very well. Indeed, in 2013, we ranked 816 out of 1058 institutions. As commentator, Paul Harvey, used to say, let's look at the rest of the story. Payscale.com also asks respondents to rate the meaningfulness of the work they do. On that measure, Earlham does very well. We ranked number 23 out of those 1058 institutions! There is more to consider in determining the payoff of your college education than simply lifetime income.

Here's a thought experiment. A few weeks ago, the Powerball Lottery prize stood at over \$500 million. Imagine that you won that lottery. My point here is for you to imagine winning so much money that you truly would not **need** a job to earn a living. Ever. My question is what would you then do? Would you pursue a career? If so, why? What if you had won that money before coming to college? Would you have chosen to spend four years studying? If so, would you have chosen the same field of study?

Let's assume that you **would** still have chosen to come to Earlham and to major in the field you did. I'd like to shift gears now to focus on the journey before you. Regardless of how you think of that journey, what will you take with you as you set out? I want to say, initially, that you will certainly take some of the stuff you brought with you when you came to Earlham almost four years ago. Comedian George Carlin had a very funny piece on "Stuff" that we accumulate in our lives — stuff that we keep in our own rooms and houses, a sub-set of that stuff that we take with us on short trips, stuff that we have left at our family's home (does that sound familiar?). But Carlin was talking about physical stuff, stuff that we might eventually sort out and discard (though that's often a difficult process). I want to focus instead on psychological stuff — experiences, memories, lessons we've learned, feelings. That kind of stuff accumulates, but we cannot store it somewhere; it is always with us wherever we go. So, what will you take with you as you travel beyond Earlham?

Some stuff really is part of our human heritage. All of us are endowed with the twin needs to know and to belong. Those motivate us intellectually, socially and emotionally. We are curious beings and we thrive best in relationship with others. We have the potential for empathy which can enable us to care about others as the foundation for supporting one another and acting cooperatively. We also possess the distinctive human capacities for imagination and plasticity. Those powerful tools enable us, through symbolic thinking, to envision a reality (be it a sense of self, social relationships or a physical object) that does not now exist and to act to create that reality. Concerning imagination, my favorite quote of the year is from the movie “The Imitation Game.” “Sometimes it is the people who no one imagines anything of who do the things that no one can imagine.”

Finally, In addition to these universals, each of you brought to Earlham you own unique set of values, absorbed from your family, friends, and the environment as you grew up. Earlham has, hopefully, helped you to clarify and deepen those values, but we cannot take credit for them. For example, your class attributed higher importance than your national peer group to promoting racial understanding, protecting the environment, and understanding other cultures. So, you brought a lot with you to Earlham (and, indeed, your values were almost certainly part of why you chose to be here).

On the other hand, it is our hope that you leave the College with much more in your psychological luggage. First, your Earlham experience should have **equipped you to make choices** in your life. This is one of our most precious human capabilities. Humans do (and must) make choices and the Earlham experience is aimed at being a garden in which that capacity is cultivated and nurtured. Choice entails a blend of knowledge, values, and caring.

We typically think first of college as a place to build knowledge. And it is. Each of you knows far more now than you could even have imagined four years ago. That knowledge is, to some extent, cognitive, consisting in **facts, theories, methods for knowing**. But, it is also **experientially-based knowledge**, growing out of your life beyond the classroom. This includes knowledge of yourself. Such knowledge can be the basis for affirming oneself, which is fundamental to interacting positively with others. As the emergency instructions on airplanes say, you should put on your own oxygen mask in an emergency before trying to help your child with her/his mask. The Christian injunction to “Love thy neighbor as thyself” contains this wisdom — namely that one should (indeed, must) love oneself in order to love your neighbor. Moreover, such self-knowledge will also be a basis for developing a sense of meaning and purpose in your life beyond emerging adulthood. A successful liberal arts education will have helped each student to greater clarity about her/his core values. Such clarity will serve you well when life presents new and often unanticipated opportunities. As Louis Pasteur said, “Chance favors the prepared mind.”

Another significant form of knowledge is an understanding of others that derives from real-life engagement with diversity, whether that engagement comes through life together on campus, volunteer work, internships, off-campus programs, or other formal and informal activities. You’ve learned to take the perspective of others and that **perspective-taking** fosters empathy that can lead to more than mere tolerance; it can lead to **respect** for differences that will serve you well in the future. One of my former students from 20 years ago paid me a high compliment at last year’s alumni reunion. She is now a junior high teacher and often shares with her students advice I gave

her. When you encounter someone who says something with which you disagree, ask yourself, “Why would a reasonable person think that?” Of course, understanding and respect must manifest themselves in our actions. Hence, another valuable skill that you might be taking on your journey would be that of active **engagement** and even collaboration with those who are different from you. Margaret Benefiel recently noted that the battle between good and evil is played out inside each of us. She shared an old parable in which a wise man tells his grandson, “Within each of us lives a good wolf and a bad wolf, fighting a battle.” When the grandson asks, “Which one will win?” his grandfather replies, “The one I feed.”

In describing emerging adulthood, Sharon Daloz Parks emphasizes the importance of “mentoring communities.” It is important for each of us to have a psychological home (or a set of homes). She contends that humans, as social animals, cannot develop into healthy adults without the support of others who serve as mentors. While the Earlham experience might be viewed in terms of a multi-layered ecosystem of **mentoring communities**, the longer-term issue is that of helping you to gain competence in finding, connecting with, and even creating such mentoring communities in your life beyond Earlham. In the digital age, not all of those communities may involve face-to-face interaction and, indeed, you may continue over a distance some support networks that have sustained you over the past four years.

Another tool that you’ll be taking on your journey is that of **integrative thinking**; the ability see connections among seemingly separate elements, to see the big picture. This is at the heart of the often-cited liberal arts goal of critical thinking, allowing you to identify underlying assumptions and implications. Integrative thinking is also the basis of bridging the gap between theory and application. One of my graduate school professors, Urie Bronfenbrenner, used to say that “the validity and the vitality of scholarly research derives from its ability to address real-world problems.” Earlham’s mission statement commits us to the goal of “improving human society” and our graduates are the primary means by which we aim to do that.

Time does not permit me to offer a full account of the “stuff” that we hope you are taking with you on your journey. We know that you will encounter many new experiences on that journey. The world of the 21st century is one of inescapable engagement with the world’s pluralisms, of increasing tension between the forces of globalization and the shifting realities of nation-states, of challenges to sustainability, of growing socio-economic disparities, and more. Moreover, the rate of change is accelerating so that each generation is encountering new issues that were not even imagined by their grandparents. Will advances in the health sciences succeed in conquering the aging process? Will exploration of deep space lead to contact with non-Earth life forms? Will we reach the point of singularity in machine intelligence? Will traditional human categories of identity be fully transcended?

When I was a child, I was told that I needed to get an education to “prepare for the future.” I did not really know what that meant, but when I envisioned the future, I conjured up an image of a powerful storm approaching from a distance, with tumultuous dark clouds and flashes of lightning. I inferred that I needed to prepare for that storm by fastening the windows and taking shelter. But, I have come to understand that the future is not some independent “thing” that is coming at us and to which we simply must adapt. Adaptation is essential, but merely adapting will not be sufficient. Rather, our human choices (individually and collectively) will **create** that future and education is the means by which we can do that.

And so, we come to the sobering, but exciting, implication of this reflection on the journey each of you faces. It really is up to you! So, to the question, “Are we there yet?” I must answer, as parents have always responded. “No, not yet.” But, in the spirit of honesty and integrity, I must add that you may be facing a new paradigm for thinking about the human life cycle, one in which there is literally no “there” there! The settled status of “adult” may prove elusive; the features of emerging adulthood identified by Arnett — exploration and fluidity of identity, shifting worldviews, changing relationships, pursuing new careers — may be the “new normal” of adult life.

The challenge you may confront may not be one of adapting to the established system, but one of **changing** the system. One of our Earlham grads from the Class of 2007 wrote to me that she went from Earlham directly into the teeth of the Great Recession and when she could not find a job, she demonstrated a resilience that we hope to foster in our students and **created** her own job. Not everyone can do that, but you may find opportunities on your journey to re-shape things.

We’ve done our best to help you to pack your bags with what you will need for a journey whose path contains many uncertainties. You brought with you to Earlham your capacity to care about the world and we’ve tried to nurture that caring. You brought with you the human gift of imagination and we’ve tried to provide you with the knowledge to help you to envision a more perfect world. We’ve also sought to help you create the competencies to act effectively upon that vision. What more can we offer? One last thing — the gift of Hope. We believe that the world is a better place with you in it, both each of you personally and you collectively as embodiments of Earlham’s ideals. Our confidence in you derives, in part, from **knowing** you and, in part, from our ongoing relationship with thousands of earlier Earlham graduates who continue to enact Earlham’s ideals and mission through their lives.

So, in conclusion, I hope that you will take at least three lessons from what I’ve said today. First, affirm yourself and feed the goodness in your heart. Second, respect and love others, **especially** those you think do not deserve it. And third, draw upon your imagination and your education to actualize the spirit of Kahlil Gibran’s poem and be “living arrows” sent forth to create a future that will fulfill your own dreams **and** improve the world.