

FALL FACULTY WORKSHOP

By Darrel D. Colson

September 1, 2009

I love those lines that Homer uses to indicate the beginning of a new day. There is that formula that appears frequently in both the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*, the one that Robert Fagles translates: “When young Dawn with her rose-red fingers shone once more”.¹ Fitzgerald renders it: “When primal Dawn spread on the eastern sky/ her fingers of pink light. . . .”² Sometimes the formula is more complicated, as in Book Three of the *Odyssey*:

As the sun sprang up, leaving the brilliant waters in its wake,
climbing the bronze sky to shower light on immortal gods
and mortal men across the plowlands ripe with grain. . . .³

I love the invocation of that temporal rhythm, the regularity of the sun’s rise and the changing colors of the sky. And now that I’m here in Iowa, I can even quicken in a new way to the last phrase, the one that calls attention to “plowlands ripe with grain.”

I think that I’m especially fond of the way Homer calls attention to the regular rhythms of life and their connection with the agricultural calendar, because a similar rhythm governs our lives, the lives of us who have made our homes in the academy. Like the rise of the sun every morning, or the rise of the tide twice each day, year after year the beginning of school threatens us and at the same time beckons us. School having let out at roughly the time to plant crops, it now calls us back at roughly the time of harvest—or at least when harvest would have happened in colder climes.

Year after year the beginning of school lures us and looms over us, gathering strength, enticing us with promise and possibility while at the same time threatening us, filling us with that strange mixture of emotions—fear, anxiety, regret, disappointment—and also, anticipation, hope, excitement, affection. Unlike most of our schoolmates back in our younger days, the ones who went off to become plumbers and doctors and nurses and

¹ Homer, *Odyssey*, trans. Robert Fagles (New York : Penguin, 1996), Bk. 2, line 1.

² Homer, *Odyssey*, trans. Robert Fitzgerald (New York: 1963), Bk. 2, ll. 1-2.

³ Homer, *Odyssey*, trans. Fagles, Bk. 3, ll. 1-3.

sellers of wares, and who now march to a different calendar, we gave ourselves to this strange rhythm and its mélange of emotions.

I even have trouble communicating with real people—that is, non-academics—because I don't file years in my mind according to the Gregorian calendar, but according to the academic calendar. For me, 1969 began in August with Woodstock and ended, peculiarly and sadly, in May 1970 with Kent State; 1973 began with the euphoric realization that the final draftees had reported for duty in late June, driving home the point that the Vietnam War, at least for Americans, was ending. Then, in October the comparative triviality of our mid-terms was made manifest by the outbreak of the Yom Kippur War and the notice that our military had gone to high alert for only the second time since WWII (Defcon 3, we later learned it was called), bringing back the spectre of war for those of us who had foolishly thought war a thing of the past. The quick end of the Yom Kippur War brought back the euphoria, and the second semester of the year, the winter/spring of 1974 saw a ridiculous expression of that euphoria, the takeover of campuses across the land not by anti-war protesters, but by streakers.

My bet is that each of you shares with me, to a greater or lesser extent, that slightly off-kilter way of measuring and counting years from summer to summer rather than from January to December. And I'll bet, too, that some of you have especially vivid recollections of academic years that resemble to one extent or another my years 1969-70 and 1973-74.

I suppose it's a little odd for me to be welcoming you back; all but a handful of you have been here longer—and many for far longer—than I have, but it is one of the happiest roles of a president to welcome people to campus, and in this instance, it is an especially happy event to welcome faculty back to the beginning of the fall term. I am delighted and honored to be here with you today, to be able to mark this occasion, this auspicious beginning of my year 2009, with you.

I have spent the bulk of the summer attending alumni Outflays as well as visiting with smaller groups of alumni and friends of the College. At each of those events, I've taken

time to talk a bit about myself and about why I was drawn to Wartburg College. It is appropriate, too, for me to share those comments with you. With apologies to those in the room who have heard this before, let me take a few minutes to do that right now.

From the split ends of my hairs to the tips of my toenails, I am committed to liberal education and have been since I stumbled into a philosophy class because someone told me that it would help me get into law school. In that first class, and in others like it, I was bitten by the bug. I decided along the way that I'd devote my life to liberal education, and I worked a long time to angle myself into liberal-arts colleges. It wasn't easy, of course, with my pedigree. At LSU, the philosophy department was dwarfed in size by the sugar engineering department, which itself was dwarfed by the poultry science department. A dean had to take a risk to hire me into the liberal-arts context, and I'm thankful he did.

I have described myself on the road as a "true believer." That is, I really believe all of that stuff that we say about liberal education:

- That the world is an unpredictable place requiring creativity and adaptability. And that these two characteristics are rooted in some specific intellectual skills and dispositions of soul:
 - The capacity to think critically, yes, but also insightfully and inventively;
 - The ability to write clearly and persuasively, as well as to speak confidently and compellingly;
 - Adeptness at working effectively in teams, in groups of people collaborating on common projects;
 - A high level of comfort with numbers—especially with all those quantitative data that we now use to analyze problems and construct rhetorical arguments;
 - An ability to understand, to appreciate, the scientific method, not only to comprehend the discoveries of science, but also to internalize the attitude of discovery that explorers feel impulsively;

- Knowledge of the past and how it shapes the future.

In my devotion to the liberal arts, I go, I think, one step further than most. Not only do I think they afford the best preparation for each individual to cope with the challenges and opportunities that come her way, but I also think they serve to inoculate our polity and empower her citizens to participate fully in self-governance. I often adduce President Jefferson, who, with his colleagues present at the Founding of this Republic, believed in the radical notion that we commoners could govern ourselves without need for royals or nobles.

He also believed, though, that our ability to govern ourselves is contingent upon education. His comments on this topic are many; I'll share one with you now from an 1810 letter to Hugh White: "No one more sincerely wishes the spread of information among mankind than I do, and none has greater confidence in its effect towards supporting free and good government."⁴ Although we liberal arts colleges only constitute 4% of what's called the higher education "market," our presence is invaluable. Were we not here, the state schools would not feel compelled to emulate us and counterfeit our character. And were they not eager to tell high school students that they offer an education that's "just like what you'd get at a liberal-arts college," the impetus for liberal education would wane, perhaps even disappear altogether. In short, we prepare young people for citizenship, and we furthermore create the competitive pressure for all schools nationwide to take such preparation seriously.

In addition to my devotion to liberal education, I have long been drawn, too, to the Lutheran colleges. In my work with the Lilly network in a past life, I spent time on a number of campuses, but found the Lutheran ones to be most appealing. I had, of course, been reading Luther for years and years with my students, and I was always intrigued by his realization that we live with paradox and tension:

⁴ In Thomas Jefferson, *Writings*, ed. Merrill Peterson (New York: The Library of America, 1984), p. 1222.

In that great treatise, the *Freedom of a Christian*, Luther hits us early on with those twin declarations:

A Christian is a perfectly free lord of all, subject to none;

A Christian is a perfectly dutiful servant of all, subject to all.⁵

And *then* things get challenging, for he says:

. . . the Scriptures assert contradictory things concerning the same man, since these two men [that is, our inner nature and our outer one] in the same man contradict each other. . . .⁶

By that point, the reader is hooked—at least this reader is hooked. From there, Luther takes us on a wild ride through multiple apparent contradictions, which he reframes as paradoxes—paradoxes that challenge us to bring the works of the “outer,” bodily nature into harmony with the faith of the “inner,” spiritual nature.

That same realization that we live with paradox and tension inspires your statement of distinctive characteristics, a statement that describes my own values as closely as any such list could:

- Dedication to liberal arts and concern for usefulness and careers
- Rigorous academic program and emphasis on “living your learning”
- Focus on future and appreciation for history and heritage
- Commitment to leadership and tradition of service to others
- Spirit of inquiry and exploration on a foundation of faith and values
- Vigorous global outreach and strong Midwestern roots

I’m drawn, too, to Luther’s fearless grasp of the brokenness of our world, a world riven by war and poverty and selfishness—in short, by sin. And yet, again paradoxically, his conviction and insistence that that brokenness does not authorize us to give up, does not provide us with an excuse to cut our losses and retreat. On the contrary, God has

⁵ In Martin Luther, *Selections from His Writings*, ed. John Dillenberger (New York: Anchor, 1962), p. 53.

⁶ Luther, *Selections*, p. 53.

mercifully equipped us with intellect and skill, and we are to use those to serve our neighbors in the effort to repair the world. I don't understand Luther well enough yet—though Professor Kleinhans is going to help me get there—I don't understand Luther well enough to say that our work in the world should be motivated by hope or by obligation, but in the event, it does not matter. We are to serve; we are to be dutiful servants of all.

And this brings up that third element of Lutheran thought that draws me to you: vocation. Nicely captured in our statement of distinctive characteristics, we believe that our students, as well as we ourselves, are called to perform important roles in our communities. That most, if not all, callings are both necessary and praiseworthy. That most of us, if not all, are called to fill multiple roles both concurrently and consecutively.

When I'm out and about—on the stump, as it were—I always emphasize that Wartburg's vocation—that is, the vocation of this community of which we are privileged to be a part—is summed up in our mission statement, a statement I have found compelling:

This College is “dedicated”—what a word to have chosen! This College is “dedicated to challenging and nurturing students”—talk about your paradox; isn't this a good one? We are to prod and to entice, to use the stick and to hold out the carrot, to kick students in the pants and to console them tenderly.

We are “dedicated to challenging and nurturing students for lives of leadership and service as a spirited expression of their faith and learning.”

All the buzz in accreditation nowadays is about outcomes. What can students do as a result of going to school? Providentially, our focus is explicitly on outcomes: our students are here to prepare themselves to lead and to serve.

When we look at the tradition of liberal education, we can see at least two interesting strains of thought coming down through the ages to us. Aristotle, in the *Politics* (Bk. 8,

chap. 3), seems to say that there are disciplines—music being one—that are not useful or practical but that are perfect for the leisurely activity of the “free and noble.” Thus, the liberal arts are those to be indulged by people who happen to be free.

Plato, in a curious reversal of normal form, seems more pragmatic than Aristotle and thus represents that other interesting strain of thought. In the *Republic* (Bk. 7), he talks of the liberal arts as equipping young Guardians for the hard work of leadership and governance in the state. It is this strain that was picked up by influential humanists in the Renaissance who thought that studying the liberal arts, especially the humanities, prepared young men—always young men, though Christine de Pizan had some things to say about that—prepared young men for active and effective participation in the affairs of their city-states. Thus, on this view, the liberal arts equip one to be free. I think that this is the strain Martha Nussbaum represents, and this is the strain I see represented in our Mission Statement.

The learning we expect of our students, as well as their exploration of faith, is to equip them for lives of leadership and service. We are not trying to enhance their capacity for leisure, but rather their capacity for effective work in the world. That’s a Mission to hang my hat on.

And then, to wrap up this set of thoughts, when I’m on the stump, I remark about something more. My first few months here have been remarkably educational for me, as they should have been. When I talk to you about my commitment to liberal education, my attraction to Lutheran higher education, and my fondness for our Mission, I talk to you about things I knew about before I accepted the call to serve as your President. In the more recent past, I’ve learned something else about Wartburg that I simply had not anticipated.

Slowly—embarrassingly slowly, I’ll have to confess—I came to realize that animating this place is a commitment to excellence that is nothing short of inspiring. One sees it in every corner of the campus: in the three NCAA national championships, of course, but also in the honor given by the Washington Center to our Center for Community

Engagement; in the work of our students on their many service trips, including the recently featured work in Guyana; in the record of faculty and student research and scholarship; in the precision of the security reports that I receive every morning; in the praise for our food service that I hear everywhere I go; and yes, my favorite example, in the care with which our staff attends to the floors in this and other buildings. The standard of acceptable performance that you in this community have set for yourselves—and therefore, have set for me—is very, very high. Good is not good enough; nothing less than the superlative is quite enough.

Once I realized that excellence is our standard, I just knew that we had to use that as a theme this year, the year of the liberal arts. For in everyday classical moral discourse, a discourse that—not coincidentally—shares some elements with Luther’s discourse, each person has a function to fulfill in the community, and each can fulfill his or her function *with distinction* provided that he or she possesses the appropriate *aretê*, that is, the relevant virtue or excellence.

In Greek moral thought, there was some debate as to whether a person derived virtue or excellence from good breeding, that is, from genetics, or by a divine dispensation from the gods, or by some other means. To the extent they were able, both Plato and Aristotle convinced their contemporaries and their intellectual heirs, including President Jefferson, that education imparts virtue. Excellence, therefore, is the intention and the result of liberal education. On that theme I’ll be hammering away this week, next week, and especially at the Inauguration. Indeed, I’ll be talking about that over and over this year. To study the liberal arts is to refine the human capacities; it is to perfect those skills and dispositions that enable us to fulfill our callings exceedingly well; it is to equip ourselves for excellence.

Now let me change gears and talk a bit about the past and the future. I dare not talk too long; Professor Strickert has already warned me that you intend to doze off if I give you any chance at all.

First, this year's budget. Since well before my arrival at Wartburg, we've been in budget-cutting mode. I am delighted that the appropriate representatives of the faculty, both on the Building and Budget Committee and on the Faculty Council, were able to participate in those discussions and give helpful advice. I plan to seek such advice on a continuing basis, and I've already mentioned to the Faculty Council my willingness to work with them to formalize some process or structure for ongoing faculty input.

As you all know, all too painfully, we've had to enter this fiscal and academic year with a noticeably downsized budget. All-told, I believe that we've trimmed about \$1 million from operations, and we've additionally reduced the College's TIAA-CREF contribution from 8% to 6%. As many of you know, the administration reluctantly sought, and the faculty reluctantly—but most helpfully—provided, support for as much as a 4% reduction. I'm thankful that we did not need to go that far, but I regret that we did need to make the reduction that we did.

The Board of Regents has been clear in insisting that we operate on a balanced budget. While we in administration were able to identify money that we thought could be trimmed, we could not guarantee that we'd meet the necessary target. The areas identified were somewhat soft and were contingent on a number of variables, few of which were within our control. The Building and Budget Committee has looked at these numbers with us, by the way. Initially, I was very resistant to the idea that my first official act, and my first official correspondence to you, would be an announcement of a reduction in your benefits. Nevertheless, on reflection and after much deliberation, I decided that we had a much better chance of achieving budget balance by trimming that 2% of TIAA-CREF contribution. My intent is to place that money in the contingency line and not use it unless absolutely necessary. If we can preserve that money, building next year's budget with a restored 8% contribution will be that much easier.

You should know that the Executive Committee of the Board, when it accepted and endorsed my recommendation for this reduction, was quite explicit in authorizing it for only one calendar year. They made absolutely sure that their approval of this benefit reduction sunsets in one year's time.

The point you should take away is that both I and the Board of Regents understand that to build and retain a superb—that is, an excellent—faculty and staff, we need to compensate fairly and we need to demonstrate that this is a College that values its employees.

Let me talk about our budgetary situation in a general way. We've really experienced the triple "whammy"—that's a technical term used by financial analysts:

- In 2008, when the economic shockwave hit us, we were coming out of a campaign cycle, so donors had completed pledges. Additional gift production was down for the fiscal year ending in May 2009, which we believe is direct result of the financial downturn.
- But that same financial downturn gave our existing endowment a severe beating, reducing it from a value of \$50 million at the end of May 2008 to \$37 million at the end of May 2009. Unfortunately, this shrinkage in value will adversely affect our spendable income for some time to come.
- The third "whammy" affected our prospective students. The families who would normally have sent their children here to school were experiencing uncertainty and sometimes outright dread, which reduced their capacity to make financial plans very far in the future. The result was that many students who would normally have come to Wartburg were deterred, thus slowing the enrollment growth that we had long counted on to generate additional and needed operating revenue.

In my view, while these are serious challenges, they are short term, and we can prevail over them. We will increase our fundraising and are laying the groundwork for that effort even now. Fundraising will increase the size of our endowment over time. And we will take whatever measures need to be taken to return to regular growth in the size of the student body and attendant growth in net revenue. Those responsible for our admissions operation are exploring new markets and developing new means for

exploiting those new markets—well, maybe “exploiting” is the wrong term; let’s say, serving those new markets. Let me share with you the administration’s goals for this academic year:

- Execute the overriding mission of challenging and nurturing students for lives of leadership and service as a spirited expression of their faith and learning.
- Complete the Commission on Mission process as outlined by the Board of Regents.
- Building on the work of the Commission on Mission, initiate a robust exercise in Strategic Planning.
- Update our campus plan to identify and prepare for key campus capital projects, including student housing and technology infrastructure.
- Observe the Year of the Liberal Arts, celebrating the centrality and effectiveness of liberal education at Wartburg.
- Continue developing a strong co-curricular and residential program that complements students’ learning and provides a variety of rich opportunities for student engagement.
- Ensure continued and managed enrollment growth by enhancing operations, penetrating new markets, and identifying new co-curricular and academic opportunities.
- Engage alumni and friends in the Orange Opportunity campaign to build additional scholarships for students.

- In a challenging financial climate, refine the institutional budget to ensure that the College efficiently executes its mission, demonstrating good stewardship in using its financial and natural resources and instituting sustainability where possible.
- Develop a purposeful marketing campaign to raise the visibility of the College, especially emphasizing academic excellence, superior outcomes, robust curricular and co-curricular student experience, and the extraordinary faculty and staff accomplishments that warrant regional and national recognition.
- Introduce President Colson to external and internal constituents to provide for a smooth and successful transition of leadership.
- In this transitional year, provide the support necessary to celebrate the heritage of Campus Ministry while preparing for a future that promotes our mission and serves a religiously diverse student body, faculty, and staff.

I want you to notice that the goals are forward-looking and ambitious—and appropriately so. I will tell you what I told the Faculty Council last week: we are not going to stop or slow the progress of this institution; the circumstances are challenging, yes, but we have too much going for us to slow down now. To those of you who are as new here as I am, or even slightly less new, I want you to know that I am determined that this will continue to be an institution where faculty—and staff—can have long, rewarding, and meaningful careers.

I am, in fact, very optimistic about the future. As I move around the Midwest and the West, I find a depth of devotion to this College that is almost overwhelming in intensity. Largely I find it among the alumni, but not exclusively. Over the years, we have attracted a number of generous friends whose only connection to the College is their intense devotion to it. Furthermore, the Commission on Mission process, which is culminating this fall, affords us a propitious opportunity to channel that devotion, fanning it into enthusiasm for the future of the College. I am eager to get started with

the serious strategic planning that will build upon that Commission's work; I'm eager, too, to get started with the campaign that we will build on that strategic plan.

I want us all to reflect on something significant. While our tradition extends all the way back to 1852 and that call that Pastor Löhe issued to Pastor Grossmann—and that is a tradition that I invoke and honor time after time—another reality is just as important. Wartburg was—as Hamm Platz outside reminds us—an itinerant college until 1935 or 1945, depending upon when you think that the “ecclesiastical skullduggery” had finally played itself out.⁷ Think about that: in this year, we will be commemorating the 75th anniversary of Wartburg's “permanence” in Waverly. It was not until the 1940's that we knew we could actually put down roots with the assurance that they wouldn't be torn out of the ground. It was not really until the post-war years that President Becker could actually assure benefactors that their gifts to the institution would generate a lasting benefit to students.

Notwithstanding our now 157 years of history, we are really, in practical terms, an institution 75 years old. The capital investments we made before that time are now lost to us. People often say to me that the Midwest is crowded with good colleges and that the competition here is keen. OK; fine. But think about this: we gave those other schools a tremendous head start: often 75 years or more. And look what we've accomplished in such a short period. I'd say we're more than holding our own, wouldn't you?

I often meet alums from the '50s, '60s, and '70s —heck, even from the '80s and '90s — who say that the place has changed so much—and changed for the better—that they don't recognize it when they visit campus or read our publications. And—this is important—they don't yearn for the “good old days” of drafty buildings and single-sex halls. There's not a lot of maudlin sentimentality out there. On the contrary, there is terrific, overpowering pride that they are part of a place that appreciates its history and heritage but that pursues progress so ambitiously and embraces the future so fearlessly.

⁷ Ron Matthias, *Still on the Move: Wartburg College, a sesquicentennial celebration, 1852-2002* (Cedar Rapids: WDG Communications, Inc., 2002), p. 43.

My vision is of a Wartburg that continues to progress at a breakneck pace, that is known nationwide as a place that excellently prepares students for lives of leadership and service as a spirited expression of their faith and learning. My expectation is that alums from the 90's and 00's and "teens" will look back on this campus and join the chorus of their predecessors, saying that they don't recognize the place anymore—but in a good way.

I'm going to make the same pledge to you that I made to our Board: I'm going to give to Wartburg College everything I've got: whatever talents, time, and energy I have belong to this College. To use that sports metaphor, I intend to leave it all on the field. To do any less would be to dishonor you folks who already give so much to this College, who have set such high standards of achievement.

I am confident that if we all continue to work together in this common purpose, straining to achieve excellence in our various vocations here on campus, we will look back with surprise and satisfaction at what we have wrought. I am reminded of Thoreau: as you get to know me, you will learn that I am all too often reminded of Thoreau, but you'll just have to learn to indulge me. You know, there is that wonderful line that begins a paragraph in the "Conclusion" of *Walden*, that line that is so often quoted that it may seem trite:

I learned this, at least, by my experiment [that is, the experiment of living in the woods for two years]; that if one advances confidently in the direction of his dreams, and endeavors to live the life which he has imagined, he will meet with a success unexpected in common hours.⁸

I like that sentence, but it is almost ubiquitous, even showing up on the Facebook pages of thousands of teenagers who've never read *Walden*. Alas!

⁸ In Henry David Thoreau, *Walden and Civil Disobedience* (New York: Penguin, 1983), p. 372.

That same paragraph, though, ends with a couple of sentences that may be even more appropriate for us at this moment in the life of the College:

If you have built castles in the air, your work need not be lost; that is where they should be. Now put the foundations under them.⁹

We stand on the shoulders of giants, you know. Pastor Löhe and Pastor Grossmann, Presidents Engelbrecht and Becker, Professors Ottersberg, and Swensen, and Hertel, and Garland, and Holmes—and so many more whom I haven't named but could. They built this castle—this Wartburg—on what must've seemed at times to be nothing but air. Even in relatively good times, they must've felt doubts, they must have worried that they were building on nothing firmer than sand. But, gracious, look what they accomplished! They are an inspiration and an admonition; let's roll up our sleeves and show ourselves worthy to succeed them. We need not build the foundation; they've done that for us; but let's reinforce, and strengthen, and expand the foundation upon which this castle stands.

⁹ Thoreau, *Walden and Civil Disobedience*, p. 372.