

**Leadership and Service**  
**A Reflection on the Occasion of the Student Life**  
**Leadership and Service Awards Ceremony**  
**Sunday, March 21, 2010**

I was most pleased to receive this invitation to speak at the annual Student Leadership and Service Awards Ceremony. I cannot think of a more fitting thing for us to be doing today than honoring and recognizing students for both leadership and service.

We often talk of our institutional commitment to service. It grows quite naturally out of our Lutheran heritage, our cultural legacy. Certainly our founders, Pastor Lohe and Pastor Grossmann, were inspired to serve. Like them, we believe that the classroom does not occupy an ivory tower—alone, isolated, disconnected from the world. Rather, we see our classrooms in their intersection with “real” life outside the walls of the College. In our view, in our culture, theory informs practice; theory must result in practice.

From the moment you first step on campus, we are talking to you about service—about how much we value it and how much time and attention we give to it. The news media remind us on an hourly basis that we live in a world filled with need. Our legacy is an expectation to respond to that need. Our calling—your calling—is to serve those in need: our neighbors, our communities, our nation, our world. That’s why you are here at Wartburg, of course. You are here to learn what will prepare and equip you to serve others, and to discern where and how you are called to offer that service.

But we say more, too, don’t we? In our mission statement, we speak forthrightly about challenging and nurturing students for lives of leadership and service—leadership AND service. We don’t expect you to do one without the other. So although you might hear us talk of service more often than we talk of leadership, it’s important to note—and this day we do note—that we don’t sever the two.

Interestingly, in their deliberations about strategically planning for our future, the Board's Planning Committee has been struggling a bit with leadership. Some are saying that it's reasonable to expect every Wartburg graduate to serve, but leading seems different somehow; it seems to some like a more exclusive role, something that not all can do and not all people should aspire to do. My visceral reaction to that view surprises me; I'm surprised at how strongly I disagree.

Let me take you on an odd detour, one that your GPS Navigation system would never recommend that you make. In 1831, Alexis de Tocqueville, a 26-year-old aristocrat who was beginning a political career in post-revolutionary France, visited the United States. He told his superiors that he was coming to study the American prison system, but he was really coming to understand how America works. Some people—actually many people—believe that the book he wrote about that journey, a journey of only 271 days, is the best, the most penetrating comprehensive analysis of the American character that has ever been written.

In his *Democracy in America*, de Tocqueville was struggling with some puzzles that Europeans simply couldn't quite solve. One of which, appropriate for our gathering today, was how a society without a social hierarchy—that is, without royals, nobles, commoners, and so on—could hang together and function reasonably well.

De Tocqueville knew that we Americans, like his own countrymen, had drunk from the deep wellsprings of liberty and equality. “[D]emocratic peoples,” he says, “feel an ardent, insatiable, eternal, invincible passion” for equality (584).<sup>1</sup> They will, he continues, “suffer poverty, servitude, and barbarity, but they will not suffer aristocracy” (584).

A consequence of this passion for equality is that we democratic people are individualistic, cutting ourselves off “from the mass of [our] fellow men and withdraw[ing] into the circle of family and friends” (585). Our tendency is

---

<sup>1</sup> Alexis de Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, trans. Arthur Goldhammer (New York: Library of America, 2004)

to create little societies around ourselves, gladly leaving “the larger society to take care of itself” (585).

By contrast, people in aristocratic societies do not enjoy equality and cannot simply withdraw from the larger society. They are embedded in it for good or ill. They occupy fixed positions in a social hierarchy, seeing above themselves people whose protection and guidance they need and below themselves people whom they should protect and whose cooperation they require (586). Families in aristocratic societies endure for many generations filling the very same social and political niche, living on the very same land, often occupying the very same house. Anyone who has read Jane Austen has a mental picture of such families, and of her ironic commentary on them.

In democracy, however, things are different. In one of his most acute observations, de Tocqueville says:

In democratic nations, new families are constantly springing from nothing, while others fall, and those who remain change their appearance. The fabric of time is forever being ripped, and vestiges of the generations disappear. People easily forget those who went before them and have no idea of those who will come after. The only people in whom anyone is interested are those closest to himself.  
(586)

Without delving too deeply into contemporary controversies, let me just mention in passing something that de Tocqueville would have found helpfully illustrative: we as a democratic society have—for my whole lifetime—been modifying, sometimes with ease, sometimes only with great difficulty, our understanding of what combination of people constitutes a family. And quite specifically, the Iowa legislature almost took up the contentious issue of marriage last month, and then backed away for yet another year.

In aristocratic nations, however, there are no questions about what families are, or which families count, or what families are supposed to own the land and what families are supposed to work the land. De Tocqueville

comments: “Aristocracy linked all citizens together in a long chain from peasant to king. Democracy breaks the chain and severs the links” (586).

The puzzle, therefore, is how, in a nation of individuals not bound to one another in the rigid social arrangement derived from medieval feudalism, we can get anything done. No nobleman can order us to do anything, so why does anything ever happen?

De Tocqueville observed our preference for local and grassroots decision-making. Lacking the top-down political organization that monarchies enjoy, we must organize ourselves locally, at the grass-roots level. When we here in Waverly realized, back in the 1850s, that we needed to make decisions about basic public works, we organized ourselves with a mayor and a city council and the attendant support systems. Now, when we want to determine where to place the VFW post, we don’t go to the palace in the capital city to petition the royal court; we petition our city council-members whose cell phone numbers we have.

De Tocqueville further discerned our penchant for voluntary association to address any number of other problems we face. Nourished by our political organization—or, one might say, our political disorganization—we must engage one another and act together to get anything done. Because each of us individually is independent and weak, we can do almost nothing by ourselves, and yet we cannot obligate anyone to give us assistance. To quote de Tocqueville, among democratic peoples, citizens “become helpless if they do not learn to help one another of their own free will” (596).

As in our politics, so too in our social lives:

When Americans have a feeling or idea they wish to bring to the world’s attention, they will immediately seek out others who share that feeling or idea and, if successful in finding them, join forces. From that point on, they cease to be isolated individuals and become a power to be reckoned with, whose actions serve as an example; a power that speaks, and to which people listen. (598-599)

Colleges are associations that magnify the power of individuals. So too are the United Way, and the ELCA, and the Salvation Army, and Doctors Without Borders, and Red Crescent, and the people in our own community who coordinated the observation of V-Day last week, and the group who've joined together to produce Culture Week this week, and the Student Alumni Council, who receive an award today, and the people who planned, organized, and conducted the twenty-four service trips we honor today.

Let me quote de Tocqueville one last time:

In democratic countries, the science of association is the fundamental science. Progress in all the other sciences depends on progress in this one. (599)

Why have I taken you on this detour, you might ask? Fair question. It's because I'm trying to cast some light on our mission statement, and at the same time trying to clarify why we celebrate today *both service and leadership*. It's because we can't have the one without the other.

Since service among democratic peoples is more effective in association with others, since our culture presses us toward free association in order to enhance our effectiveness, we must be able to lead as well as to serve. Each member of an association must lead, and each must serve—not always at the very same time, of course, but nonetheless everyone must lead and must serve.

Aristotle had something helpful to say about this, which is not surprising, for he had something helpful to say about nearly everything under the sun. In discussing citizenship in a free state, he observes that “the good citizen must have the knowledge and the ability both to be ruled and to rule, and the merit of the good citizen consists in having a knowledge of the government of free men on both sides (1277b14-17).<sup>2</sup>

As in a free state, so in any association of free people. Efficacious action requires that free people be adept at both serving and leading. Aristotle

---

<sup>2</sup> Aristotle, *Politics*, trans. H. Rackham (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, Loeb Classical Library, 1977)

observes that the virtuous citizen will be both just and temperate, but that these two virtues equip their possessor to differently appropriate dispositions and actions depending upon whether the occasion calls for service or leadership. Pursuit of common goals requires that people gathered together in a purpose-driven association be able to switch from one responsibility to another as circumstances demand.

That is why we hold these two characteristics in an indissoluble combination. We challenge and nurture students for lives of leadership AND service, knowing that both are essential for the complete person. We need for students to be both leaders and servants; our communities need for our alumni and alumnae to be both leaders and servants.

We come together this day to celebrate leadership and service. We recognize and honor the work that you students have done, work that both expresses leadership and service even as it instills and refines your skills of leadership and service. And of course, while we celebrate what you have done, we aren't checking a box and letting you off the hook. We want to be absolutely clear that we expect this to be only the beginning; we expect you to lead and to serve throughout the remainder of your lives. I'll end there: with congratulations to you all, and a challenge to boot.