

The Life Worth Living

This is a moment of pretty high pressure: a number of people have told me how much they are looking forward to my inaugural remarks. These remarks must, I fear, be profound. And yet, it's also been made clear to me that they must be brief. I considered reading to you President Lincoln's *Gettysburg Address*, for that would certainly fit the bill: profound and yet brief. But then, I feared that you would consider me unoriginal. I could, I thought, read to you some of Heraclitus's aphoristic fragments, which I have struggled to understand for years. Most of you don't know those, so I might get away with it; they *are* brief, and they might be profound—or, heck, they may even be insane; who can tell?

Cracking under the pressure of high expectations, I decided to forego the quest for profundity, but to

offer you something more important still: let's take to heart those comments that my daughter Rachel read from Plato a moment ago, and let's enjoy for the next few minutes the greatest good a person can enjoy; let's discuss virtue.

The lines she read are from Socrates' speech to his jurors when he was on trial for his life. He was being given a chance to survive that ordeal; the implicit agreement the jury offered to strike with him is that if he would shut up and go into exile for a while, they'd let him off the hook. But he was too stubborn. He would never disobey his city's commands, for he recognized its authority over him; but he could not abide the deal offered to him. The only option left, then, was to accept execution.

Socrates was as strange a person as you'd ever want to meet. He could drink all of his companions under the table, yet never himself got drunk. He was given

to “spells” when he would stand transfixed staring into the distance for hours on end. And he simply could not stop asking people questions—hard questions about the most important things in life.

Socrates’ views were dramatically different from those of his contemporaries. The normal moral framework of the day could be summarized in this way: “Help your friends, harm your enemies.” Is this the way Congressional politics works?

Contrary to everyone around him, Socrates kept insisting that a good person never harms anyone, friend or foe. Indeed, on his view, doing harm to others does much more damage to the one inflicting harm than it does to the person receiving the harm. The damage is different, of course; it’s psychic damage, damage to the soul.

It’s far, far better to be a victim than to be a victimizer, he insisted. At one point, after listening

to Socrates say things like this, an incredulous acquaintance said to him that if we took this point seriously, we'd have to turn our lives upside down. And that of course was the very reason for the trial. Socrates' neighbors did not want to turn their lives upside down. They just wanted him to shut up. Socrates means what he says in that passage that Rachel read. Not only does he say that discussing virtue every day is the greatest good a person can experience, but he also says that absent the opportunity to engage in that kind of discussion, life is not worth living—literally, not worth living. That's a famous comment: "the unexamined life is not worth living."¹ Come to think of it, it may even be profound—but its profundity lies, I think, in the sincerity with which Socrates meant it. On trial for

¹ Plato, *The Apology*, translated by G.M.A. Grube, in *Five Dialogues* (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Co., Inc., 2002), p. 41.

his life, facing execution, he told the Athenians that he simply would not stop his customary practice of buttonholing them and demanding that they give an account of their lives. Not only because he was a pain in the neck—which he certainly was—but because he really believed what he says. If the Athenians would not let him continue to question, to prod, to challenge, and to examine himself by discussing virtue with them every day, then he would prefer not to stay alive at all.

Obviously, he doesn't want to talk about virtue just to have something to talk about; the reason to discuss virtue is to figure out what it is and then to conform to it, to live it out. You students will remember my comments at Convocation—won't you?—when I drew your attention to the windows of Danforth Chapel. How many of you have paused to look at them? [This'll be on the test.]

For those of you who are visiting today and don't know our windows, let me tell you about them.

Preserved on the second floor of our Saemann Student Center are three panels of stained-glass.

They depict three things very important to us here at Wartburg: Virtue, Christianity, and the Liberal Arts.

As we are celebrating the Liberal Arts this year, I've been drawing students' attention to the right window—the Liberal Arts—and connecting it to the left—Virtue.

The right window pictures the Quadrivium, the four mathematical subjects in the Medieval Liberal Arts Curriculum: arithmetic, geometry, astronomy, and harmonics. The left window represents the four cardinal virtues of the classical period: temperance, courage, justice, and wisdom. During Convocation, I drew the link between the liberal arts and the virtues. I adduced *The Republic*, in which Plato has

Socrates construct an elaborate justification for studying the liberal arts because they cultivate the virtues.

Plato was inspired by the example of Socrates, and his inspiration found expression in a prodigious output of philosophical writing, including *The Republic*. Indeed, Socrates' example inspired a host of people down through the ages, including those two great advocates of non-violent resistance, Mohandas Gandhi and our own fellow American, Martin Luther King, Jr.

But no one was inspired more by Socrates than Aristotle, and Aristotle adds for us an element that we did not adequately cover at Convocation.

Aristotle begins his book on ethics by observing that all actions aim at a goal.² And, he goes on to say,

² Aristotle, *The Nicomachean Ethics*.

everyone agrees that the goal of all human actions is happiness. What, though, is happiness?

Reasoning through a number of possibilities, Aristotle comes to the conclusion that the key to human happiness lies in our nature. What humans do that is unique among the organisms in this world is to use *reason* to plan and to carry out their actions. Those who use reason well, who can deliberate well and carry out their actions effectively, are virtuous, for in the Greek mind, to be virtuous is the same thing as to be excellent.

At Convocation, I talked of the classical concept of *aretê*, the Greek word that means *excellence* or *virtue*. The virtues don't lead us to perform a different function from other people; they enable us to do what all people naturally do, but to do it exceedingly well. The virtuous person, then, reasons

and acts excellently; and someone who excels at the human function is, by that very fact alone, happy.

On Aristotle's view, happiness has two dimensions, both of which necessarily involve the active exercise of the human rational faculties. On the one hand, the happy life is one of contemplation, contemplation for the sheer pleasure of contemplation. Thus we express our most essential characteristic of rational thought.

But, on the other hand, we can only engage in such contemplation if we have satisfied a number of practical, i.e. physical, needs, such as securing food, shelter, domestic tranquility, and peace with our neighbors. Hence, we must also employ our rational faculties to cooperate with our fellow citizens to carry out common projects, such as creating and sustaining an economy or building and training a military or establishing and sustaining a college.

The completely happy person needs not only the intellectual virtue of wisdom, but also the practical or political virtues of temperance, courage, and justice. Any functional society will impart to its young these virtues, as well as whatever others are necessary, inculcating in them the society's expectations and conclusions about the virtuous and therefore happy life.

Note, too, that both Socrates and Aristotle recognize that people are drawn to vocation. These two guys speak of our common humanity and of our common birthright to which that humanity entitles us.

Socrates calls it the life worth living; Aristotle calls it happiness.

Each guy also realizes that we hear and respond to more than one call. As human, Socrates was called to discuss virtue every day; as Socrates, he was called to be the gadfly in his city. Aristotle says that each of

us, as human, is called to contemplation; but to make that feasible, each of us is called to perform vital roles in the community—teacher, soldier, governor, farmer, nurse, reporter, college president, and so on.

At the heart of what we do here at Wartburg is preparing young people for vocation. Our mission is to challenge and nurture students for lives of leadership and service as a spirited expression of their faith and learning. We pack a lot into those few words.

Our students' learning is grounded on the Liberal Arts. We are confident that their study of the Liberal Arts will strengthen their virtue, will make them better, even excellent. And excellence is the pathway to happiness.

Like Socrates and Aristotle, we believe that young people are called to multiple roles layered upon one

another: they are called to lead as well as to serve; and the expression of their faith and learning takes many forms.

We don't tell them what their callings are, but we prepare them to listen, to hear, and to respond spiritedly. I'm not sure that they'd put up with us if we told them what to do with their lives; but we do all we can to prepare them to live into the many roles they are called upon to fill. And this, of course, brings us to Emerson.

In *The American Scholar*, from which my son Jacob read a moment ago, Ralph Waldo Emerson offers a sort of manifesto, what has been called America's "intellectual declaration of independence."

Independence. That's an important word for us Americans, isn't it? None of us wants a book, or a school, or any institution at all to make us into "a

satellite instead of a system,” as Emerson puts it.³ We Americans don’t want to be pinned down. As I said to our students at the opening Convocation of the year, we Americans don’t want to be characters in a narrative that someone else wrote for us.

Emerson looks to books not for indoctrination, but for *inspiration*. Using a related word, our mission speaks of the “*spirited*” expression of faith and learning that our students will manifest once they’ve left us. Derived from the Latin *spirâre*, to breathe, these words imply that our students, like Emerson’s ideal American reader, will breathe in vital energy that empowers them for choice and action.

I sometimes wonder how to reconcile the very traditional pictures on our stained-glass windows, those symbols of virtues that date back 2500 years,

³ Ralph Waldo Emerson, *The American Scholar*, in *The Selected Writings of Ralph Waldo Emerson*, edited by Brooks Atkinson (New York: The Modern Library, 1940), p. 49.

with the American notion of manners, actions, and words that spring “spontaneous from the mind’s own sense of good and fair,”⁴ but then I see the reconciliation I seek in iconic depictions of the American character.

Our students already know that rattling around in my head are lots of old books and movies. It’s a scary place, my head, but it does give me lots of entertainment. For instance, right now I’m thinking of *Key Largo*, the 1948 film, the final pairing of Humphrey Bogart and Lauren Bacall. Bogart plays Frank McCloud, a World War II veteran, a former officer who’s seen way too much action. He’s seen a lot of his men killed, and he’s killed a lot of men in his turn. Once McCloud might have believed that the war would make the world better, but by the time we meet him, Winston Churchill has already given

⁴ Ibid., p. 50.

his “Iron Curtain Speech” in Missouri, and the world is preparing for war once again.

McCloud is visiting the hotel run by the widow and the father of a guy who died under his command.

Before long, the hotel is taken over, McCloud and his hosts taken hostage by Johnny Rocco and his outlaw gang. That Rocco, the Edward G. Robinson character, is a vile gangster running rackets and counterfeiting money from his exile in Cuba doesn't bother Frank at all. What's one more crook in a world filled with Nazis, Fascists, Communists, and hypocrites?

As we watch the drama play out, we see Rocco and his henchmen abuse the handicapped owner of the hotel, insult his daughter-in-law time after time, kill a police officer, and then frame some Seminoles for the killing, which leads to their deaths in short order. All the while, McCloud greets these events with

cynical disregard. His hosts continually urge him to take a stand, not so much to do anything physical, for that would be dangerous, but to concede that Rocco and his men should be punished. McCloud's response: "One Rocco more or less isn't worth dying for!"⁵

Curiously, interestingly, what finally rekindles the virtue we know hides within McCloud's soul is the way that Rocco treats his former girlfriend, played by Claire Trevor in her Oscar-winning performance. Watching Rocco humiliate the Trevor-character, McCloud's character rouses; he responds to the calls issued by his hosts, and he chooses to act—and he does it rationally, by planning a very clever scheme to separate the gangsters from one another and then pick them off one-by-one. Aristotle would be quite pleased.

⁵ *Key Largo*, Director John Huston, Warner Brothers.

It's that element of choice I'm calling attention to. McCloud, though an Army vet, is not programmed for automatic patriotism or idealism; and yet, he has virtuous dispositions that yearn to disclose themselves—provided that he chooses the path of disclosure.

At Wartburg, we stand foursquare within that classical tradition I've been talking about, the one personified by Socrates and Plato, the one depicted on our wonderful stained-glass windows. And, we stand, too, in solidarity with Emerson and his insistence that Americans make their own choices.

In the spirit of that wonderful Lutheran embrace of paradox, we are at the same time traditional and progressive. We talk explicitly and sincerely about focusing on our future while revering our heritage, about building a spirit of inquiry and exploration upon a foundation of faith and values, about

dedication to liberal education with a concern for usefulness and careers.

Our paradoxical formula works. I've seen it with my own eyes in the short time I've been here, in the Wartburgers I've met and befriended. They live lives of engaged leadership and service; they do meaningful work, some of it so imaginative that I did not even know it existed until I met them: serving clients in new ways, deploying technology in creative fashion, solving problems in ways I never could have anticipated.

And I've met alums whose choices in life are vivid examples of the virtues on our windows.

- Darold Beekman, class of '57, whose patient, persistent service on the Commission for a New Lutheran Church, illustrated what people can accomplish if they give themselves over to the

virtue of temperance; if we moderate our suspicions and resentments and skepticism about the motives of others, we can reconcile and unify disparate people.

- Kathryn Koob, class of '62, who demonstrated courage and endurance for 444 days in the American embassy in Tehran as a “guest of the revolution,” and who continues to say that she did nothing extraordinary; she merely did “the very best job of which [she] was capable”—as if that’s not extraordinary in itself under such conditions.⁶
- Coleen Rowley, class of '77, whose commitment to justice, a commitment sharpened while reading Plato right here on campus, drove her to go over her superiors at the FBI and make a

⁶ Kathryn Koob, *Guest of the Revolution: The Triumphant Story of an American Held Hostage in Iran* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson Publishers, 1982), p. 230.

report directly to the Director himself, an act for which *Time* named her one of the three persons of the year in 2002.

- Herb Brokering, class of '45. When they thought of justice, the ancients were especially attuned to piety, that portion of justice which governed human respect for the gods. I've seen this species of justice fully embodied in Herb, who wrote two of the hymns we are singing today, whose writings always focus on the healing that occurs even where we least expect it, and who continues to write even now while under hospice care.
- And Ron Matthias, class of '54. If you stop anyone who's been around for any length of time and ask for a name of someone who exemplifies wisdom, that fourth virtue in our windows, more often than not they give the same name.

Consensus has it that our institutional wisdom resides in Ron, but he will not like at all that I've said this.

When I was at another institution, a fellow once asked a colleague of mine what our specialty was. Well, these are our specialties here at Wartburg: students who are challenged and nurtured to lead and to serve, whose faith and learning animate their lives, whose study of the liberal arts makes them useful and virtuous—students who become alumni and alumnae whose lives are well worth living, whose lives happily express their excellence.

This is what we've done for 157 years in America, for 75 years on this very spot; and this is what we'll do for another 157 years or so, God willing. We will continue to answer the call to prepare young people for powerful lives of leadership and service, lives energized by faith and learning. As you leave here

today—whether you are student, alum, friend, Regent, professor, or staff like me—you should leave with the certain knowledge that Wartburg College moves in one direction, its compass pointed confidently toward excellence. This we pursue; this we attain. I leave you then with that one word, both stunningly profound and elegantly brief, *aretê*, excellence—or for fun, let’s make that two words, *sandarákinê arête*, orange excellence.