

Wartburg Convocation, Fall 2003

CHRISTIAN VOCATION: A HORSE OF A DIFFERENT COLOR

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Thank you Prof. Lambert.

President Ohle, faculty, staff, administrators, students, freshmen: greetings!

Horses

Do you remember your drive here to Wartburg? I wonder if some of you—I am speaking to the freshmen especially—felt like I did the day I arrived at school: excited, yes, but with an edge of loneliness and anxiety as well. I too attended a rural denominational college, St. Michael's in Vermont.

My parents chatted away in the front seat of our Pontiac Catalina station wagon, as I stared out at the rolling countryside. When we arrived at St. Mike's, we parked in the basketball court next to Alumni Hall. My room was 460 Alumni. It said so on the card I grasped tightly in my hand. I didn't tell my parents that I was nervous. Instead, I bounded out of the back seat with energy and enthusiasm, the way baseball players bound out of the dugout for the first inning, ready to compete, to do whatever it takes to win.

I ended up at St. Mike's in part because we visited Vermont almost every summer. The first time we drove up there, I must have been in fifth or sixth grade and I was very excited. I read a map of Vermont until late the night before. The map gave the heights of mountains, marked historical sites in red, and displayed pictures of Calvin Coolidge and Ethan Allen. I especially wanted to see Mt. Mansfield, the highest point in

Vermont at over four thousand feet. But I had something even more exciting on my mind: horses.

Being a city kid, I had never seen a horse close up. Nevertheless, horses had exercised great power over my imagination since the third grade when I sat behind Kay Hansen. Kay drew horses that were lithe and beautiful and all but jumped off the page. I tried to emulate her, but I failed. My horses were too fat and profoundly out of proportion, often looking more like the state of Montana than a palomino or a piebald.

Still, I was a resilient kid. If I could not express my sense of awe artistically, I could at least study horses in the same way I studied maps. Somehow, a book about horses fell into my hands, and I read it intently for hours at a time as our trip approached. It was a labor of love. The drawings were captivating. I devoured the short essays greedily, eager to learn everything I could about horses.

But just before the trip, perhaps a day or two before we left, a subtle shift took place. I decided I would impress my father with my knowledge of horses. My father loved horses too. He was, for a time, a private detective working at race tracks. He traveled all around the country protecting horses from gangsters and drugs and sleazy jockeys on the make. Clearly, my father would be pleased with my interest in horses. But I did not wish to impress my father in a general sort of way. I wished to stun him with my knowledge. I wanted my father's jaw to drop involuntarily and I wanted him to turn to my mother and say: "Why, Betty, have you noticed? Our son Brian is a veritable horse genius."

My plan was this. I would first knock my father off balance by spotting horses at a great distance, well before he'd seen them. Then I would astound him by rattling off

precise descriptions of each horse. “Well Dad,” I heard myself saying, “I see a couple of palominos out there and a pinto or two, and if I’m not mistaken that’s a dray horse over there by the barn. Strong animals those dray horses, wouldn’t ya say, Dad?”

Of course there was a remote chance my father might question my classifications. I was, I allowed, still unclear about a few details. For instance, I confused paints with pintos, not quite grasping that paints represented a wider classification than pintos and were not readily identified by color. I did comprehend, however, that pintos had mainly dark background coloring, interrupted by patches of white. To address this confusion, I decided to call anything with lots of white patches a pinto.

We were somewhere in New Hampshire when I saw them. There were perhaps a dozen or so horses grazing in the distance. They all looked pretty much alike to me. “Yes, mmmhmmm, browns and blacks with white patches. OK, I’m going with the pinto scheme. Pintos!!!!” I told myself.

“Look, over there, Dad, pintos—maybe a dozen of them. Look at those white highlights, will ya. Wow, all those pintos. Someone must be breeding—”

My father interrupted me: “Dear God, son, those are not pintos . . .”

Oh no, the one thing I feared! But all was not lost. I could still turn this around. “Oh, oh, yeah. I meant paints, Dad, they’re paints—now that I look a little closer: a dozen or so paints out there.”

“Oh, Betty, what’s wrong with that kid? Son, they’re not paints either.”

“What?”

“Son, those are cows.”

What Went Wrong and What It Has to Do with You

Well, that certainly was a sad ending to my romance with horses. But what went wrong? It wasn't my love of horses that got me into trouble. I think it was that shift in focus that did me in. But the shift was not only a shift from wonder to calculation; it also had a temporal dimension. That is to say, I also shifted my attention from the present moment in which I was captivated by horses to a future in which my knowledge would pay dividends.

You may think of your studies at Wartburg as a means to an end, as preparation for things to come. There's nothing wrong with that, just as there is nothing wrong with a small boy wishing to impress his father. But there *is* a problem that accompanies such inevitable and prolonged peering into the future. It is this: you may come to think that your real life is out there somewhere in the future and that your time here at Wartburg is only prep time. That would be unfortunate.

So I have a suggestion. I'm speaking to the freshmen, but if any of the rest of you wish to join in, feel free. I suggest that for your entire freshman year, you embrace the practice of radically limiting your thoughts about the future. Look to the future only occasionally and then only with sideways glances. Keep your eyes focused on what is right in front of you, on whatever it is you are studying, on your new friends, and on the events of each day.

Staying in the present moment is not an easy practice. The future lures us with promises of a better, more beautiful life. Because of this, our minds naturally drift toward this enticing future and away from the everyday dullness of the here and now.

Recognizing this, I would like to suggest a thought experiment, one that may help you embrace the beauty of your lives as they are here and now.

You are no longer at Wartburg College; you are now at Wartburg Castle. Or better said, Wartburg College is now Wartburg Castle. And you are not visiting Wartburg Castle as a tourist; you're moving in. You belong at Wartburg Castle, which is to say, you are royalty.

Of course, there's precedent for moving into Wartburg Castle and for taking on a royal identity. As you probably know, Martin Luther did just that in the early sixteenth century, staying at Wartburg Castle, fittingly enough, for about the length of one academic year. Luther, or Earl George as he was called at the castle, was in hiding. Church officials unhappy with the outcome of his recent visit to Rome were anxious to express their displeasure with him.

During his time at the castle, Martin Luther managed to translate the entire New Testament into German. Astoundingly, he managed this remarkable achievement in a matter of months, the bulk of it in eleven weeks.

Think about it. Luther, by any measure one of the great figures of Western history, lost himself in something he loved and valued and did so as world events raged about him, events that he had helped set in motion. If Luther could take time at Wartburg Castle to lose himself in something he loved, so can you.

I have another suggestion, one that more or less follows from the first. I suggest that for the rest of the day, freshman should address each other as "m'lord" and "m'lady." I also suggest that their royal servants, royal tutors, royal administrators, and other royal functionaries do the same.

My hope is this. If you are already royalty, currently residing in a castle, you may not be quite so anxious to linger in your reveries about the future. After all, there is really no better place to be than right here, right now.

Why Wartburg Is Like a Castle and Why You Are Royalty

“Sure,” you’re saying to yourself, “that is all well and good. I wouldn’t mind being a noble and living in Wartburg Castle. But c’mon, this is Iowa.”

But hold on. Take a moment to consider how things work around here and I think you’ll come around. Consider the following.

When you’re a freshman, you’re food just shows up. It is served to you. The rest of us plebeians have to shop, shuck corn, follow recipes, push buttons and clean ovens. (Though I have a friend who confessed that as a young man he moved out of his apartment to avoid cleaning the oven. He is now an Old Testament scholar.)

Much of the time we feel more like hunter-gatherers than royalty. Truly, freshmen, I wish food would just show up on *my* dining room table. Oh sure, make fun of the food here at Wartburg if you must. Freshmen always do that: “Tonight I think I’ll have the savory mystery meat with a side of partially mashed potatoes and a serving of super-hardened bread pudding.” Go ahead, make fun, but coming here directly from home, many of you just have no idea what it means not to worry about feeding yourself.

In addition to food, people keep showing up too. Pascal, the great French mathematician, philosopher, and Christian apologist, once said that what separates royalty from the rest of us is that there are always other people around to distract and entertain them. Well, it’s the same here at Wartburg. When I’ve spoken to former

students, those who have recently graduated from college, their chief lament (if it does not have to do with procuring and cooking food) is that they lack good company and miss old friends. They are lonely; sometimes they are desperately lonely.

And as all royalty who have not fallen on hard times, you have your own elite security force. Do not let the fact that you are the ones most likely to be detained suggest to you that these dedicated men and women are not here to serve you. You just happen to be at that stage of life when you most need protection from yourselves.

Your royal guards know, for instance, that beer does not improve your reflexes, that you should not place friends on the roof rack of your Ford Taurus when you go for pizza, and that it's in extremely bad taste to run naked through a snowy quadrangle at 2:30 in the morning, yelling, "I'm weird man, I'm weird man. Catch me if you can," as occurred four times during the frigid winter of 1968 at St. Michael's College in Vermont.

I don't know how many books Martin Luther had at his disposal while at Wartburg Castle. But it could not have been anywhere near the 160,000 volumes you have in Vogel Library.

And let's not forget about the royal tutors. They have, after all, invested years of their lives in study, incurring considerable debt so that they might enjoy the dual privileges of tutoring you and of dressing as court jesters at special events.

Royal tutors, it should be noted, are also the ones (if it is not other students) who are most likely to introduce you to the books, the subjects, the questions that may well change the direction of your life.

Prof. James G. Case was that kind of teacher for me. It was Prof. Case who instilled in me a passion for the study of philosophy. Astoundingly, Prof. Case wrote a

book-length manuscript for our introductory course. “This is just for us?” I remember someone asking. “Philosophy begins in wonder,” Professor Case told us that first day of class.

In another class, after a step-by-step review of some abstruse argument first spun by his own beloved mentor, St. Thomas Aquinas, he paused in silence for a moment and then whispered to us, “Do you know what that means? Do you know what that means?” Yes, I knew. That meant that Prof. James G. Case was in love with philosophy, and I wanted to know why.

There are, of course, royal tutors who effect us from a distance. My friend Fred Helenius, who has dedicated his own life to the study of mathematics, told me of one such figure. Regarded as one of a handful of the greatest mathematicians of the last century, Paul Erdos was described by one biographer as the Johnnie Appleseed of mathematics. Exiled during the holocaust of European Jews that also decimated his family, Erdos had no permanent home and never held a full-time university appointment.

Instead, Erdos traveled the world tutoring others, sharing his research, and listening attentively to anyone who mirrored back his profound passion for mathematics. These grateful companions in turn provided him with food, shelter, and friendship.

When he traveled, Paul Erdos took with him no gold or silver or copper coins. Nor did not carry a walking stick. Paul Erdos did however carry a traveling bag, a cardboard suitcase that contained all his worldly possessions. The suitcase, his friends say, was never more than half full. In 1996, Paul Erdos collapsed and died at the age of 83 while attending a mathematics conference in Warsaw.

I corresponded with Prof. Case recently. He told me that teaching four courses a semester for forty-three years might be almost enough. But make no mistake. Prof. Case could no more retire from philosophy than Paul Erdos could from mathematics. How do you retire from love?

Howard Thurman, a theologian who was a mentor to Martin Luther King, Jr., was asked by one of his students what he should do for the world. Surprisingly, Thurman responded by saying, “Don’t ask yourself what the world needs. Ask yourself what makes you come alive and go do that, because what the world needs is people who have come alive.”

Of course, Thurman’s advice only goes so far. Understood in a certain way, refusing to ask what the world needs may be construed as selfish. For this reason, Frederick Buechner’s description of call, of vocation, is a good corrective. “The place God calls us to,” Buechner writes, “is the place where our deep gladness and the world’s deep hunger meet.” Still, I prefer Thurman’s words. As much as I am inspired and influenced by Buechner’s description of God’s call, I believe it lends itself to manipulation. We are sorely tempted to get out a sheet of paper, place what makes us deeply glad in one column and what the world needs in another, connect the dots, and find our vocation at the bottom of the page.

My own sense of the matter is that we may in fact be living out our vocation without having a strong sense that we are doing so. Similarly, we may speak confidently of God’s plan for our lives while we’re missing the mark badly.

A friend of mine is fond of repeating the words of the great Danish philosopher Soren Kierkegaard, that we may take joy in the thought that before God, we are always

in the wrong. Frankly, I am comforted by the fact that before God I can never really get it right, never quite know what my own vocation is and whether I'm living it out faithfully. In this, I experience a deep resonance with these words of Thomas Merton's: "My dear God, I have no idea where I am going. I do not see the road ahead of me. I cannot know for certain where it will end. Nor do I really know myself . . . But I believe that the desire to please you does in fact please you, and I hope I have that desire in all that I am doing. I hope that I will never do anything apart from that desire. And I know that if I do this you will lead me by the right road, though I may know nothing of it."

It was also Thomas Merton who suggested that faith is knowing that if we do the thing that is necessary in this moment, everything else is taken care of.

It was because of this understanding of faith that I came up with the scheme of moving everyone into Wartburg Castle. We need some way, however silly and imperfect, to remind ourselves of the beauty and richness of each moment as it unfolds before us. It is difficult not to get caught in the floodwaters that push us upstream, that have us peering breathlessly ahead for relief, for peace of mind.

But God always meets us where we are, as we are now, gently sometimes and more forcefully at other times, but in every instance reminding us of our royal inheritance, and of the upside-down, already-not yet Kingdom His son announced to us—a Kingdom where the first shall be last and the last first, where SAT scores are not required for admission and Advanced Placement is available upon request.

Concluding Remark

Well, m'lords and m'ladies, please take another look at this beautiful castle. And when you can, sneak a glimpse at your royal companions. Truly, there is no better place to be than here, no company more worthy than those with whom you find yourself.

It remains for me only to say what a delight it was to speak to you today at this auspicious moment, at this new beginning in your lives. Please permit me to tell you one more thing before I leave. It's right on the subject. M'lords and m'ladies, it is you who bring me to life. For this I am grateful beyond words. I am in your debt.

Thank you.