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The Liberal Arts

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PHI BETA KAPPA – May 1st, 2012

“The Liberal Arts”

Dear Presidents and faculty, Parents and friends, and especially, dear Students – It’s a great privilege and honor to be able to address you today. Let me be among the first to congratulate you on your election to Phi Beta Kappa, the most prestigious of all academic honors societies.

You have attained to this great honor not only because you have excelled in your chosen majors, but because you have also excelled in your other courses. One of the important criteria of selection of Phi Beta Kappa recipients is that they should have taken challenging courses in a wide variety of fields – you have all met that criterion, and in so doing have shown yourselves to be great students of the liberal arts. Well done!

Let me begin by telling you one of my favorite stories. *A BUDDHIST AND A TOURIST were sitting next to one another on a bus heading into the foothills of the Himalayas. Even the foothills of the Himalayas are impressive mountains, and as the bus ascended higher and higher, and the road got narrower and windier, the tourist got more and more nervous. As the bus rounded yet another bend, and the chasm off the side of the road came even closer and more threatening, the tourist let out an audible gasp and gripped the seat in front, as if for all the world she could somehow pull the bus further from the edge. “Don’t worry,” said the Buddhist, “You’re quite safe.” “But what if the bus goes over the edge?” said the desperate tourist. “Oh! In that case,” said the Buddhist, “Be sure to look to the left – the scenery over there is spectacular!”¹*

Typical of Buddhist wisdom, this story is about awareness – about the eternity of the present moment – and about the openness of mind we should all have to the boundless nature of reality. It is this last quality I want to focus on today, and my thesis is that the liberal arts, just like the disciplines of awareness and meditation, are a vital pathway to the boundless nature of reality. I hope and trust that you are already convinced of this, but today is in part a celebration of the liberal arts, and it is appropriate for us to take out a few moments to think about what ‘liberal arts’ means – not in terms of curriculum and distribution requirements, but in terms of the vision of the human person it wishes to promote.

To do this, I propose that we meditate on a page from a book. Theoretically, and in your imagination, the page could be from any type of book – your chemistry text book, a book on art history with an image of your favorite Gauguin or Picasso. It could be a page from a Shakespeare play or a sociological study of a given population group. It could be a political speech or a page from history, about, say, the Napoleonic wars or it could be a math text about quadratic equations. You get the idea, any page from any book among the numerous disciplines you have studied over the last few years. I am a theology professor, and I am going to exercise the

¹ I am uncertain of the provenance of this story beyond that I am sure I got it (somehow) from Anthony de Mello (1931-1987). He is the author of a number of books on spiritual wisdom, but I have also listened to some of his conferences on tape. His books include: *Awareness: The Perils and Opportunities of Reality* (New York: Doubleday, 1990) and *The Song of the Bird* (New York: Doubleday, 1982), but I have not been able to find the story in either of those books in the short time I had to look.

speaker's privilege and tell you that my page will be from the Bible, and in fact specifically from the St. John's Bible, the page that contains the 23rd psalm. You almost certainly all know this psalm, at least its beginning. It is the psalm that reads:

The LORD is my shepherd; I shall not want. 2 He maketh me to lie down in green pastures: he leadeth me beside the still waters. 3 He restoreth my soul: he leadeth me in the paths of righteousness for his name's sake. 4 Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil: for thou art with me; thy rod and thy staff they comfort me ...

Now, ordinarily, you think of analyzing a page of a book in *literature* class, but there are all sorts of ways of analyzing a page, and I propose the thought experiment of analyzing my Bible page by doing so from the perspective of all the disciplines you have studied over your college years – fine arts, history, social sciences, natural sciences, humanities, even theology. As we do this thought experiment, I want you to notice that as we move through the disciplines it is a little bit like ascending a mountain (whether on a bus or on foot does not matter) and as we go from level to level we encounter different types of reality – even different levels of reality, and of course, my point will be that to understand the page, to understand reality in all of its depth, we need all of the disciplines.

But just before embarking on this experiment, I want to tell you briefly of the scholar whose work inspires it. Michael Polanyi was born in Hungary in 1891 into a Jewish family of great intellectuals (he died in 1976). He was home-schooled and his favorite subjects early in life were physics and art-history, clearly a child of the liberal arts. He was fluent in four languages: Hungarian, German, French and English. In university, he first trained in medicine, and when the First World War broke out he was conscripted into the Austro-Hungarian army as a medic. In that experience, he saw the horror of humanity's inhumanity. After the war, he spent time in Germany and became very accomplished as a researcher and teacher of chemistry, impressing even Albert Einstein with some of his discoveries and theories. He also spent time in the then growing Soviet Union, but increasingly his place of work was Germany, where as a young scientist he enjoyed the thrill of research. However, in the early 1930's, Hitler came to power and since Polanyi was Jewish, he had to escape, and so went to Manchester University in England, and continued for some years there, researching and teaching chemistry. He also spent many years in the USA.²

But what Michael Polanyi is most famous for is that, though he was a famous scientist, having published extensively in physical chemistry, he spent the last half of his life dedicated to the social sciences, to politics and especially to philosophy and the study of knowledge. He did this because he was horrified by what he had seen as the perversion of scientific knowledge in Soviet Russia and Nazi Germany, and he feared that similar, purely materialist thinking was becoming prevalent throughout industrialized societies.³ As he saw it, life was being reduced to the definitions of physics and chemistry, and he was convinced that such a view of science, such a view of knowledge, was a major contributor to the horrors of the Western, industrialized world. So he turned to philosophy to attempt to show how all of the disciplines are equally necessary if

² Much of the biographical information here I have taken from Mark T. Mitchell, *Michael Polanyi: The Art of Knowing* (Wilmington, DE: ISI Books, 2006).

³ For Polanyi's personal accounts in this regard, see Michael Polanyi, *Science, Faith and Society* (Oxford University Press, 1946), and *The Tacit Dimension* (University of Chicago, 1966).

we are to have a true understanding of the depths of reality. Hence, he is the inspiration behind our thought-experiment.

So, let's analyze our St. John's Bible page with Psalm 23 inscribed upon it. The art-historians might be the first to offer an analysis – they would have lots to say about how it picks up the ancient tradition of the monks copying texts. They would comment on its calligraphy and illuminated pages, so reminiscent of, but so different from, the beautiful illuminated pages of medieval manuscripts. Regular historians would recall that the psalm has traditionally been ascribed to David and would have a great deal to say about David as a shepherd, a warrior and king of Israel, and no doubt would argue about the likelihood of whether David did indeed compose the psalm. Linguists have to have their say: they would have a wonderful time reminding us that the psalm was not originally composed in English at all, nor in Latin or Greek. Its original language is Hebrew (over):

יְהוָה רֹעִי, לֹא אֶחְסָר

בְּנֵאוֹת דָּשָׁא, יִרְבִּיצֵנִי ; עַל-מֵי מְנַחוֹת יִנְהַלֵּנִי

נַפְשִׁי יִשׁוּבֵב

גַּם כִּי-אֵלֶךְ בְּגֵיא צְלָמוֹת, לֹא-אִירָא רָע-- כִּי-אֶתָּה עִמָּדִי (recite after me)

Notice that, with respect to language, it is not just a matter of different sounding words, but – as you have undoubtedly learned – it's a matter of the cultural content of a language and its worldview. Psalm 23 is not the same thing in English as it is in ancient Hebrew.

From each of these disciplines we are learning something about our page, but there is still much more to study. The social scientists, for example, especially the psychologists, might have a lot to say about how the page is redolent of a fearful individual who is seeking comfort from an unseen agency. If the psychologist were a religious skeptic, she might wax eloquent about how this is a typical example of humans deluding themselves. Other social scientists might not be so skeptical, but they could have a lot to say about shepherds in the ancient world, their difficult lifestyle and their close attachment to their sheep.

When Polanyi used this image of a page of writing, he was most concerned about the natural sciences (in which he was an expert), and he was concerned how in the minds of some, the only true knowledge humans can acquire is from science, from what can be tested and proven by the scientific method. He completely rejected that view, and largely devised this and other illustrative analogies to combat it. So, he wanted to draw our attention to what physics and chemistry would, and would not, be able to tell us about our page. It would be able to tell us numerous things, of course – far more than I could list. Physics and chemistry would weigh and measure the page precisely, perhaps even calculating its atomic weight. They might inform us that, unless the page is given very special protection, it will in time crinkle, yellow and fade, and this is because it is not an inert thing, as it appears to our eyes. Rather, its particles are all in motion, and in fact the vast majority of it is just empty space, no matter how solid and smooth it looks to us. They would analyze the ink of its writing and the parchment on which it is written, breaking down its chemical composition – all fascinating stuff.

But now we come to a crucial question: Are there limits to what physics and chemistry can discover? To Polanyi, it was more than obvious that there are severe limits. For instance,

would such analysis be able to detect the presence of words or their meaning? And of course, the answer is no, it could not. This is not a criticism of those sciences, of course, merely a description, but the point being made is crucial. If the page being analyzed were from a score of a Beethoven symphony, chemical analysis could detect the ink on the page, but it could never hear the music. If the page contained a poem by Wordsworth, physical analysis could say lots of things about the paper, but it could never detect the emotions of the poetry. The physical sciences, just like art history, psychology, linguistics, history and so on, can tell us lots of things about our page, but to hear its poetry and to know its faith in, and longing for, God, requires the fullness of our humanity, and no one discipline is equal to that task.

And that's where the wisdom of our Buddhist on the mountain and the wisdom of the liberal arts converge. As we ascend through the disciplines – from the physical sciences with their ability to pin down facts, to the less exact social sciences, attempting to solve the unpredictability of the behavior of individuals and populations, and finally to the humanities and fine arts that deal in aesthetics, symbolism, poetry and the abstract arguments of philosophy and theology (knowledge that is real but largely indeterminate) – as we climb these mountains of knowledge, we begin to realize that we are moving deeper and deeper into mystery. Or, another way to express this is to say that we are encountering different levels and types of reality. Michael Polanyi insisted that it is the least tangible realities that are the most real, since it is they that give meaning and order to the tangible. In terms of our page, this means that it is the mind of the poet, the composer of the prayer, that is more real than the ink and paper on which he wrote his psalm. Theology's contribution to understanding the page is to insist on taking the mind and heart of the poet seriously on their own terms, including in their humble recognition of the sacred.

My wish for you, therefore, is that you will celebrate throughout your lives what you have learned from the liberal arts. Never be satisfied with just one way of looking at things. Don't let anyone ever convince you that human beings are just so much physics and chemistry. No matter how painful life might be sometimes, do not let it be pancaked to just one level of reality. Keep your minds open to the boundless nature of reality. Humans beings, suggested Polanyi, are the universe reflecting on itself. All the disciplines agree: by far the most complex entity in the entire universe is a human being. By comparison, stars and galaxies, quarks and gluons, are child's play. Discovering all of that amazing and sacred complexity is what the liberal arts are all about. So, climb every mountain of knowledge you can; and don't be afraid; the views all around you are spectacular.

Thank you & God bless.

Vincent M. Smiles
May 1, 2012