

25th Anniversary

Dr. Eugene Curtsinger

Primal Light:

the University of Dallas

Your Excellency Bishop Tschoepe -- I almost said 'Gorman'--
President Sasseen -- I could have said 'Brasted, Duzy, Morris,
Cowan, Smith, Fandal, Sommerfeldt, Pejovich' -- Trustees,
faculty, students, guests -- or, I could have named about a
dozen of you, then said 'and all you newcomers' :

When Dean Jodziewicz shanghai'd me to make this speech,
he said "speak on the theme of excellence, and throw in a
few reminiscences, about twenty minutes." I translate that:
"make an excellent talk, say anything you like, and get it
over in a hurry."

I was going to speak in rhymed couplets, but, luckily
for you, I got stuck on a rhyme for Tschoepe, and had to give
it up. Instead, I'll throw in a melange of poetic quotes.

It doesn't seem like twentyfive years. It seems like
forever. Twenty minutes to cover twentyfive years works out
to fortyeight seconds per year, four seconds for each month,
one bat of an eyelid for each day. If you start now, and bat
fast, I'll still finish before you. Not all at once: you'd
blow me off the stage.

I speak mainly to the freshmen. Everybody else has heard
all this. The faculty has my permission to doze off.

We set out, as you know, to build the best possible school,
having no wish to waste our lives, our dreams, our substance,
on anything less. Fiat lux was spoken here those decades ago--

"let there be light"--echoing and, indeed, like the making of any poem or painting, taking part in the original act of creation. We speak it again every time we read or write a novel, or experiment in the lab. We say it every time we catch one of these wild freshmen and turn him into a human being, baptizing him in the name of Homer, Dante, and Shakespeare. We say it now, by taking part in the ceremony, the ritual, of today.

It's a commonplace that all men want to be present at the creation; all men want to walk with the gods. Driven by that deep desire, we turn customarily to some three or four "rituals" that take us out of an otherwise unimportant present, and place us in the realest and most important of times. The prime "rituals" that do this are religious ceremony, art, lovemaking, and one or two others the freshmen don't need to hear about yet.

The Catholic mass, for example, is not merely "in memory of"; when you attend mass, the god is present, the god dies, and you are on Golgotha for the sacrifice. I wonder how successful older, primitive religions were in moving their tribes within eyeshot of the primal light?

As we do, ancient man did what he could to be present at the creation. His religious rites, somewhat like ours, were communal, formal, rhythmic, climaxing with the presumed arrival of the god and, on occasion, the charismatic frenzy of the

priestess as the god possessed her.

Myths, of course, are not lies, or somebody's pretty stories, but are ways of saying something so true of us, buried so deep in us and in reality, that it can be said only metaphorically, mythically. One Greek myth of the creation pictures it as a mighty battle between the gods of order and the gods of chaos. The world is created as the gods of order win.

Ancient man's games, somewhat like ours, put him at that original battle. Today it's easy to note, at a bullfight, for example, which side is order, beauty, grace, and which side is the bete noire, the black chaotic beast. When we "hola," we take part in the very beginning of the world.

At a football game, the gods of order -- your side--take on the gods of disorder--their side. A seed is an ultimate symbol of order, because you know what you get when you plant it. When that seed-shaped football is, against all obstacles, touched down to earth, that earth is claimed by the good guys, and we are present at the creation. If our games were not creations rituals, we wouldn't be so moved by them.

Some of our old gods of light and order, who wrested this place from the gods of mud and disorder, are visiting here today. Some of them are dead. I don't mean the ones you see-- at least, they looked all right a moment ago. I mean Maher, Egres, Peterson, others. We are all, in this moment, present

at the creation. . . Pete! you there?

I used to whistle when I wanted the registrar, and Sister Mary Margaret would come running, afraid I'd whistle again. If I whistled now, she'd show up, right here. I'd better not. She's up there registering, waiting for you -- the upper twenty percent.

Ancient man, somewhat as we do, knew that some places were especially sacred. A certain mountain, a lake, a grove, even a particular "holy deep-leaved oak tree," was his axis mundi, the center of his world. There he could commune with the gods. It is recorded that some tribes, when the old oak fell, or the lake drained away, having lost their axis mundi, were so shaken, so separated from their gods, that they wandered dazed, aimless, and died out.

You may recall, from the Iliad, a scene in which the chief god, Zeus, lies with his wife Hera on the mountain Ida. Their lovemaking is ceremonial. It is so creative that flowers spring up around them. That loving image of husband and wife is central in Greek and later thought. In epic poetry, when king and queen ascend to their bedchamber, you know there is something right, something good, about the whole kingdom.

It is only after Odysseus has purged his castle of the murderous suitors that he makes love with his wife, Penelope.

The kingdom is now set straight. You may remember that one of the four posts of Odysseus' bed was the trunk of an olive tree, with its roots still down in the ground. Why? The olive was their axis mundi, and shows us that the loving of Odysseus and Penelope was linked with that of the gods, takes part in the primal act of love at the heart of creation. Their bed was very sacred space.

We still have such love around nowadays, of course. There is also the chaotic force, grotesque parodies of the act of love, destructive as bitter parody is destructive. No flowers spring up around their beds.

If I mention the classical archetypes too often, it's partly because the university is rooted in classical tradition, and partly because I've made the UD Greece trip seven times -- that's not enough--and I've lived in Rome with over seven hundred of you--that was too many. I could say UD in fairytale instead of myth.

Once upon a time, fed up with the problems of being academic dean, I sulked out of the office and retreated to a grove of trees on a nearby hilltop. Sitting in the weeds and the silence, I noticed something peculiar about the trees. Each one had a ribbon tied around its trunk. You know the story of the caught leprechaun made to tell where the treasure was buried, and the one ribboned tree to mark the spot. The leprechaun had promised

not to remove the ribbon, but while his captor was gone to get a shovel, the leprechaun put ribbons on all the other trees. The fact of the matter was that construction of the Dominican priory would soon begin there, and the ribbons marked the trees that ought to be saved, tied there, I suppose, by Father Cain or some other leprechaun. But I was so elated by the proof that there was a treasure buried at UD that I went back and deaned for four more years.

I used to have a PA system in my office, and when there weren't any classes going on, I played classical music all over Carpenter Hall. Some of our first graduates still walk with a statelier rhythm than you punk-rockers. One day I was asked to announce something in honor of the Hungarian Freedom Fighters. I picked up the mike, spoke a bit about the tragedy in Hungary, and said, "we will now have a minute of silent prayer for the Hungarian Freedom Fighters." I put the mike down, turned it off, and went back to my desk. Out in the halls, the labs, the library, people paused, stood still, and, I suppose, prayed. I realized later that they were waiting for me to announce the end of the minute. If a stranger had entered the building, he would have been shocked into silence by all the statues. After a while, they started peeping around a bit, to see if anybody else was moving. Perhaps that's when the university really began, as that still painting, that museum of statues, gradually

came alive. Father Maher said it was the longest he'd ever stood in the restroom. One of the janitors was reported to have just gone into a broom closet as I made the announcement. I haven't seen him since.

It's true that UD has skeletons in closets. One member of the faculty was anxious to hear my talk, expecting me to bring to light some of those scandalous old bones. I'm not going to. Well, one or two little ones.

The students had an election to discover who they were: Crusaders, or Tigers, or Pioneers, or Saints. The list was narrowed to two names for the final voting. The ballot box, carefully guarded, was brought to my office for the tally. I was busy, and said I'd count it later. I did. I miscounted, probably on purpose. Whitman has a poem about you Crusaders: "Pioneers! O Pioneers."

We had an acting president once who was said to sit in his office all week and clip items out of newspapers. On Saturday he'd throw them away. Late one evening, a janitor unlocked the door and walked into the dark office, turning on the light. The president was sitting there, behind the desk, staring at him. "What did he do when he saw you?" I said. The janitor said, "he didn't do nothin. He just showed thuttytwo"--smiled, I guess--"so I turned ~~off~~ the light ~~and~~ off

again and locked him up."

All administrators understand that kind of frustration. Poor old chaps; let's be kind to them, sitting in the dark, trying to say fiat lux.

Every freshman class, every convocation, every illumination, begins the university all over again. We are, just now, present at the creation. We share this primal light. Where we are is sacred space. The altar and the tower are our axes mundi, centers of our world, and announce that we are in touch with the gods, that our work is blessed, that our teaching has more to do with truth than with fact.

To make the distinction, in my freshman classes I quote the philosopher who said, "the distance across a stage is much more adequately measured by a ballerina who dances it than by a carpenter with a tape." Clearly, the dancer says much more about that distance; she illumines it, the beauty of it, the mystery and meaning of it, the truth of it. We need both measurements, of course, but our concern as professors is with the ballerina's dance.

Because we work in sacred space, and deal with truth, we have to make a mighty attempt to be worthy. Some years ago, Professor Allen Reid and I agreed that a teacher teaches what he is. If you're a killer, you teach murder along with math. Thoreau puts it this way: "The impure man can neither stand nor sit with purity." That's an unpopular notion nowadays,

for modern compartmentalized man, who thinks he has the secret chambers of his soul carefully sealed and barred from each other. However, to quote: "A man is a stroke of lightning, One searing flash, that blazes and is gone."

The poet Hopkins says it best:

Each mortal thing does one thing and the same:
 Deals out that being indoors each one dwells;
 Selves -- goes itself; myself it speaks and spells;
 Crying, What I do is me; for that I came.

I say more: the just man justices...

I'm interrupted at this point by an old woman I knew who says something that might be pertinent, although I haven't finished thinking about it: "You are what you eat, so go to communion." She is akin to the character in a novel who comes to the, for him, perplexing realization that, as he puts it, "a man, damn it, has to be a saint."

I enjoy a little verse by a poet of our time who worries over the relationship between a man's character and doings, and his work: "Time has taught you," he says to himself as poet,

How much inspiration you vices brought you,
 How many a fine expressive line
 Would not have existed, had you resisted.

But a few more stanzas bring the poet, finally, to the sudden fear, or illumination, that

On Judgement Day,
God will reduce you to tears of shame,
Saying, These are the poems you would have written,
Had your life been good.

I can picture it now. "These are the students you would have graduated..." Or, "This is the school you would have built..." No. This is the school. The way it is now is pretty much the way we set out -- however clumsily, blindly, sinfully--to build it.

Of course we love it. But if it is to be a great university, then we must be great teachers, and if we are to be great teachers, then you must be great students. And each of us--at least, each Christian among us--shares that lovely and terrifying obligation, as the novel's man says, "to look in the mirror and see Christ."

It is no secret that love is at the heart of the creative act, or that wisdom is knowledge illumined by love. Let there be, in our knowing, the light which is love. If you have questions about that--or, in fact, about any of these things I've touched on today--I'll be happy to take them up immediately after the university's fiftieth anniversary convocation.

In the meantime, fiat lux, fiat UD.