THE UNIVERSITY OF DALLAS

The Most Useful Education

Faculty Address, Senior Convocation
May 3, 2012

Scott F. Crider
Associate Professor of English

Dr. Crider receiving the Haggar Faculty Award in 1998.

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Convocation Address to the University of Dallas Senior Class of 2012
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Dedicated to Lyle and Sybil Novinski—
Professor and Administrator; UD Benefactors

Thank you for the honor and privilege of speaking on behalf of the faculty to you today, the beginning of the end of your time here at what will soon be your alma mater. Our duty as a faculty this afternoon is to thank you and wish you well as you leave your old educational home for your new lives. It is time to go. But a few words before you do. What do we want to tell you? We are proud of you, all the while mindful that your parents deserve most of the credit for your formation: they sent you to us already talented and receptive young people. We like you, even though we know you only as students.

But our affectionate pride will not be our final point. What we would like to tell you today is something simple, but counter-intuitive to you even now: You have gotten the *most* useful education possible. I don't need to rehearse the apparently practical world's dismissal of liberal education; you've heard it so often that you may believe it. Let me only point out that John Henry Newman refuted it long ago in his *Idea of a University*:

> [A] liberal education is truly and fully a useful, though it be not a professional, education. "Good" indeed means one thing, and "useful" means another; but . . . though the useful is not always good, the good is always useful. Good is not only good, but reproductive of good; this is one of its attributes; nothing is excellent, beautiful, perfect, desirable for its own sake, but it overflows, and spreads the likeness of itself all around it. Good is prolific . . . . A great good will impart a great good. If then the intellect is so excellent a portion of us, and its cultivation so excellent, it is not only . . . noble in itself, but in a true and high sense it must be useful to the possessor and to all around him [or her] . . . as a diffusing good, or as a blessing, or a gift, or a power, or a treasure, first to the owner, then through him [or her] to the world.

Through the Core, Rome and your major, we cultivated your intellect without too much concern for its power, focusing instead on its increasing goodness with a faith that ignoring the remote end of utility *for a brief time* would allow you to develop into the good people who can fulfill that end when proximate. That time has now arrived. Yes, you have been useless to others while flourishing here, but now you are ready to be the most useful people in the world, to be a diffusing good to yourselves and all you encounter.

How might you be prolific of goodness in your new life? Our answer to that question is partly Ben Franklin's. You will remember his modest plan from the *Autobiography*: "I conceived the bold and arduous Project of arriving at moral perfection" by mastering thirteen virtues, the last of which is humility. He expected to be perfect within thirteen weeks, one week

for each of the virtues, recording in his little book of virtue his progress until he would be, well, perfect. (Thirteen weeks isn't even the length of a semester.) Under HUMILITY, he tells himself, paradoxically, "Be humble: Imitate Jesus and Socrates." Let your productive goodness be like theirs.

In Plato's *Apology*, Socrates recounts receiving some puzzling news from a friend of his: the Delphic oracle proclaimed him the wisest of human beings. Because he believed that he knew nothing, he was perplexed. So he began his philosophic enterprise of interviewing men renowned for knowledge, only to discover that, when he asked them simple, but fundamental questions, they could not answer without internal inconsistency. From these interviews, during which he invented the art of reasoning itself, Socrates discovered precisely in what way the god was right:

> "I am wiser than this man; it is likely that neither of us knows anything worthwhile, but he thinks he knows something when he does not, whereas, when I do not know, neither do I think I know; so I am likely to be wiser than he is to this small extent, that I do not think I know what I do not know."

Socrates discovers that he is wiser than the others since, though he has love for knowledge, he neither has that knowledge nor thinks he does. This is the Socratic humility Franklin hoped to learn. Socratic skepticism takes two forms, of course: the radical form—human beings know nothing—and the moderate one—human beings have trouble distinguishing between what they do know and what they do not, but they should try. I recommend the latter. One form your productive goodness can take is this: Believe you know only what you actually do; be dialectical with yourself and with others.

If the city of Athens provides Franklin's exemplar of truth, Jerusalem provides that of virtue. Jesus is also a dialectician, by the way, and in his exchanges with the scribes and Pharisees, he often leads his interlocutors from confident orientation to disorientation, then, sometimes, reorientation:

> Early in the morning he came again to the temple. All the people came to him and he sat down and began to teach them. The scribes and the Pharisees brought a woman who had been caught in adultery; and making her stand before all of them, they said to him, "Teacher, this woman was caught in the very act of committing adultery. In the law Moses commanded us to stone such women. Now what do you say?" They said this to test him, so that they might have some charge to bring against him. Jesus bent down and wrote with his finger on the ground. When they kept on questioning him, he straightened up and said to them, "Let anyone among you who is without sin be the first to throw a stone at her." And once again he bent down and wrote on the ground. When they heard it, they went away, one by one, beginning with the elders; and Jesus was left alone with the woman standing before him.

In response to a demand for violent judgment, Jesus is silent, writing in the sand. After further demands, he disorients to reorient the discussion away from the one judged to those judging—

"Let anyone among you who is without sin be the first to throw a stone at her"—sending each judge to judge himself first. The narrative enacts the growing realization of each that none can meet the standard: "When they heard it, they went away, one by one, beginning with the elders." They were tempting him to principled cruelty, and he not only ignored the offer, but also transformed it into a counter-offer of principled self-reflection, reflection which diffuses cruelty. He accepts this offer himself: Once all the judged have left, he says to the woman, "Neither do I condemn you. Go your way, and from now on do not sin again." He persuades them to forgive her, and he himself forgives her. Another form your productive goodness can take is this: Judge others as you would have them judge you. Be forgiving.

Little is so useful in the world as Socratic skepticism and Judeo-Christian forgiveness. If wisdom is the union of truth and virtue, then these Hellenic and Hebraic narratives may figure our own mission statement: "The University of Dallas is dedicated to the pursuit of wisdom, of truth and of virtue as the primary and proper ends of education." You have achieved a portion of the wisdom that is, and must remain, UD's educational end. But I don't want to leave it there. After all, one exemplar was poisoned—the other, crucified—for truth and virtue, and they remain distant—in historical time, cultural formation, and idiosyncratic character. Socrates is figuratively unique; Jesus is literally so. Patterns that cannot be achieved *are* helpful since we improve in our failed attempts to imitate them. Even so, might we find a more proximate ideal—nearer in time, in culture and in attainability—not simply Hellenic or Hebraic, but (perhaps) American? I am tempted to choose Franklin since he's been so helpful to my address today, he is highly attractive, and I could dine out on his witticisms until the reception, all the while assured of your amusement. But I would like to offer another Founder, another pair, actually—the Adams, John and Abigail—as proximate heroes of productive goodness. The Adams' marriage, available to us in their letters, is a modern American association informed not only by Socratic dialectic and Judeo-Christian forgiveness, but also by something else: republican friendship. (That's small "r" republican, by the way.) Most of the flourishing human life is characterized not by uniquely grand, let alone world historical sacrifices, but by small, communal gestures of association. Of course, John Adams became the second President of the United States of America, and Abigail, its second First Lady, but, before that, they were a young married couple engaged in violent revolution. When in June of 1775 the British had destroyed much of Boston, Abigail (who was an informal spy for the Second Continental Congress) wrote from Braintree outside of Boston to John in Philadelphia:

> My father has been more afflicted by the destruction of Charlestown than by anything which has heretofore taken place. Why should not his countenance be sad, when the city, the place of his father's sepulcher, lieth in waste, and the gates are consumed with fire? Scarcely one stone remaineth upon another; but in the midst of sorrow we have abundant cause of thankfulness that so few are numbered with the slain, whilst our enemies were cut down like the grass before the scythe.

Abigail is a spirited gal. John replies:

> It is not surprising to me, that the wanton, cruel, and infamous conflagration of Charlestown, the place of your father's nativity, should afflict him. Let him know

> that I sincerely condole with him on that melancholy event. . . . Your description of the distresses of the worthy inhabitants of Boston and the other seaport towns is enough to melt a heart of stone. Our consolation must be this, my dear, that cities may be rebuilt. And a people reduced to poverty may acquire fresh property. But a constitution of government, once changed from freedom, can never be restored. Liberty, once lost, is lost forever.

Their marital letters reveal them to be artists of republican friendship. She shares the private family loss with the public war-news; he responds to both. Spouses in a good marriage (whatever its particular form) are first and foremost friends, and friends hold things, private and public, in common. This American Odysseus and Penelope exemplify the republican friendship we would encourage, especially since neither is implicated in the crime of too many of the other Founders, that of slavery. I am not recommending that you and your friend be violent revolutionaries, only that you prepare your private associations for public works of noble note, without sacrificing one for the other. Which is more moving in the letters, the shared consolation over a parent's loss or the encouraged belief in the importance of liberty—both manifest in this mighty, delicate moment of the liberal arts of language? One form your productive goodness can take is just this: the republican friendship of common cause.

Socratic skepticism, Judeo-Christian forgiveness, republican friendship: you already exhibit the Hellenic, the Hebraic and the American virtues. Let these UD habits of soul be the diffusing goods you carry with you long after you have forgotten us and our lessons; let these be the blessings you offer when the fire comes. And the fire will come. Be not afraid: you will be its equal—not only because of your faith, but also because of your education.

But adult life is not all fire. It is something else, as well. Allow me to close with another of John's letters: "Pray remember me to my dear little babes," he writes, "whom I long to see running to meet me and climb up upon me under the smiles of their mother." Adult life informed by liberal education is a powerful goodness—both in the fire and in the smile. As here, that smile is sometimes remembered, sometimes anticipated. Often, it's actual: the smile that knows what it does not know, the smile that forgives what it hopes will be forgiven, the smile that shares what can be shared. This is not the easy emoticon of popular culture; it is the earned gesture of liberal education overflowing, spreading the likeness of itself. There is nothing else quite so useful. You have not simply *received* a liberal education; you *are* a liberal education. Bless you as you bless others with its treasure.