

Senior Convocation Address

May 10, 2007

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President Lazarus, Dean Eaker, esteemed colleagues, and especially to you, the men and women of the class of 2007, thank you for this invitation to address you today. When I first was informed that I had been selected to talk to you today, I was sleepless in Irving that night pondering what to say. Deep in my subconscious I decided to compare you, your experience at UD, and the faculty's role to something, but what I couldn't grasp. Perhaps a favorite equation—my favorite, the Schrödinger equation? But somehow I thought that comparing you to a partial differential equation and its solutions obtained through the Numerov algorithm would fall sadly short of capturing your vivacity despite the fact that that equation describes so much in the subatomic realm. So I turned to another muse, one to which I often turn when tired yet anxious, curious yet unfulfilled; I looked at the poets.

A poem that continues to intrigue and resonate within me since I first came across it last semester is by an influential poet of the late 20th century, William Stanley Merwin, entitled *The Unwritten*¹.

Inside this pencil
crouch words that have never been written
never been spoken
never been taught

they're hiding

Aha, that's it, you're a pencil! And you're not dull, on the contrary, you're quite sharp and always to the point. At this time of year when all of us, including faculty, are short on sleep, resembling more zombies of the living dead than blood and flesh academics, perhaps that analogy is very appropriate. Of course, the administration must like this analogy when soon, as wealthy, productive alumni you will be writing checks to UD. So if each of you is a pencil then we, the faculty, are pencil sharpeners. Now some faculty members are the

old fashioned type that turns round and round to produce a nice sharp point and others of us are sleek electric ones that make a whirling noise. No matter the type of sharpener you been by which you've been honed, you have ideas, thoughts, questions, and desires that Merwin goes on to describe as

they're awake in there
dark in the dark
hearing us
but they won't come out
not for love for time for fire

I, and the rest of the faculty, have struggled to prod those ideas crouching within to move from shadow to reality as written works and oral discussions. How enjoyable, at times, that prodding has been. Having wide-eyed students in class hanging on every word is heartening. Having students who are quite in class burst forth in brilliance on a project or paper is stirring. Having students who grasp the subtleties of a discussion and extend it light years further is uplifting.

Newton's third law tells us that for every action there is an equal but opposite reaction. So every time we pulled to get out an idea from your pencil, you yanked back on us. You transformed us just as we were shaping and molding you. How exciting and delightful it is when students in a class ask questions that we have never thought of, questions that make us dive into the recess of our understanding and stretch our imagination to pull out the unwritten from inside our minds.

even when the dark has worn away
they'll still be there
hiding in the air
multitudes in days to come may walk through them
breathe them
be none the wiser

what script can it be
that they won't unroll
in what language
would I recognize it
would I be able to follow it
to make out the real names

of everything

So what are some of the unwritten thoughts that are yet to gush forth from you? The world in which we live today changes dramatically and profoundly in quantum leaps and on all fronts. I imagine that none of the people on this stage ever thought that they would see the end of communism and the cold war in their lifetimes. And none would have predicted the environmental effects and sociological disasters that beset us now. Nonetheless, guided by the wisdom of great thinkers, we have tried to imprint on your unwritten ideas moral guidance, social purpose, and critical thinking. Our intent resonates with the remarks of Vaclav Havel, poet and politician, in an address to the United Nations on September 8, 2000,

Whenever I encounter any problem of today's civilization, inevitably, I always arrive at one principal theme: the theme of human responsibility. This does not mean merely the responsibility of a human being towards his or her own life or survival; towards his or her family; towards his or her company or any other community. It also means responsibility before the infinite and before eternity; in a word, responsibility for the world.²

The world today is a densely woven fabric of lives on all continents for which poverty in one area, civil unrest in another, and social stagnation in another leads to tears and tears. There are no island continents in a world of electronic technologies; no place left to hide or to withdraw from the global.

So how will you work together in a world that seems to be isolating the individual increasingly more through technology? Economic studies conducted even before the information-technology revolution have shown that as much as 85% of measured growth in US income per capita was due to technological change. Much of the change has focused on communication and data. However, electronic databases don't require us to walk across campus and actually pick up a book when we can access it on JSTOR. Even when everyone has access to technology, there still remains a acute problem: What will induce others share in ideas of the past to forge the future? For example, just about anyone has access to a public library. In libraries we find the greatest, most profound, most illuminating literature that human beings have so far produced. Do most people read these

books? Have they read Dostoevsky or Cervantes? Have they read the sonnets of Shakespeare? or Hegel or Nietzsche? How can we unroll that unwritten script in others if there is no starting point?

Similarly, our iPods bring us gigabytes of classical music or rap without ever entering a symphony hall. Cable and soon your cell phone provide hundreds of channels of entertainment without ever need to discuss a movie with a friend over dinner. We ask what T.S. Eliot decried, “Where is the wisdom that is lost in knowledge? When is the knowledge that is lost in information?”³

We can and we do shut out the world. We become trapped in the “dark in dark.” We close eyes and minds to the suffering and genocide in Darfur and earthquake victims in Pakistan because they are far away, we are busy, and it is convenient to us. We ignore the oppressed in our own country because our lives themselves are already complicated. We pay no heed to how we treat our planet because it is large and we, though many, are small. So how do we move our unwritten from dark of today and into the light of distant tomorrows?

Prayerful patience, listening, and creative vision are essential traits for negotiating life’s challenges. In his time the prophet Habakkuk was likewise confused with an unsettled future for Judah but he trusted in God’s wisdom: “Write the vision. Make it plain upon tablets, for still the vision awaits its time. If it seems slow wait for it; it will surely come. Behold, the one whose soul is not upright shall fail, but the righteous shall live by their faith.”⁴

What does it mean to live by faith? It means to cultivate from your unwritten a vision of what things ought to be like, and then to live that vision into reality.

Many of you have begun to live that vision. As one student reflected on Alternate Spring Break, “I did not go to Lima to put up a school room or build a church, I went to Lima to serve, to bring love, to bring joy, and to receive much more of these things I could have

ever brought.” Another realized that “Ultimately, experiencing the lives of these people in Lima has taught me that Christ isn’t locked up in a tabernacle, but ^{he} his is alive and well in the faces of all of his children. We don’t only see Christ on Sunday in the Blessed Sacrament, but we experience him daily in our brothers and sisters, our priests and teachers, and especially in the poor and sick.”

Your experiences at UD have ignited the transformation that will continue to burn within you to bring to light your unwritten. Right now you may be akin to Eliza Doolittle in Act Four of Shaw’s *Pygmalion*⁵: you’ve returned from the ball where Professor Higgins has won his bet. At that point Eliza slips into depression not knowing where she is going in life. After throwing her slippers at Higgins for not understanding her difficulty in confronting an uncertain future—one in which she can no longer return to a life in the gutter— she cries out “What is to become of me? What is to become of me?”

What is to become of you, of course, is still unwritten and quite frankly it is a scary question that you face as you leave your years of nurturing. But I know that your transformation which resulted from innumerable papers, countless discussions, and loving care will guide you, our pencils, to yet unwritten thoughts. You’ll find an issue in life that swells up within you, that impassions you, that gives your life meaning and a desire, not for greater materialistic worth, but for greater wisdom, understanding, and service to the world.

I will close with Merwin’s last stanza from his poem:

maybe there aren't
many
it could be that there's only one word
and it's all we need
it's here in this pencil
every pencil in the world
is like this

Thank you.

¹ William S. Merwin, *Collected Poems* (Canada: Harper Collins, 1992).

² Vaclav Havel, President of the Czech Republic, Address at the Millennium Summit of the United Nations, <http://www.uno-komitee.de/en/documents/UNMS-2000-VaclavHavel.pdf>.

³ T. S. Eliot, "Choruses from 'The Rock,'" *The Complete Poems and Plays* (New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, 1971), p. 96.

⁴ Habakkuk, *New Bible*, Hab. 2:2-4.

⁵ George Bernard Shaw, *Pymalion* (New York: Pocket Books, 2005).