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College - about as close to Paradise as you're likely to get"

William Frasure, Professor of Government

Remarks to the Class of 2006 at Baccalaureate, May 20, 2006

It's a happy weekend, and for the next day or so, it's surely O.K. to leave off worrying about all the world's looming catastrophes, and be happy. On this happy weekend, it's appropriate to think happy thoughts and talk about happy things.

And if there is a single virtue that is most fitting for this weekend, it is the happy virtue, the happiest virtue of all: gratitude. Gratitude, being appreciative of what we have, especially those good things with whose creation we ourselves had nothing to do. Unlike most virtues, Gratitude costs us nothing, imposes no burdens, and it really makes us feel good — even euphoric — when, say, we find things here on earth that are just like paradise. A sunlit tropical beach. A mountain trail through the aspens when it breaks out into one of those views across the valley. We didn't make them, we just found them. And when you find yourself in paradise, you just can't help feeling grateful for the chance to be there.

So, today, I thought I would share with you a little of what I know about paradise. Most of what I know about paradise comes from songs and movies. About 25 years ago, Steve Martin made a movie musical, *Pennies From Heaven*, about a sheet music salesman during the Depression. There were lots of great old tunes in the movie, and part of the story was that Martin's character really believed in them.

Somewhere the sun is shining
My honey don't you cry
There'll be a silver lining
The clouds will soon roll by

In one scene the salesman pleaded with his wife; "Do you ever listen to the songs? They're true. Don't ya see? Life can really be like that."

Well, what's wrong with that? I'm on his side. Let me tell you about paradise. The first thing to know about paradise is that it is a real place. In fact, it's important that you know it is a real place, right here on Earth. It's not made up. It's not a dream.

Here's another important thing to know about paradise: even though it's real, not a dream, it's like a dream. You walk in a dream and you know you're not dreaming.

It's like a dream, or it's like a movie. Some of the best parts of paradise are those when it's like a movie. You walk around and you feel "This is just like in the movies." Dreamlike. Movielike. But real.

In the musical *Miss Saigon* there's a beautiful song sung by a bargirl. She's imagining that someday a GI will marry her and take her to New York, where:

Our children laugh all day
And eat too much ice cream
And life is like a dream
Dream
The dream I long to find
The movie in my mind

She imagines that New York is paradise. Not for me, but maybe for you.

Another song from another musical, *Little Shop of Horrors*, sung by a shop-girl who lives in a place called "Skid Row" imagines paradise as a house in the suburbs:

And I dream of a place
Where we could be together at last
A grill out on the patio
A washer and a dryer and an ironing machine
Somewhere that's green.

Sounds a lot like "Peace and quiet and open air wait for us, somewhere" doesn't it? But look: "somewhere" means it's really there.

The next thing about paradise: Paradise, at least the movie in my mind, ought to have a beach, the kind with palm trees. Moon of Manikooora playing on the breeze. A place where:

We got sunlight on the sand
We got moonlight on the sea,
We got mangoes and bananas
You can pick right off the tree,
We got volleyball and ping-pong
And a lot of dandy games!

Oh, yeah. Right after that song, in *South Pacific*, comes the greatest evocation of paradise I know: The one that:

"may call you,
Any night, any day,
In your heart you'll hear it call you,
'Come away, come away' . . ."

I know this song is not really about a real island, but there are real islands that are like "Bali Hai, floating in the sunshine, [Its] head's sticking out from a low flying cloud..." There are such places and they are worth looking for. I've been there, and I know.

I think mountains are part of paradise, too. The big shining mountains with green forests on their slopes and snow on the top, trout streams and game trails and fifty-mile views.

I guess we could talk about aspects of paradise all day, but let me get to the one that matters most today. When I was in the fourth grade, I stayed home from school for three or four days with a cold or flu or something. Every morning that week on television was a movie of the type they used to call "college musicals" — at least most of them were musicals. Well, I thought they were fabulous, and they really did give me another image of paradise that you can find right here on earth.

I discovered from these movies that college was a place where everyone was reasonably happy. Even those who were unhappy were only temporarily so. People could do most anything and get away with it, or at least things would turn out OK in the end. These colleges were usually very nice looking places (which, in case I forgot to mention it, is an essential quality of paradise: it has to be beautiful). Life there seemed to revolve around sports and romance and music. Almost every problem was solved with a song.

In several of these movies, the college was in financial trouble, and the kids bailed it out by putting on a show. The faculty were generally a bunch of loonies. In *Horse Feathers*, probably the funniest of all these things, Groucho Marx is the president of Huxley College. He takes over a biology class, gives a lecture wearing one of these things, and, in classic Groucho fashion, with his cigar and eyebrows and weird gestures, demolishes all of the pretensions and self-importance of our profession, but it looks like it could really be fun. *Horse Feathers* involves a big football game (Groucho's Huxley College is out to defeat its archrival Darwin).

In *Too Many Girls*, a bunch of football stars from Harvard, Princeton, and Yale (this was 1940) are hired by Lucille Ball's father to accompany her, incognito, to protect her virtue at Pottawotomie College, supposed to be in New Mexico. One of the chaperones is Desi Arnaz. (Lucy and Desi actually met on the set of this movie.) Of course, the guys end up playing football for Pottawotomie, which goes on to win games from Army, Ohio State, Pitt, Texas, and so on. And in the process they save the college from financial doom. And they sing their alma mater, "You made a lotta me, Pottawotomie."

Now I confess to having suspected that real grown-up college would not be like these places. Still, from these movies, it was easy to get the idea that college is a version of paradise. I mean the ideal "college" — this good old American institution. The idea of a place with broad green lawns, elegant old trees, fine old buildings with generations of memories in their hallways and classrooms. Little worlds that are like gardens. Arcadian sanctuaries from the grit and stress of urban life, commercial life, "real" life.

And I think, just like with beaches and mountains, it's really like that. I don't mean Connecticut College, particularly, but all of these places, the hundreds of them all over this land. Grinnell, Bucknell, Cornell, Nebraska, Wesleyan, Ohio Wesleyan, West Virginia Wesleyan . . . but probably not that Wesleyan.

Things didn't have to be this way. It's easy to imagine a world without college. But, somehow, this one has them. We didn't make them, we just found them. Sometimes you can stand up there next to Blaustein, coming around the corner from the library on a pretty day, and it just hits you: "Here am I, your special island."

We ought to be grateful that we can have these places where life is like a dream.

One final, very important thing about paradise: it's fun. Maybe the most famous musical number in all of the college movies is in *Good News*. In that one, June Allyson had to tutor Peter Lawford so that he could pass a French exam and be eligible to play in the big game. The whole campus is worried, but the kids get themselves back into a good mood by, right there in the classroom, doing the Varsity Drag:

You can pass
Many a class
Whether you're dumb or wise
If you all answer the call
When your professor cries Everybody!
Down on your heels
Up on your toes
Stay after school
Learn how it goes
Everybody do the varsity drag!

Just before that number, someone says: "Hey everybody! What's goin' on here? We can't let school get us depressed, after all the reason we're in college is to have fun, right?"

I hope college was fun for you. I hope it was like being in a movie. It is **about as close to paradise as you're likely to get on this earth.**

Be thankful for it. And congratulations.