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I can't give you a brain, but I can give you a diploma

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CONNECTICUT COLLEGE

Baccalaureate Address 2012

May 19, 2012

“I can’t give you a brain, but I can give you a diploma”

Delivered by The Very Reverend Laurence A.M. LaPointe, Connecticut College Chaplain (“Father Larry”)



Nearly every year the question of the definition of Baccalaureate (not to mention its spelling) arises. For some reason that passes understanding, I am often the target of those questions, so it is a real delight to have the opportunity to get my answer into the official record.

Historically, only master’s and doctoral degrees were honored by inclusion in university commencements. Those receiving bachelor’s degrees, which were understood to be transitional and leading to the higher degrees, were honored at a religious service on the morning of Commencement. That service is believed (at least by Wikipedia) to have originated at Oxford University in 1432, making this year the 580th anniversary of such events.

It is not, as was suggested to me by a student this past week, based on some rites in honor of Bacchus.

Those would have been earlier this week.

So anything that’s nearly 600 years old is bound to change a little. Right? But although the application and audience of the Baccalaureate have morphed over the centuries, the fundamental function remains the same.

First, it is a time for contemplative reflection amid the many activities and festivities associated with Commencement and it draws upon the inspirational writings of many cultures and the diversity of formidable performance skills of the graduates. These days, respecting the religious and philosophical diversity of those participating, the Baccalaureate service draws from a very wide variety of sources for its inspiration.

Second, the Baccalaureate service is also an opportunity for the College to impart some last words of advice to its graduates in its role as alma mater, “Beloved Mother.” Now, you say to yourself, doesn’t the College do just that at Commencement?

Well, yes and no. At Commencement, the keynote speaker is usually a person of note from the world who comes, as it were, to welcome back the graduates to the wider world. At Baccalaureate the keynoter is usually someone with a significant connection to the college community who imparts some wisdom and bids the graduates “fare well” on behalf of the whole college.

Here at Connecticut College, for many years the Baccalaureate was the prerogative of ordained clergy related to one of the graduates and was held in the Harkness Chapel. Within my memory we migrated out of the chapel onto the Chapel Green, then to the Harkness portion of what we now affectionately refer to as Tempel Green, and finally to Palmer Auditorium. And if we have migrated away from the chapel physically, we have also left behind the notion of restricting the speaker to clergy. (Well ... sort of.) We have in the past 30 years heard from presidents of the College, faculty, students, and alumni, past and recent. From my perspective, the gold standard for Baccalaureate addresses was set by Professor Lawrence Vogel in 2007, at which time he said:

“Graduation is forward-looking; it’s about leave-taking and hope. Graduation anticipates your entry into the so-called ‘real world.’ ... The Baccalaureate is backward-looking; it’s nostalgic and opens up a space for gratitude. This ... binds us to our shared past: a gift bequeathed to us by nature and by previous generations.”

So then, here we go.

Both Commencement addresses and Baccalaureate sermons seem to be loaded with advice and invective. And have you noticed how giving advice doesn’t always go well?

In Shakespeare’s play about the tormented and tormenting Danish prince, Polonius, the perennial adviser, doesn’t fare well after delivering himself of a lengthy list of parting cautions to his son, Laertes.

Things are better in Gian Carlo Menotti’s opera “Amahl and the Night Visitors.” Amahl, a young boy who can only get about with the assistance of a homemade crutch, and his mother enter into a touching duet as he prepares to leave home in the company of the three kings in search of the “Child” — and to give thanks for a miracle. In this touching musical exchange, each gives last-minute directions to the other.

“Don’t forget to wear your hat.”

“I shall always wear my hat.”

“Oh, my darling, good bye.”

“Wash your ears.”

“Yes, I promise.”

“Don’t tell lies.”

“No, I promise.”

“I shall miss you very much. I shall miss you very much.”

“Feed my bird.”

“Yes, I promise.”

“Watch the cat.”

“Yes, I promise.”

“I shall miss you very much. I shall miss you very much.”

Literature and films are filled with characters who have set out, like Amahl, or later in life, like Tennyson’s Ulysses, “to strive, to seek, to find, and not to yield.”

Jason and Perseus.

Beowulf and Parsifal.

Pip, Alice, Huck and Frodo.

Dorothy, Anakin and Harry.

The very invocation of their names evokes the excitement of “the Quest” and transports us with great expectations to the world at the bottom of the rabbit hole, the banks of the mighty Mississippi or to Middle Earth. And, while each of us may have a different vision of those fabled places, films have built on the printed word and brought us to a shared vision of Oz and the Galactic Republic/Empire and Hogwarts. Whether fantastic or familiar, the landscape of the quest is always intriguing, but the inner landscape is always where the real action is. The journey itself has the power to transform even the reluctant or oblivious traveler.

And so, now you are the traveler. Like Amahl, you continue on the quest: the quest for truth, the quest for integrity, the quest for bliss. And what will you encounter on your own quest?

Dragons? Debt?

Doubt? Dread?

Deceit or delusion?

And that’s just the D’s!

(You may have encountered one or more of these just during the past week or perhaps they await you in the weeks and years to come!)

Many sources tell us that, just now, the definition of success includes the concept of flexibility, re-invention and innovation. The Intel principle, we might call it.

How then do we pursue the truth, integrity and bliss if we have to change constantly?

What will ground us in a world that is not only the scene of change but the agent of change?

Is Charles Taylor, the eminent Canadian philosopher, right that we have to discover the “Rules” and how to follow them?

Is Alain de Botton, the French writer, right when in his latest book, “Religion for Atheists,” he states that, whether or not we are believers, there is great value for wholeness and healing in ritual?

I suspect for each of you the answer will vary. While we acknowledge that we are bound together by birth and death, in so many other things we are unique. Our perspectives vary and the same experience can create vastly or subtly different responses in each of us. There is no one answer, one path.

Besides, Baccalaureate sermons, like the Oracle at Delphi, are most effective when they are ambiguous. Then they cause the seeker to ask the vital questions — questions that change the unfolding of history, both the personal and the more universal.

Our lives are like a palimpsest. (One last “new thing” before you graduate.) A palimpsest is a parchment or manuscript that has been written on and its writing scraped off so that it can be reused — an ancient form of recycling, and a splendid metaphor. Modern science makes it possible to read the “lost texts.” We, like the palimpsest, are the composite of everything that has been “written” on our lives: the trials and the triumphs, the loves, the losses and the legends.

Paulo Coelho, the Brazilian lyricist and writer, in his novel, “The Alchemist,” tells of a young Spanish shepherd who travels to Egypt searching for a treasure about which he continually dreams, only to find in the end that the treasure was with him all the time.

The treasure is always the goal and the starting point. I think of all the aspects of human life, the spiritual ground from which our hunger for the transcendent and to transcend originates, is the treasure at the heart of our lives.

To seek to transcend one's own self is a part of the secret of the journey.

The scarecrow's brains, the tin woodsman's heart, the lion's courage are all there in a lesser form at the beginning of the journey to Oz. All the wizard does is give the travelers a symbol of what has happened to their longing during the journey.

"I can't give you a brain, but I can give you a diploma!"

(Remember that tomorrow!)

Have you noticed that love and companions are an important element of the quest, especially in modern times? Evolution?

(Spoiler alert.)

In the end, the relationship that has developed among Harry and Hermione and Ron leads to the capstone act of Harry's life as he realizes that love has implications and he sacrifices his life to save his friends. (I come from a religious tradition where self-sacrifice is always the highest sign of love. [John 15:13])

How could he have known that his sacrifice would lead not only to death but, 19 years later, to King's Cross Station and gate 9¾ as he reassures his son at the beginning of his journey?

Is there a wrong path? Are we always looking down two paths as if lost in some personal Robert Frost poem?

Whatever it is that Harry Potter sets out to find in his quest, he appears to be driven by some unseen hand toward his fulfillment.

It's true that all our lives are filled with choices. And it's also true that "the dark side" is always one of the choices available, but all of the protagonists in the stories we've referenced have seemed to have some inner compass that nearly always leads them safely on.

Now, this is perhaps a 21st-century take on "This above all, to thine own self be true," as undoubtedly Shakespeare (or whoever wrote "Hamlet") was expressing Elizabethan ideals of enlightened self-interest when composing Polonius' advice to Laertes.

Apart from a wholesome humility, trust yourself!

Now, will you make mistakes? Oh my, yes. But how does one approach a mistake? Indulge me as I tell you about one of mine. Some years ago the College offered one-week courses, which were out of the ordinary at the end of winter break: courses that would enrich the regular offerings of the catalog but could be developed in a much shorter and more concentrated timeframe than the regular course offerings.

I signed up for a course on iconography. (That's not how to become an icon but how to produce one.) As the course ended and my icon was nearly done, I stood above it with a stylus-compass loaded with white pigment after having drawn the final line around the halo of the saint in the icon.

Distracted by something going on in another part of the room, my inattention to what I was doing allowed a drop of the pigment to fall on the halo. A huge drop of pigment! Oceans are smaller than this drop of pigment!

Horrified and crestfallen, I went to the master, an older gentleman of Russian origins, and asked how I could "fix" it. Would I use a swab, a brush, a rag? What?

"Oh no," he said calmly in his heavily accented but strangely calming voice. "You cannot go back to correct it. You must wait and correct it in the next step of the process."

“You cannot go back ... You must wait and correct it in the next step ...”

Ah, Russian wisdom! I guess that’s why we read Tolstoy and Dostoyevsky.

No experience in the journey appears to be without some merit or eventual value to the whole quest. In fact, often the seemingly inconsequential may eventually turn out to be crucial. I know some of you have graduate school or jobs and internships lined up, but if you’re worried about that job at Home Depot — don’t worry. Everything teaches a lesson.

“Little Gidding” is the final poem of T.S. Eliot’s “Four Quartets,” a series of poems about time, perspective, humanity and salvation. Eliot says:

“We shall not cease from exploring,
And the end of our exploring
Will be to arrive where we started
And know the place for the first time.”

This new sight, the ability to see something familiar as if we were seeing it for the first time, is one of the milestones on the journey. If there is a place for reinvention or innovation in this journey this may be it — to see with new eyes.

So then, the journey is paramount, more important even than the goal. You and all of us together who are the College have shared the journey, share the journey still, and will always share it. You on your journey and Connecticut College on its journey have shared a place and a time with one another. Out of this sharing a unique relationship is born. (This is where the alumni office comes in.)

But now, it’s time for you to fall down the rabbit hole, to fire up your Millennium Falcon or mount your Nimbus 2000. (Be careful! Remember that’s the one that crashed.)

We hear the words from the poem Ithaka, “Hope the voyage is a long one, full of adventure, full of discovery.”

And although we will hear our singers in just a moment proclaim, “Farewell, kind friends whose tender care has long engaged my love,” we will carry one another’s hearts in our hearts. You in the heart of the College and the College in your heart until you find that home which lies deep within you — from which you came and for which you seek.

For “whatever a moon has always meant
And whatever a sun will always sing is you.”
You are “the root of the root and the bud of the bud
and the sky of the sky of a tree called life; which grows
higher than the soul can hope or mind can hide ...”

So:

“Wear your hat ...

Wash your ears ...

Don’t tell lies ...

We shall miss you very much.

We shall miss you very much.”