It has always seemed difficult to begin a speech at the University of Dallas without mentioning tradition. So with your leave, that’s what I’ll do today. Many of us, if not most of us, arrived here four years ago with the intention of gaining an intimate knowledge of the Western Tradition. Coming of the wave of high school accolades and recognitions, we applied ourselves eagerly to debates in Lit Trad. And Philosophy, our pace broken only by Fr. Maguire who made us pause in our remarks and begin again in a complete sentence. Did we love Hector or Achilles? Was Plato really serious about the just city or not? Was Descartes a hero or a villan? As such topics arise with strange frequency on this campus, all too soon we began to feel as though we were the sole, stalwart keepers of this tradition; a sentiment reinforced by our first trip home. We compared our choice for UD with the various choices of our high school friends. People, with whom we’d spent many years of our lives, suddenly became less familiar when discussions of Greek society involved absurd rituals of hazing and pledging, rather than the Odyssey or the Republic. “My God,” we said to ourselves, “Am I the only one learning anything?

Christmas and summer had even stronger effects, where time with relatives was equally disheartening. When we heard “Now where are you going to school again,” or “What do you expect to do with that major,” a few too many times from those we love, we fled to the telephone or email to commune with those like us. Eventually this loneliness became an intellectual independence and individuality for which we were proud.

The return to campus was a new homecoming. We were back in the one place in our world that gave serious thought to our cultural history and refinement; that asked the metaphysical questions and gave rational answers. We had come back at last to our city on the hill.
And then we traveled to Rome and saw our pretensions of knowledge, isolation, and elitism shatter before our eyes. The incarnation of the Western Tradition in art, music, manners, and indeed, the spirit of everyday life, about which we had only read but not yet lived, dwarfed our intellectual independence and, even at times, our faith.

I remember how, during our tour of Greece, I was suddenly overcome with the desire for the perfect Greek T-shirt. After a patient and discriminating search, I at last found one with a quote from Pericles’ Funeral Oration. Unbeknownst to me the shirt read in Greek, “We love beauty with thrift and knowledge without weakness”—a bold statement for any human being to make, especially one who only knew his little Latin and no Greek. Over the next few days I tried to ascertain the meaning of my T-shirt, but Dr. Hatley and Dr. McShane, rusty in their Greek could only provide me with sentence fragments. Had Dr. Ambler been on hand he would have closed his eyes and recited the passage by heart, but unfortunately, we were not in his company. After a few weeks, the perfect Greek T-shirt became one of many that on any given day was hopefully clean enough to wear. As I stepped off the bus one day in Albano, an Italian woman shouted something at me that I couldn’t understand. Certain that I had done something wrong I said “Escusi,” and began searching for my error.

“Periclese!” she repeated.

Realizing that I was wearing my perfect Greek shirt I looked back at her and said, “Oh, Pericles!”

“No,” she replied, “Periclese,” and she began to read my shirt aloud with ease and great joy.

If it was Greek to me, it was flawless Greek, and if any human could claim to love beauty with thrift and knowledge without weakness it was this hefty Italian lady, who could quote Thucydides at the bus stop. She came closer, patted me on the back and in the same motion
pushed me out of the doorway. She had places to go and I was holding her up. Never have I found the theory of relativity to have a more pointed example. Across the sea, in the sight of my family and friends, I was a young man abroad, on his way to cultural refinement, but to this great Italian lady, I was a twenty year old tourist, whose cultural refinement was about as absent as his bus manners.

If you’ll indulge me, to carry our theme through to the end requires another story. Again in Greece, Brian Hildebrand convinced a band of us to take a trip down to the Piraeus in search of an ancient lion statue, graphitied with Viking runs. After a brutally hot and smelly metro ride we arrived at the ancient port, which was considerable less savory than in Socrates’ time. After almost two hours of walking up and down the docks, the lion was nowhere to be found. When our troop was at a state of near mutiny, we suddenly beheld the lion, which was of course nothing but a poor cement copy of the original graphitied with Greek spray paint rather than ancient runs. A young girl curiously inquired about why tourists like us were in this part of town. Brain answered, and the young girl replied in more colorful German, “You came all the way down here to see this piece of junk?” The end result of our educations has been equally unexpected, but thankfully, not such a raw deal as our trip to the Piraeus.

A friend of mine recently described our education here at UD as a journey from pride to humility to courage, and I think he is quite correct. We are no longer the masters and possessors of the Western Tradition we fancied ourselves to be as freshmen. Quite the opposite, hopefully we gained the courage to admit that we know nothing, but by careful study, have formed some opinions we believe to be true.

Still, there is another, more significant product of this transformation. Above all else, I’ve seen my peers learn how to seek the truth in a spirit of charity. In my final years at UD, I’ve
found this to be the most beautiful and powerful trait among the friends and classmates I've come to love dearly. It is a spirit that makes old friends from high school amiable again, and the more practical members of our family tolerable. It is in this spirit we recognize that while gaining final knowledge as such may be as unlikely as changing our friend’s opinions of Hector, or Tocqueville, or Austin, the attempt itself has made us happier and better people.

For example, I’ve never be able to fill Scott Hastings thick head with the true opinion that the study of politics is superior to the study of economics, but I’ve always been able to fill his glass and enjoy a free evening to laugh with him.

Finally, I do believe there is something we at UD singularly possess, and that is our sense of humor and the great memory of this journey we’ve made together. There is only one place where I can say single phrases like “Toastboy,” “Adam’s Mark,” or “No, on campus” that will have immediate recognition. There is only one place where the gentleman’s game is considered good humor. There is only a certain group of people with whom we’ve felt former athleticism slip away, like when Gregg Wolfe threw out his back carrying jugs of wine home from the SMA. We could go on and on with such things and we will in the next few days.

Having given the nature of our journey some thought, I don’t believe that I will ever get to share the same kind of joy and humor with another group of people in this life.

And in the end, I don’t think I would want to.