THE GRAMMAR
OF THE MIND

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We are especially grateful to have our families gathered here, together for the first and last time in our four years at the University of Dallas. It is they who have most noticed the progress we have made. From that first Thanksgiving at home, to our all-too-brief Christmas and summer breaks, until now, they have watched us change.

Perhaps it was they who first noticed, in our freshman and sophomore years, that we had picked up a new and interesting little vice, a bad habit this school is famous for: of course, I am speaking of talking, incessant talking.

After those first intense semesters of classes and dorm life, we had become talkers. Although some of us were talkers when we came to UD, most picked it up their freshman year. After all the experiences of Rome, there were few who hadn’t caught the bug.

We had met a new world of people and places, and learned a great amount in a short time. When we were home on breaks, all that had been packed in came billowing out. No dinner conversation was safe from one of our outbursts. Something, some word, would spark our memory, our faces would light up: “Oh, have I ever told y’all about so-and-so,” or “When I was in Rome (‘blah blah blah’).” Yes, we were incorrigible gabbers, and thought our new-found love for talking was a pleasant addiction.

The curriculum, too, was having its effect on us. No longer did it take us all night to put out the 500-word Lit. Trad. essay. Our essay topics became less ambitious: no more “Justice in Dante’s Inferno” or “Free Will in Paradise Lost.” And while, at first, asking the professor questions was seen as “kissing up” or “brownie points,” at some point curiosity took over and we began to ask questions in class; we asked questions even at the risk of undermining yet another opinion we once thought was secure.

After several semesters, intellectual confidence came: we thought our torch was lit for us to let shine; we thought ourselves equipped to win any argument, to defend any truth; we had our one-up on the rest of the world, and we were ready to march out there and prove ourselves right.
But this triumphalism “has faded, is fading, will fade.” The next universal experience this class will share is the realization that America is not waiting on our doorstep, ready for our lecture on philosophy and the ethical life. And then we may ask ourselves: Is this what our education has prepared us to be—so many Cassandras, with all the answers to no one’s questions?

To solve this problem, we must go deeper into what our education has done for us. In short, it was not intended to give us all of the answers. Can we think of any course in which, at the end, the professor handed us a torch and told us to set the world aflame? That is not the purpose of a liberal education.

We will leave here not with torches, but with habits of reflection. Our education has done much more than give us the right answers to life’s questions: we have been freed from the trap of our own minds, and our often inherited opinions. We were not born knowing how to speak; we learned by hearing our parents and siblings talk, and, later, with the help of grammar classes. Similarly, we did not come here knowing how to ask questions; we learned to ask questions in our conversations with our professors, friends, and in our core classes—the liberal arts are the grammar of the mind.

There is a story in Greek mythology that reveals the true nature of this new grammar, or rather, of the dangers this grammar frees us from. It is the story of Echo and Narcissus. Echo, the myth tells us, was a very talkative nymph who lived on a remote mountain with her sister nymphs. Zeus was very fond of these nymphs, to say the least. So when Zeus’ jealous wife Hera would come looking for him on the mountain, Echo would rush down and delay Hera with endless chatter, giving her sister nymphs time to escape.

Eventually, Hera caught on to this deception, and was furious. She placed a curse on Echo: Echo could not speak, except to repeat the last words that others had said. Soon afterwards, Echo met Narcissus, who was wandering through the woods. He was the most handsome youth in the world, and so Echo rushed up to speak with him, but could not. After the confusion that followed, Narcissus ran away, and Echo hid herself in a cave. Today, only her voice remains, repeating what we say.

Narcissus did not fare much better. He happened upon a pond, and leaning over to drink, saw his reflection for the first time. He was so taken by his own image that he could not move, but remained there, speaking to his reflection until he passed away and was transformed into a flower.

As I said, this story shows us the freedom we have achieved through our liberal education. We have found the freedom to reflect, and to think on our own—not just repeat what we’ve heard at home or in class. We have been freed from the curse of Echo, who could not ask questions or think for herself, but could only repeat the things she had been told. We have learned to reflect on what we’ve been told, and we have learned the art of asking questions.

Our liberal education has also freed us from the opposite extreme of being one who certainly can think for himself, but believes he can think for everyone else as well. This is one who cannot ask questions, thinking he has nothing to learn from others. Rather he says “Learn from me, though I be proud of heart.” His name is Narcissus, and he has lost the sense of wonder by which he first began to learn. He looks at others, hoping only to see his own reflection in them. He talks to others, hoping to hear his own opinions come from their lips. Narcissus could not respect what others had to show him, what insights others had to share. Narcissus did not have UD to teach him.

Clear of these snares, we have been freed to share in that most noble uniting of two souls, which is friendship. It has been said that friendship is a love of one’s own, that we tend to befriend those like ourselves. That may be. It is also true that in the past four years our minds have developed, our souls have grown. What we can now consider “our own” has immeasurably expanded, beyond former (often partisan) confines.

For the past four years, we have confronted thinkers from every Western school of thought; but it has been more than a mere confrontation.
In a confrontation, one can be dismissive of the opposing point of view. The essence of the liberal arts, however, is seeing the insights these thinkers have to offer, seeing each genius in his own right. These thinkers have come alive for us, engaged us, and challenged us. Perhaps their challenge was formidable, and our faith was shaken; but now our faith is no less solid, and it is much more lucid and diffusive.

Friendship is not so different. Friendship is impossible if one approaches others confrontationally; rather, friendship has a knack for finding common ground. It is generous in making allowances and unwilling to dismiss someone when their errors have been found.

This does not mean that we have become “comfortably numb” to reality. Much less does it mean that our capacity to make moral judgments has been eroded, so that “everything is good.” It does mean that, unlike Narcissus, we know ourselves for what we are, having the modest disposition of judging ourselves more strictly than others; and it means that, unlike Echo, we will not repeat the mantras of our society without reflection. We will continue to raise intelligent questions, and we will lead others to do the same.

This liberal spirit is the fruit of the liberal arts; this is what our liberal society needs. And all of this has been given to us by the University of Dallas. On behalf of the Class of 1997, I would like to show my gratitude to our faculty and administration for making this possible. Please join me in applauding them.

1. A. Lincoln, Speech to the Young Men’s Lyceum, 1838.

Kevin Majeres graduated from the Constantin College of Liberal Arts at the University of Dallas as co-valedictorian for the class of 1997, with a Bachelor of Arts degree in Politics. He gave this address at the commencement ceremonies for Constantin College and the Braniff Graduate School on May 18, 1997.

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