I deeply appreciate this opportunity to share some reflections with you. Or, really, to continue a dialogue with you, often enough a voiceless conversation, that has gone on now for close to four years. One does not communicate only in words, but also in gestures and various expressions of concern, not always audible, yet still real enough.

Again I do thank you, although receiving your generous invitation early this past Monday morning...allowing me to share at least momentarily in a version of last-minute-paper-writing-anxiety-itis was perhaps too generous.

The senior convocation allows one to speak, to give voice, to certain reflections then that are not necessarily an ordinary part of the academic exchange of teacher and students in, say, a history course. These particular thoughts may be noticed at times, perhaps in a reading, but creating a sort of critical mass out of them requires a different, more appropriate moment...such as this.

Two images immediately came to mind early Monday morning, both of which have troubled me before this. One is from Erich Remarque’s All Quiet on the Western Front, the extraordinary anti-war novel published just a few years after World War I. The film version is perhaps even more vivid, but the moment I am thinking of comes early in the book when Paul Baumer and his fellow German soldiers are discussing their schoolmaster, Kantorek, an unabashed enthusiast who had strongly encouraged them to join the army to serve the
fatherland. The novel, of course, portrays the basic insanity of the life these soldiers were leading on the Western front. What of Kantorek's responsibility for their predicament? What of the teacher's responsibility to his students?

There were thousands of Kantoreks, all of whom were convinced that they were acting for the best - in a way that cost them nothing. And that is why they let us down so badly. For us lads of eighteen they ought to have been mediators and guides to the world of maturity, the world of work, of duty, of culture, of progress - to the future. We often made fun of them and played jokes on them, but in our hearts we trusted them. The idea of authority, which they represented, was associated in our minds with a greater insight and a more humane wisdom. But the first death we saw shattered this belief...we had suddenly learned to see.¹

You all have been a captive audience now for almost four years. (In fact, we might subtitle commencement 'a release from captivity.') Whose risk is it when I am speaking to you as I am doing now? Should I just help to send you off into that supposed "real world" with a few unreflective and encouraging platitudes like those of the patriot Kantorek? Or, might I affirm something about that world of work and duty and culture that indeed is real, but also a hard saying?
The other image is of a child on a carousel. Phoebe Caulfield. Her brother Holden has been wandering around in J.D. Salinger's Catcher in the Rye looking for something, whether the authentic, humanity, meaning, some connection with post-World War II America. He gets a kick out of ten-year old Phoebe, her innocence especially. He likes to be around her, she seems so mature. And he feels protective toward her given his own less than happy experiences of adults, young and old, and their world. In his mind's eye, Holden imagines saving children like Phoebe from falling off a cliff. "That's all I'd do all day. I'd just be the catcher in the rye and all." In the end, though, Holden comes to terms with his attempt to protect innocence while watching Phoebe on a carousel in New York City:

All the kids kept trying to grab for the gold ring, and so was old Phoebe, and I was sort of afraid she'd fall off the [xxx] horse, but I didn't say anything or do anything. The thing with kids is, if they want to grab for the gold ring, you have to let them do it, and not say anything. If they fall off, they fall off, but it's bad if you say anything to them.¹

Maybe UD is really a carousel, and when your ride is ending, one should say nothing but God speed, good-bye?

What all of this is leading to is a decision to speak to you - the haunting
and cautionary examples of Kantorek and Holden Caulfield notwithstanding - about a four-letter word. It sounds almost trite, especially given the ease of its use, but it is actually a hard word, or rather a hard-edged reality. It probably was what Holden was looking for; we do not know enough about Kantorek to decide whether he had advanced beyond the patriotic brand. This four-letter word is love.

Remember Henry Adams and his big book in Am Civ II? the book recently named by Modern Library as the twentieth-century’s "best English-language work of non-fiction"? You remember him, fondly I am sure, as forever musing about multiplicity and unity, about the avalanche of technological and scientific progress in the late nineteenth century. But more to the point you recall his perplexities caused by the absence of some principle of order, some intellectual or otherwise thread or strand upon which to place all of these modern pearls, these tokens of man’s expertise, in order to understand the meaning of life, of human existence, at the turn of this terrible century. Remember his systematic if idiosyncratic rejection of philosophy, science, politics, academe, religion...as grounds or foundations for such meaning? In the end his own response to this recognizably postmodern dilemma is an exhortation to offer oneself to a sort of existential self-creation...with no apparent sense of a transcending love or transformning community, but buoyed perhaps by the traditional solace of heroism and
surrounded by a sympathetic civility. Adams’ pose is as a pilgrim, with no distant shore in sight....Perhaps modern man writ large? Yet others have written, too.

Consider James Baldwin, the black American novelist, guiding his nephew in the mid-1960s in _The Fire Next Time_ as to how the child should respond to the racial hatred of whites:

The really terrible thing, old buddy, is that you must accept them. And I mean that very seriously. You must accept them and accept them with love. For these innocent people have no other hope...these men are your brothers - your lost younger brothers. And if the word integration means anything, this is what it means: that we, with love, shall force our brothers to see themselves as they are, to cease fleeing from reality and begin to change it.³

And consider Dorothy Day, and her own rather different integration, one of faith and culture, of liturgy and community, of love of God and love of neighbor, especially the poor, in the Catholic Worker movement dating from the 1930s. And notice her echoing of Baldwin, though with a more profound grounding in the reality of God: "the holy man was the whole man, the man of integrity, who not only tried to change the world, but to live in it as it was." Or again, notice her description of the synthesis she was seeking, this abundant life, this answer to the "long loneliness": it was "loving God and loving our brother,
and living close to him in community so we can show our love for him.  

The hard part, of course, and you know that you have already experienced it at UD - very much part of the real world - is that other than ourselves few people seem very lovable. Or, maybe even we ourselves seem mostly unlovable. It is a risk to speak about this out loud. It is a risk to seem less than completely in control. It is a far greater risk to seek to live this way in a world which often seems, let's face it, so unredeemed, a world of selfishness and self-promotion, of remorseless competitiveness rather than selfless and abiding service. The new Adams appear to wander about in the late twentieth-century world Henry Adams was watching at its birth, searching now for such as self-fulfillment and self-esteem, but always seemingly burdened by self. Yet, there are the counter voices of a James Baldwin; a Dorothy Day, both pointing in a quite different direction toward love, but speaking without self-righteousness. We say easily that God is love, but remember it is a love that was crucified, and the way of this love, by our own designs, is not necessarily straight, paved, or easy. To seek to be holy, to be Christ-like, is to cultivate a selfless love, and it is the way to true happiness, and to our real assurance, an assurance and a happiness so many of us seek in so many different places. But faith and grace are gifts we have not earned, never weapons, nor emblems of our special status. Rather they are gifts, the fruits of which are to be shared in our world, in our time, with our neighbors, unlovable as they (or
we) may seem. But, to share, to love, is to risk,...and surely to love selflessly is often to embrace a life-long struggle with a self that wants nothing of such risk.

My ending is simply to leave with you a favorite prayer, by St. Francis de Sales, that speaks to this great risk to which we are called, this struggle to love, to be loved, but a prayer which speaks with great hope (and therefore with great certitude):

BE AT PEACE

Do not look forward in fear to the changes of life; rather look to them with full hope, that, as they arise, God, whose very own you are, will lead you safely through all things. And when you cannot stand it, God will carry you in His arms.

DO NOT FEAR

what may happen tomorrow. The same everlasting Father who cares for you today will take care of you then and every day. He will either shield you from suffering, or will give you unfailing strength to bear it.

BE AT PEACE

and put aside all anxious thoughts and imaginations.
Thomas W. Jodziewicz

University of Dallas

Senior Convocation

6 May 1999
1. Erich Maria Remarque, *All Quiet on the Western Front* (New York: Fawcett Crest, 1925), 16-17.

