Senior Convocation

UD Convocation, 2003

[Greetings, exclamations, in Italian.]

It is indeed a moment of high emotion for me to be here with you again – both with you expectant graduates, my friends from Rome, and with you my colleagues on the faculty and staff, my friends of yesteryear from Irving. Thank you all very much for this opportunity to return to a UD Convocation after a 9-year absence. As wonderful as it is to be back, I confess to feeling a bit disoriented. The bricks on the mall seem fairly level now, and I thought that Carpenter Hall had been swallowed up into the mud long ago. Some things are roughly as they were when I saw you last, but many are different, and I am not sure that I have my bearings.

It did help me to feel at home again when, on walking into Haggar late last night I heard the bellowing voice of Katie DeFusco, extending to me from long distance a warm and very welcome greeting; and further evidence that I was in the right place was supplied by John Russo, was once again busy causing disturbances by throwing water out of windows in the Student Apartments.

But look at you students! In Rome, I saw you as a vast and cheering throng of toga-clad students all in white, wreathed with olive branches, incited by Christine, Jon, Gwyneth, and Terry, and eager to win honor in the great Geek Olympics, competing at tug-of-war, balloon-popping, and the daring egg-toss. Now what do I see? A throng of robe-wrapped students, all in black, with smart flat hats, with tassels even. I can sense in an instant that you are a solemn crowd, here on a mission, no longer sophomores on a lark.

You invited me to say goodbye to you and reflect on your 4 years at UD, but my inclinations are instead to say goodbye to myself, and to reflect on my 23. My wife, Corlin, our children, and I have many friends here – family, really – and many deep debts of gratitude, so in inviting me, you ran the risk that I would become distracted, overwhelmed at being with old friends again, or that I would seize your Convocation to express the Amblers’ deep thanks to many of those present. And besides, there is gossip to catch up on, and this too could distract me. I don’t even know for example the aftermath of that wedding we celebrated in Rome, the one between Greg and Kate: Has it been consummated yet?

Your distinctive garb reminds me, however, that this is an occasion with a special function, so let me turn from my departure to yours. The issue of the moment is: What is the character and importance of the education for which you have worked for four years?

This is a complex question, to which I would like to give several answers – if time permitted, but it does not – for UD has much to offer. Even the shortest of lists would have to mention the contributions of the Kellys’ dramas of extraordinary quality, Rich Olenick and his remarkably strong Physics Program, an excellent English Department which has grown even stronger with good new hires, the top-notch pre-Med Program put together by Sister Clo and Frank Doe, and so forth. And then, of course, there are the extracurricular contributions to your growth here, like friendships, Charity Week, European travels, and participation on athletic teams. But partly for brevity’s sake, I will respond more globally, and speak more personally. To summarize, I have been happy to have been associated with UD because it is radical to the core, even if it looks ordinary or conservative on the outside.
Here is a example of what I mean, an example which might also serve as a metaphor. When I interviewed for a position here way back in November 1978, a couple of years before you expectant graduates were born, I was taken to dinner and, in a mostly pleasant way, cross-examined to see what I thought and how I thought. And because much was at stake — for I had no other good job prospects — I was continually sizing up my own performance, and imagining how I was doing in the eyes of each of my table-mates. I remember being least worried about the guy who ordered a martini before dinner and then seemed to sink into a deep reverie, with eyes half-closed. And, being a Yankee, I worried even less because on meeting him, I had heard a drawl of the sort I did not associate with penetrating intellect. But halfway through the meal, I had to adjust my appraisal, for suddenly he entered the conversation and his questioning grew intense and persistent, and when I tried to protect myself by showing my learning and dropping a Greek word or two, my drawling inquisitor upped the ante and came back with a display of erudition and incisiveness such that if I had been held to meeting his standards, I never would have gotten the job.

Like my interlocutor on that occasion, the curriculum here seems at first to be unassumming and in no way threatening, but it is potent, pure dynamite, and it asks a lot of questions that make one uncomfortable.

Yes, the Core requires students to study old books, admire ancient art, and try to understand the history of times gone by. Yes, much of the modern world supposes that what is old is stodgy, conventional, and outdated. Yes, core curricula were more common fifty years ago than they are today. But if we unpack the content of this traditional education even a little and look at it from the inside, what we begin to see is a truly radical undertaking. The study of western literature, science, philosophy, social science, and theology does not reveal clear lines of development that support the views we currently embrace. Rather, it discloses a rich array of radical alternatives.

Every good graduate of the University of Dallas should see and even feel the genius of the Founding Fathers of this country, a single one of whose Federalist Papers contains greater political wisdom than can be found in a week’s worth of contemporary political commentary. But this same graduate should have had at least a glimpse of the genius also of such thinkers as Plato, Marx, and Nietzsche, no one of whom would have supported without serious reservations the principles of the US Founding. To study the UD Core is to learn that there are serious alternatives not only to knee-jerk patriotism but even to liberal democracy itself.

Every good graduate of the University of Dallas should take seriously the doctrine of papal infallibility, but this same graduate should also know the origins and explicit limitations of this doctrine, as well as knowing something of the great deeds performed by some of the popes and of the corruption of a few others. To study the UD Core is to learn alternatives to automatic and complete support for every papal pronouncement.

UD should not be understood as creating a comforting home of “traditional values.” Still less should it be refashioned to embrace warmly the latest intellectual trends or social fashions. What we study here is, and should remain, a battleground of competing ideas. If it does nothing but comfort you, or mirror mainstream educational opinion, something is wrong: it should perplex, challenge, haunt, excite, and vex you, not reassure you that on all great questions on God and man, nature and culture, beauty and truth, by golly, you have been right all along and,
conveniently, no difficult adjustments need to be made.

The Core is not a collection of books by dead, white, men who are united in thought and clumsily endorse the oppression of women and people of color without even realizing it; it is a potent mix of living ideas that agree neither with each other nor with you. This mix should hit you harder than Shock and Awe, from all directions – though since the assault is intellectual, some can live through it without even noticing.

This is not the way all liberal arts programs understand themselves. Some liberal arts programs exist not to uncover and examine fundamentally different accounts of nature, man, and God, but rather to smooth the rough edges of their young students, to make them better able to enjoy music, art, film, and drama and to add a dimension to their conversation. I value such endeavors, but this is Liberal Education Lite and should not be confused with a program that requires careful reflection on opposed understandings of fundamental issues.

Other liberal arts programs emphasize rather the complex history that led to the modern world, to trace our roots or lineage, so to speak, and show the continuity in Western Civilization, a continuity that connects us with the noble Greeks, the potent Romans, the devout early Christians, the opulent Renaissance, and the knowledge-hungry Enlightenment. This too is a useful endeavor, but it is far better, and far more demanding, to show in addition the discontinuities – both the way we moderns have rejected our past to travel a new route and the ways our various different pasts are in tension one with another. Everything does not come together nicely and culminate in us, certainly not everything good.

The UD I have so enjoyed distinguishes itself by its success in helping students and faculty see that there are disagreements on questions that touch the core of our lives. Can nature be best explained by matter in motion? Are there laws which govern it? Is love unselfish, or is the lover always after something? Is there a God? If so, an active and personal God, or one too distracted to worry about the problems of the world here below?

In short, UD is not just another Catholic liberal arts college, and cannot be allowed to become such. It is a rare and fine place in which students and faculty members are encouraged when they try to address difficult questions like these.

What I have said is liable to at least one huge objection on a rather sensitive point: I say the UD Core is radical, but UD also has the reputation of being a conservative Catholic university. How can this be?

Certainly I have seen closed minds. Certainly I have been saddened to see some young people who had made their minds up prematurely, who had refused to see that the world is a confusing, mysterious, and wonder-inducing place, who insisted on Newton’s world before even considering Einstein’s, as it were. Certainly there are young militants who by age 18 have figured everything out and are – thank you very much – in need of no further instruction. But they are the exception here, in no way the rule. And since thinking is difficult, we should never be surprised if some are not eager for it.

I came to UD because I was offered a job. I came as a Protestant, and a Yankee, with a couple of Big Name Universities on my resume, and I did not expect much. The students would be, well, parochial and dogmatic, and the heat oppressive.

I was right about the heat, but I was wrong about the students, and I began to sense how things might be the moment Dr. Alvis finished his martini and began to cross-examine me: they
would be challenging, but wonderful and exciting at the same time. Almost a quarter of a century later, I still admire both the hidden radicalism of UD’s educational mission and her open and proud Catholicism, even if in the eye of the general public, these qualities seem opposed.

I have seen today’s graduates for a semester at most, but my guess is that all who know them will grant that, at their best, they are remarkably good, for what else can one say of students like Sean Lewis, Janet Hendrickson, or Bethany Lee, to mention only a few who distinguished themselves in Rome? What I can add is that for as long as I have been here, UD has managed to attract, nurture, and satisfy students of this same high caliber, the caliber of the Great Graduating Class of the Year of our Lord 2003. And if the names of students from past decades would mean anything to you, I could easily recite for you now from memory my own honor roll of remarkable UD grads from years gone by. UD is not just any Catholic liberal arts college.

Nietzsche declared that God is dead, and more than a few big name scholars think they have buried Reason as well. For many American youths, these opinions merely state what they take to be obvious and may be met with a wide yawn. For UD students, these opinions are challenges, invitations to reexamine convictions and to see where the truth may lie. Their faith has not closed their minds but, to the contrary, has made it easier for them to see that ideas are not merely adornment but are at the center of our existence. They matter. UD is not just any Catholic liberal arts college.

It would be ridiculous to say, because we together have not answered, nor even fully formulated, the kinds of questions at the heart of UD’s approach to education, that we have not enjoyed enormous benefits from collaborating on this challenging enterprise. But it is useful and proper, as we look back over a job generally well-done, to consider how high, and indeed how pressing, the aspirations of serious students and teachers can and should be. If you have used your opportunity here to the fullest, it will have been not merely pleasant, but a source of spiritual strength and intellectual richness that will abide with you -- and be of use to your friends -- for the rest of your lives.

by
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