

"The Relevance of a Liberal Education in the 21st Century and ... Beyond"

Keynote Address of Christopher B. Nelson, President of St. John's College, Annapolis, Maryland at a Colloquium at the University of Mary Washington on the Future of Liberal Education, November 5, 2007.

Thank you for the opportunity to join you in your centennial year conversation about a vision for Mary Washington in light of the challenges we are facing in our world today and those we expect to face in the years ahead.

I have been asked to address the question of the continued relevance of a liberal education. My position will probably come as no surprise to those of you who are familiar with St. John's College. A liberal education will always be relevant, irrespective of the century we are born into or the condition of the world about us. This is because a liberal education, properly conceived, is an education designed to liberate the human spirit and to free the human intellect from unnatural or unhealthy constraints.

This is my message, plain and simple: as long as we are human, a liberal education will remain necessary for us to achieve our human potential and therefore necessary for our happiness.

A liberal education may nonetheless be a peculiar privilege belonging to those of us who live in a free society, a privilege we should both be grateful for and willing to fight to protect.

To frame my argument, I've divided my remarks into two parts. First, I'll try to make a case for liberal education, its precarious place in our society, and why we should care to promote it. Then, I'll turn to the question of mechanics, how we might organize ourselves to protect liberal education from the many threats to it, both internal and external.

I'd like to appeal to an ancient hero of mine to help me argue the case for liberal education. I think his case is as timely today as it was when he made it. I am speaking of Socrates, the warrior for liberal learning who lost his life in defense of the spirit of inquiry that lives at the very heart of liberal education.

Let me start at the end...in the final weeks of Socrates' life. Recall the setting in Plato's *Apology*, as told by his immortal character, Socrates. Socrates is on trial for his life, defending himself against charges of impiety and corruption of the youth of Athens. Instead of denying the charges, or offering to amend his behavior, or arguing that he means no harm, Socrates speaks like the star witness for the prosecution. Take this example:

"I was attached to this city by the god – though it seems a ridiculous thing to say – as upon a great and noble horse which was somewhat sluggish because of its size and needed to be stirred by a kind of gadfly. It is to fulfill some such function that I believe the god has placed me in the city. I never cease to rouse each and every one of you, to persuade and reproach you all day long and everywhere I find myself in your company."

It is typical of Socrates that he makes it hard for us to determine just when he intends to deny the charges brought against him and when he would positively embrace them. Socrates is a defense attorney's worst nightmare and a grave digger's delight; when in a hole, he will take up the shovel and dig himself deeper.

Presented with one bill of particulars, Socrates adds new charges to the list against him. Prosecuted for threatening the city's good order, for challenging its authority figures and questioning their wisdom, he claims to be a gift to the city...and not just any old gift, but a gift of the god. Threatened with death for his behavior, he gives no thought to himself, but instead begs to argue the case for the city. He asks the jury, for its own sake and the sake of the city, to avoid mistreating god's gift to them by condemning Socrates, the city's greatest blessing --- a blessing in the form of a gadfly, attached to the city, to stir it and rouse each of its citizens, to persuade and reproach them, all day long and everywhere. On trial at age 70, Socrates will not go quietly into retirement. His jury was sufficiently impressed with his defense that it sentenced him to

death. It does not take much imagination to picture what a pain in that noble horse's rear this gadfly, Socrates, must have been.

I apologize for giving away the outcome of the trial so early in my talk. But I wanted to open my remarks with reference to it because I think that each of us here has something at stake in this trial, at least something at stake in Socrates' defense. Socrates certainly thinks so, and he will fight for it with all he has, comparing himself, ironically but rightly, I think, to Achilles, the hero of Homer's Iliad: a man of action, praised for his courage, his warrior's excellence, and his fighting spirit. (More about this later.)

Perhaps, I am also drawn to the dialogue as a former trial lawyer. While I cringe when Socrates mocks both his accusers and his citizen jury, I cheer at his courage and willingness to embrace the claim that he may be both a threat to the established power structure and a gift to the city. Armed only with questions and the will to question relentlessly, he threatens the status quo and the peace of mind of the city's public opinion shapers, and challenges the citizens' thoughtless acceptance of whatever they are told. Socrates is a destabilizing influence. Is he really the blessing to the city that he claims to be?

Let us first look at our city. Socrates claims that Athens is great and noble, made sluggish by its size. What can he have meant by this? Not every city is great and noble. Indeed, we learn in a later dialogue that Socrates would rather be put to death in Athens than be released to live anywhere else. I can imagine a number of ways to think about the problem of this great city, but I'd like to offer one for now. Athens is a democracy, or a kind of democracy of free male citizens; it is built upon a respect for the individual and a trust that its citizens are capable of self-governance. Surely, the protection of a democracy and the freedom of its citizens require that those citizens have an education both in the traditions of the city and in the arts of freedom. Yet, the traditions of a city, its customs, its idols, and even its laws, will frequently be at odds with the very things that encourage the autonomy of the individual citizen--those arts that allow us to think for ourselves and to question the city fathers, popular opinion, and social custom.

One might say that a democracy of any size can only work well if its citizens agree on the need to hold on to this tension between the needs of an ordered society and the needs of a free people. I imagine that only in such societies can a Socrates have a home. Athens may be the best hope of a home for the free individual. But it may also be that in any well-ordered and relatively happy society there will always be a tendency for the people to fall asleep, to become comfortable in their prosperity, to follow without much reflection the will of the many or the lead of our elected officials, and to ignore, resent or repress the individual voice that would challenge custom, question the status quo, or shake the comfort of its citizens. Let me call this tendency to sleep a form of decay or corruption of a democratic society, which can only be countered by the wakeful vigilance of its citizens and the persistent effort to find ways of renewing the city's spirit, recalling it to its purposes. If the city's business is justice, its citizens need to be alert to signs of corruption and open to correction; they need to be able to think about what is right and wrong, not just what is comfortable or expedient--to think about building a better tomorrow, not just protecting their inheritance.

The liberally educated man or woman, like Socrates, should be the spur to such vigilance. The chief work of this vigilant citizen would seem to consist of prodding us to wakefulness, to keep us from the smug self-satisfaction that comes from sleeping through life without examining who we are and what we ought to become. We should be kept awake to this self-examination even if we can't resolve the questions that such examination requires us to ask.

How does Socrates prod us to wakefulness? Certainly not by giving us life's answers. We've all slept through those lectures. He does it by asking questions which open us up to the world. These are not the questions we need to know to pass our multiple-choice or true-false exams; they are not the questions designed to test our knowledge. Instead, they are questions that should help us understand how much we still need to learn, and how little we really understand what we thought we knew or were told by others. They are questions that will reduce us to a state of perplexity so that we may wonder at our ignorance and search hard for a better understanding. These questions and this state of perplexity are the conditions for a liberal education.

For Socrates, it is human to want to know, and the prod to encourage the human desire to know something is the prod to be human. We all recognize that the desire to know something is grounded in what we don't know. Therefore, the best preparation for life, for becoming more fully human, is less the acquisition of knowledge than the understanding of our ignorance. This in turn will help us find the questions we need to ask to bring us to a better understanding. For a question to help us, something must be at stake for us; it

must make a real difference to us how we answer the question. When Socrates tells the reader toward the end of the Apology that the unexamined life is not worth living, he is telling us that we might as well be dead (or never born) as live a life that is unexamined --- a life without questions, the answers to which really matter to us.

For Socrates, what is at stake is literally greater than life or death. Here is where he compares himself to Achilles who, knowing he will soon be killed after he slays the royal Hector, nonetheless despises death: " 'Let me die at once,' he said, 'when once I have given the wrongdoer his deserts, rather than remain here, a laughing-stock by the curved ships, a burden upon the earth.' "

Like Achilles, Socrates is not just willing to risk death for something he believes in; he is without thought of death, as he faces danger rather than the disgrace of withdrawing from the search for self-knowledge, the pursuit of which is his only reason for living. The disgrace for Socrates would be all the greater for backing away out of fear of the unknown. "To fear death, gentlemen," he says "is no other than to think oneself wise when one is not, to think one knows what one does not know. No man knows whether death may not be the greatest of all blessings for a man..." True to his search for self knowledge, mere death is no barrier. Socrates and Achilles live the lives that belong to them, fully and completely, because they have some understanding of who they are and what they are meant to do.

Now, Socrates happens to be a local hero to many at St. John's College. He may be one to some at Mary Washington. But there are undoubtedly many other heroes and heroines from our literature; some are unyielding, bulwarks, upright (again, from our ancient world, take Ajax or Antigone), while others are survivors, with a kind of practical wisdom that will see them through a changing world (Odysseus and Penelope). In the literature throughout the ages, we find examples of men and women who invite imitation. The question we must ask of each such character is this: who is this man or woman, and what is at stake for me that I need to understand what moves them to do what they do? The question that underlies Plato's Apology is not the guilt or innocence of Socrates. It is something closer to this: "Who is this man, Socrates? Is he living a life worth living---the life that truly belongs to him? Does it matter to me and to the City that this man's life should continue or come to an end? Is it perhaps, even, a life worth imitating or undertaking as my own?" We cannot judge Socrates until we know him better. And in judging him, we reveal ourselves. We had better understand what is at stake for us before we decide the fate of Socrates and either keep him with us or consign him to Hades and take up another would-be model. This is the prod to wakefulness that Socrates represents. And these persistent questions can be as annoying or inspiring to the sleeping soul within each of us as the gadfly is to the noble horse.

Any proper course of instruction in the liberal arts, the arts of freedom, should be designed to give us the tools to ask the question "Who am I?" The invocation here is the same as the words at the entrance to the temple of Delphi, consulted by Socrates in his youth: "Know Thyself." It presumes that the question "Who am I?" is a real one, and that we ourselves have not answered it. It presumes that the stakes are high, that our happiness depends upon our investigation into this question. It suggests that coming to know oneself is a high and sacred duty, a task of monumental difficulty, requiring courage, and worthy of being called "heroic." And it suggests that the way each of our students will choose to live their lives after they leave our colleges may depend on how they go about exploring the answer to the question: "Who am I?" This is not a question left to any one or two of the so-called "disciplines" in our universities; it belongs to them all.

Consider the texts our students might study together in mathematics and science, in the humanities and the political disciplines, in the study of things divine or eternal. All of these books in any of their courses should help our students consider some aspect of the question: Who am I, and what is my place in the world? What makes me a featherless biped, a rational being, a lover of wisdom, a son of Adam, a child of God, a collection of molecules and a product of genes, an evolved kind of ape, an acquisitive animal, a noble savage with a life that is solitary, poor, nasty, brutish, and short, but created equal and endowed with certain inalienable rights? Those are just a few of the possible answers our students might consider from their studies over the course of four years in a college committed to liberal education. In reading these books and asking of them whether they speak any truths to us, we will be participating in an education appropriate to a great and noble democracy --- an education in the traditions of society, the arts of freedom, and the tension between the two. Living with this tension prompts us all to remain wakeful, the surest sign that learning has a chance to flourish within us.

Earlier, I suggested that "wonder" is the beginning of a liberal education...the wonder that comes from looking hard at something that is familiar to us and discovering that we really don't understand it. We look at

something we always thought we knew, and ask “what is this thing?” That is when we are ready to learn and well along the path to better understanding. This wonder comes not from something we understand, but rather from our desire to understand...what we sometimes call a love of learning, born not in understanding but in ignorance.

Here is where Socrates helps his willing subjects do the heavy lifting in virtually all of Plato's other dialogues. An interlocutor poses a question of Socrates: “Can virtue be taught?” for example. Socrates responds by saying “How can I answer your question when I don't know what virtue is? Can you tell me what it is?” Meno, in this case --- or Gorgias, in another, or Euthyphro or Ion or Thrasymachus --- each of them tries to say what the thing is, and under Socrates' questioning they each work through several unsuccessful attempts at answering the big question “What is it?” In all these failed attempts, we actually come to understand the power of discovering what something is NOT, to see that knowing what something is not is much more than knowing nothing; it is a kind of “knowing ignorance,” an “intelligent perplexity” that comes from trying out and discarding false notions. Socrates has also helped us see that we not only don't know what virtue is (or justice or piety), we don't even know what learning is. We see that those interlocutors who are not willing to face their own ignorance are slaves to their pride, slaves to the opinion of others, unwilling to examine what they clearly do not understand. The problem with such men or women is not that they are ignorant, but that they have no desire to be free from the shackles of their ignorance. To learn what needs to be learned, men and women must be freed of the false notions they've been carrying around with them, freed from the pressures of popular opinion, freed even from the things they have been taught (but have never examined) in their upbringing from childhood. This freedom, strangely, comes not from the certainty of knowledge but from the recognition of their ignorance. In other words, we should want our students to acquire the freedom that allows them to acknowledge the one certainty in life: “Indeed, Socrates, I do not know.” Recognition of that certainty is the pathway to learning --- learning things that will belong to them, not just repeating things that belong to others. We also want our students to have practice with the tools they will need to acquire this freedom --- tools that will help them to listen and to read attentively and deeply, to express themselves intelligibly and precisely, and to measure and reckon the world in which they live accurately and comprehensively --- tools that will help give shape to their understanding who they are, where they live, and what their responsibility is toward others and the world they together inhabit, the world of the body and the world of the spirit.

So when I reflect on the Platonic dialogues and venture into their several conversations, I find myself thinking that the way to virtue (or the good or justice or piety or love) may require that we come to know our great weakness, our own ignorance. This ignorance is common to all who are less than divine; it is something we share with one another in our humanity. If there is a connection between knowledge and right conduct, it is likely to be found in our ignorance and in the humility it inspires, in seeing that every single one of us has a long, long way to go toward understanding, in the endless search for truth. I suspect that human virtue lies somehow coterminous with this strange path toward knowledge, a path through ignorance and therefore available to us all. As we are not likely to attain great heights of knowledge, it is more likely that we can share with each other the great peaks of desire. It may be that the love of learning, more than the attainment of understanding, is what binds us together most tightly.

Here is the place for our institutions of liberal learning. We need to find our many and varied ways of helping our students see how big the world is, how endless and wondrous are the questions worth asking, and how they can apply the tools we've helped them cultivate to examine those questions best. Lest some of you think I mean to restrict the curriculum only to questions that might fall under a traditional class in philosophy, let me say instead that I think every class in any discipline comes alive only when these principles are at work. The scientist never sets out to prove something. He starts with an hypothesis and sets out a series of experiments or tests that would disprove it. The engineer tests her design to the point to failure. Each of us in each of our disciplines tries to find a way to the truth by discarding failures, false notions, and bad starts. This is freedom! Each of our liberal arts colleges should embrace the kind of student engagement in our classes that comes from having them ask the deep questions, wrestling with them, and trying out and discarding false notions, rather than having them recite some answers they've been given.

All this reminds me of a little talk I once read, written by John Gardner, entitled “Personal Renewal”, which opened with a story about barnacles. I know that sometimes weeks go by without your hearing about barnacles, so you may not remember all that you have learned about them. An article quoted by Gardner had this unforgettable opening line:

"The barnacle is confronted with an existential decision about where it's going to live. Once it decides, it spends the rest of its life with its head cemented to a rock."

The barnacle has solved a lot of life's problems, like where it's going to sleep (or with whom), how it's going to get its food, whether it should go to work, and how to avoid the company of its relatives. Happiness for the barnacle is having a large, loving, caring, close-knit family stuck to some other rock. No one is going to come around to tell you that your head is stuck up some other part of your anatomy.

But the barnacle builds its own prison and serves as its own jailer. We each know a few barnacles---people who have simply arrested the course of their lives, who have given up the power to engage in the world about them --- people who are stuck where they were years ago, slaves to the status quo. They have lost the will and the imagination it takes to seek happiness for themselves or others. Let it not be said of our liberal arts colleges that we prepared our students for a life stuck to some rock. Education at our schools should be but the beginning of a lifetime of learning, and we should be helping our students acquire the tools for learning rather than cramming their heads with today's "knowledge."

If the signs over the entranceways to our schools don't already say "Know Thyself," perhaps they should read "No Barnacles Allowed, Unless Willing To Be Scraped."

Enough about the relevance of a liberal education.

How should we go about conceiving our project, and talking about it in the world in which we live...one that expects us to develop workforce skills, that commands expertise in a specialty, that measures so very, very much in dollars and cents, that would count what can be counted as an indication of quality rather than exercise some considered judgment about the strength of a curriculum or the character of community life...a world that is shrinking and yet moving faster and faster, assisted by the extraordinary advances in technology? Are these changes to be seen as threats or opportunities, we ask? The one thing I know is that it is easy to be swept up in the demands of the day, and it is hard to slow down. This very observation suggests that we need to slow down to ask ourselves some very deep questions before we jump on the next train that comes speeding by. Is the college experience to be a time of freedom or a compulsory credentialing for professional training? That is our first question, I think. There is nothing wrong with job preparation. The question for us is not whether a job is a necessary condition for living, but whether it is a sufficient condition for a good life. We don't live in order to work, after all. We work in order to make a life worth living.

If the four years at our liberal arts colleges are to be a time of freedom, we must ask "What are the sufficient conditions for that freedom?" Are some materials, tools, and books, classroom sizes and configurations better suited to the purpose than others? Should not the faculty of the whole college make those preliminary judgments in laying out expectations for, and limitations upon, the curriculum for undergraduates? Should we simply allow our students, particularly our freshmen, many of whom are coming in from a kind of intellectual wasteland...should we simply allow them to decide what they wish to study with no regard for what we on the faculty think might best help them find their way in the world. These are the next set of questions, and they belong to our faculties.

If we accept the argument I made earlier, that the liberal arts are literally the arts of being human, then all human beings are liberal artists and the only choice open to us is whether we want to help our students be good liberal artists or poor ones. If we care at all for our students, we owe them the experience we have of the world to help them become good liberal artists...and this means taking some responsibility for making curricular choices; it means standing for something and giving an account of the reasons we are offering or requiring one set of courses or books over another. This requires time, attention, and thought. In this day and age, it requires courage to stand up to the pressures to conform to whatever the winds of change may bring to us. We do not need the certainty of knowledge that we are right in our curricular prescriptions, only that we are making the best judgments we can, with the interests of our students at heart. When we do this we need have no fear that we will lose our distinctiveness. To the contrary, the bright lines that distinguish us all will stand out more clearly.

With all these thoughts in mind, here are a few suggestions offered to help our liberal arts colleges maintain their place of distinction in the world of higher education:

Stand for liberal education, but abandon the effort to find one, broad, bland, expansive way of speaking of it as if we must reach agreement with one another. We should hail our distinctive voices and let them all be heard. The better any one of us is understood, the better for all of us. Our publics need to hear voices that are anchored in a real time and place, inhabited by real people. When we speak with one voice we risk speaking falsely or without sufficient conviction to be convincing.

Distinguish liberal from utilitarian learning. Earning a living is about means; making a life worth living is about ends. It is a higher form of education that helps us understand just what a good life might look like, in order that we might live it well.

Defend the search for truth --- or at least avoid foreclosing the possibility of truth. We don't have to have the truth to believe it is there, or to have some sense that one thing is better than another for a good reason. For learning to take hold, the student must find some way to make the lesson his or her own. To make it one's own requires that something be at stake for the student. The student is driven then to ask, not just what something means, but whether it makes any difference what something means (i.e., whether it is true or not).

Acknowledge that liberal learning is about foundations and elements. Liberal education is elementary education in the highest sense. For this reason, what we teach is important. We should explain and defend the choices we make to give our students subject matter that is worthy of their study and contemplation.

Promote the desire to learn over the mania to test performance; success in passing tests will follow the former as night does the day. Therefore, we should construct academic programs that encourage the desire to learn for its own sake rather than for the sake of the grade. This requires that we give attention both to the quality of the materials we use to teach from and our ways of giving them life in the classroom. Let us give our students matter that will be worthy of their love. After all, it is love that moves us to the good in this world, including all the good that can be learned. We might even consider using the desire to learn as a criterion for admission to our colleges, for that desire will better determine a student's ability to learn than a high SAT score.

Abandon the language of the marketplace. We are not delivery systems; students are not consumers; and education is not a product that can be bartered, going to the highest bidder. Socrates had it right when he reminded us that the power of learning is in the soul of each of us and cannot be put into us just as one cannot put sight into blind eyes. Learning actually requires commitment and effort on the part of the student as well as on the part of the school, which is far more complicated than the purchase of goods at the shopping mall.

Reclaim the argument that our colleges serve the public good. We do this by helping to bring thoughtful adults into the world — adults who are free to think for themselves, and free to choose paths of action they consider to be best rather than those that are easiest or most popular.

Remain high minded but practical --- that is, fight only the fights worth fighting. There are a thousand chimeras in the world. Some are hideous but will never threaten; ignore them. Some can be fought collectively by our collegiate associations; support those groups. Others come in an endless stream of constituent complaints about issues peripheral to our central purposes. As most of those issues can be resolved by giving them some attention, attend to them; develop a plan with a timeline and a set of priorities. We are all stronger for attending to things that have been ignored, and our alumni, friends, students and faculty will be happier for it. As to those that threaten the very identity of our schools, take them head on. This requires that we have some sense of who we are. Self-knowledge is the key to self-preservation. My experience here suggests that we will gain respect and strength by defending what is truly of the essence, so long as we're flexible when our first principles are not at stake.

Embrace institutional self-examination but beware of external means of assessment. We have unlimited ways to come to know ourselves better and to improve our campuses. We should admit this publicly and seek the support we need to improve ourselves. On the other hand, we should not fear to fight those silly rankings and any so-called science-based measurements that take no account of the liberal arts we are trying to help our students acquire.

Balance is required in all things. The whole organization improves best when all of its parts are getting some attention, not just those who have shouted the loudest, had the most success, or claimed the greatest need.

We are perpetual institutions. This should not be an excuse for delay in attending to things, but rather a reminder that time is on our side. We will be here tomorrow. Therefore, careful planning is required, and all good things may be redeemed in time. Ideally, we should want to give to the next generation at least as much as we have had to work with in this one. Our financial people call this intergenerational equity. Do not spend down capital today that will be required to preserve the college tomorrow, but do not spend so little that you have sacrificed the essence of the college today. This is a healthy tension to carry with us.

Champion and fund the cause of broad and affordable access to our colleges, and provide the means to complete the course of study with us. A liberal education does not recognize class or economic distinction. We are sometimes challenged for being elitist, providing an education to the rich and the powerful. For most of us, this charge is simply false. The best education is available to everybody with the desire and the ability to learn; no segment of higher education has done more to provide the economic means to those without the financial wherewithal than the national liberal arts colleges.

Accept and explain the high cost of education. Education is expensive because it requires the giving of the life of one well-educated human being to another, a devotion of time that cannot be compromised without being cheapened. Let's not apologize for that. Rather, explain why it's a veritable bargain. After all, none of us charges what it costs to educate a student, even one who is able to afford to pay the full tuition.

Encourage intellectual freedom among the faculty; it stimulates intellectual growth. Freedom is required for institutional health. In our governance structures and leadership constraints, we should leave enough room for the freedom to grow and change. The alternative is defensiveness, stagnation, or unhealthy strife. A liberal education is grounded in the conviction that humility of intellect and humility of spirit are required for wisdom: we understand that we are still seeking the answers we don't have and still aching for something we desire. Faculty who are not engaged in their own learning cannot hope to help free their students. To encourage intellectual freedom among the faculty, we need to provide the funds and the opportunity for leisure study. Our faculty need the renewal that comes from discovering, over and over, what they don't know and improving their understanding of what they purport to know.

Encourage in our students the freedom to be at leisure. Freedom requires that students have some time to look at, contemplate, and talk about fundamental questions. This requires that they get some break from the practical pressures, even from paid work, if possible. School is "time out" to study; it's not just another job, another test, more work. We are loading our students with more and more work, and giving them less and less time for "leisure" in its highest sense.

Encourage all opportunities for learning together: faculty, students, and staff. Learning is a social activity and a cooperative art. Support the many ways we might come together on campus and we will remain vital and close to our fundamental purposes. One way to attend to community health is to try to treat all community members, students, faculty and staff, as ends in themselves, not simply as means to our institutional purposes. This is impractical at its limit, but is nonetheless a worthy object of pursuit.

Finally, be flexible. If we anchor ourselves to unshakeable principles, we may find it difficult to consider changes that might be healthy for the college. We should concern ourselves less with the principles behind our actions and instead satisfy ourselves that we have adequate reasons for everything we do. It is easier to make a change and easier to undo one if we are giving reasons for our actions rather than trying to find an underlying principle for everything.

The essential problem I have tried to address here is how to organize ourselves best for the freedom we wish to encourage in our lively colleges. Where is the path through all the obstacles? That remains the big question. And that question has to be rediscovered and re-answered with each generation. You at Mary Washington are engaged in just such a conversation this year, once again asking that big question "Who am I?" "Who are we in this University Community?" "What is the place of this liberal arts institution in this world today?" I congratulate you on your undertaking. If you are able to find your way to the questions that need to be asked, you are more than half-way there. At our liberal arts colleges, it is only right that we value the question more than the answer, the search more than its end...not because we don't want the truth or an

end to our toil, but because experience tells us that the end of each search is the beginning of the next, the answer to each question the occasion for another. Questions alone make learning possible.

I close with reference to the final lines from the fourth of T.S. Elliot's Four Quartets:

*We shall not cease from exploration
And the end of all our exploring
Will be to arrive where we started
And know the place for the first time.*
(Little Gidding)

If we are alive to learning, it is impossible that we will not remake ourselves over and over again. Like anything else, we start with something we think we know, and discover in our study of it that we only knew it as a child might. We find that we never really understood it at all, or that we now see something altogether new that we were sure was never there in the first place. That is when we come back to the place where we started and find that we now know it for the first time. That is what liberal learning should be: a continual rediscovery and deeper understanding of what is right there before us but only barely known. We need to practice such liberal learning in the very activity of examining and refounding our communities of learning.

I congratulate you on your centenary celebration and wish you well in your self-examination!

The End