

President Nelson, Members of the Board, Colleagues of the Faculty and Staff, Parents and Families, Honored Guests, and Members of the Class of 2015: 5/2015

This is an august occasion of great ceremony, adorned with traditional pomp, funny costumes, and ancient language; and a decent respect to the opinions of mankind requires that I try to behave myself. Unfortunately, in the words of Philip Marlowe, Raymond Chandler's hardboiled private detective, I test very high in insubordination. I'm just not too good at solemnity, pomp and dignified ceremony. So I'm going to do something slightly rude: I am going to address myself exclusively to the primary objects of interest here, the members of the Class of 2015. The rest of you are welcome to eavesdrop.

Let me start over: Comrades, and Dear Friends!

In a book that the seniors have had occasion to reread in the not-too-distant past, Socrates remarks that "the things of friends are common." (This Greek proverb also figured prominently in the Senior Prank video.) I think that we friends have many things in common, you and I, starting with this lovely orange-and-white hood which I was very recently given the right to wear, and which will soon be lovingly but clumsily draped across the shoulders of each of you. For one thing, I suspect that like me, many if not most of you also test very high in insubordination. That might seem like a surprising claim, since you have submitted yourselves to an academic program not of your making, consisting of venerable and august books that are elsewhere more honored than they are read. But let's try to cast our minds back and remember what brought us here. Wasn't it, at least in part, an act of rebellion, an expression of discontent with what seemed to be the normal expectations of the straight academic world?

In a way, that ornery motive would have been true to the oldest and best traditions of St. John's. Long ago, even before I arrived, back when the New Program was actually new and when Johnnies were at least allegedly real, heroic Johnnies such that no two of our present Johnnies could lift one, Johnnies capable of digesting 200 pages of the *Summa Theologiae* in a single, smoke-filled evening, back in those dear, dead days the College saw itself as iconoclastic, and its self-descriptive publications struck a defiant tone. There was much talk of flinging down the gauntlet in the face of conventional American education. It may seem that we are less bumptious now; but perhaps those Tygers of Wrath were wiser than the current Horses of Instruction. At least back then we understood, as even some of our well-wishers now seem to have forgotten, that it is our differences from other colleges that truly define us and justify our ways. But why am I even mentioning this to you? You, the students, have always known it and still know it. It is the rest of us that need to listen harder to you, to be reminded of what it is that we do here, or hope to do. But I digress. Let us assume what I think is true, that it was not mere rebelliousness that brought us here, you and me. We knew, or thought we knew, what we were against; but what did we come here for?

We sure didn't come for the money. In freshman year we were thrilled to read, in Book 8 of Herodotus, how King Xerxes learns how the Greeks compete at the Olympic Games, only for a prize of an olive crown. One of the Persians, Tigranes, exclaims in dismay: "What sort of men have you led us to fight against, who contend, not for money but purely for the sake of *ἀρετή*, of excellence?" These hoods, if you will, are our olive crowns. Not that many of you won't succeed in the world of material acquisition; but judging from my experience, it is exceedingly hard to predict, on the basis of their four years here, which among you will turn out to be the fortunate one-percenters. Nor did we come for the prestige. Until quite recently, the hallowed

hierarchies decreed by *U.S. News and World Report* were regarded by all of us with well-justified contempt. (I only wish it still were so.) So what was it that we were looking for in this act of rebellion, this choice that is so hard for others to understand and so hard for us to try to explain to them? What on earth were we thinking?

It would be nice to be able to say that we came for the fun. Because it certainly has been fun, hasn't it? In spite of the fears we had to overcome, the sheer strangeness of the languages we had to wrestle with, the arguments that affronted all our intuitions but could not be simply dismissed, the doubts that we could actually be worthy of the material that was set before us, in spite of all these hurdles, this activity we have shared has been deeply pleasurable, maybe especially so at the moments when we were so deeply engrossed in it that we weren't conscious of feeling pleasure or pain, only absorption. I would like to be able to say that it was the promise of pleasure that brought me to St. John's-- I think that would have been a very adult motive. But I can't say that. At the time it would have seemed too frivolous to me, and besides, how could I have predicted then how much fun St. John's would turn out to be? Back when I was a brand new freshman tutor at the age of 31, I still thought that I didn't like math. Since I am being rude, I will presume to speak for all of us and say that, embarrassing though it may sound, we came not for pleasure, but for the Truth. We came for wisdom. *We wanted to become wise.*

And now here we are, and here is my opening question: How is this choice working out for us? Did we get what we came for?

"Where shall wisdom be found? And where is the place of understanding? Man does not know the way to it, and it is not found in the land of the living." How can we tell if we are wiser? Would we even know wisdom if we saw it? In our readings, we may have encountered a

few people who might have seemed wise to us. Socrates, perhaps, or Jesus, or Montaigne, or Abraham Lincoln. In our eyes, they have earned their title to wisdom in part by disclaiming it. Very well, we say, perhaps it is not the people who are wise, it is the books; after all, our slogan is that the books are the teachers. But it is an odd way of speaking, to attribute wisdom to books but not to people. For us, as we experience them, books are not destinations but pathways, often winding and tortuous ones. They always seem to point beyond themselves. But their refusal to gratify our desire to solve them, to pluck out the heart of their mystery, often causes us to want to reengage with them. Was it our desire to become more like the books? Many would say that we are bookish enough already.

It may be reassuring that the people we consider wiser than ourselves do not consider themselves to be so. For it's likely that we don't feel wise to ourselves, or even know what it would mean to feel wise. Most of us came here with a few more comforting certainties than we have now. Perhaps all our deep reading and prolonged grappling has only relativized us, made us more sceptical and irresolute. Is that because we didn't do it right, didn't work hard enough, didn't achieve the requisite seriousness? I have often heard the seniors say that they want to go back to the beginning of freshman year. As youth is wasted on the young, Homer and Plato and Sophocles are wasted on the freshman. Let's do it all again! This time around, we'll get it right. But as one who has taken about nine times as long as you to get to this point on the path, I have bad news: I have done it all again, and again, and I still have not gotten it right. Rereading is a wonderful and precious experience. But neither I nor any of my faculty colleagues would be willing to tell you that as a result of steeping ourselves repeatedly in all of this wisdom, we now consider ourselves wise.

So what was it all good for, then? It isn't my intention to increase the ambivalence, the bewilderment, maybe even the sense of bereavement that already suffuses this occasion for many of us, and for me not the least. As a partial consolation, let me ask you a question. Imagine that some genie is willing to grant you the wish to go back and do it all over again, tuition-free, to shout insatiably *Da capo!* as Nietzsche says. But there is one condition: In doing it over, you have to be willing to go back to being the same person you were when you first arrived. Would you make that deal? I hope not. I certainly wouldn't, not for myself and not for you. We are never the best judges of ourselves. The child, impatient to grow up, needs the penciled marks on the doorframe to assure herself that in fact she has grown taller. Others who knew us before and after our time here can testify that we have been changed, changed deeply, and mostly for the better. I even claim that while each of you doesn't know this about yourself individually, you know it about your classmates. (Think of the people in your freshman core group, if they are still here today.) Perhaps it is a long stretch from this observation to the claim that we are all wiser now. Maybe we are just older. And we would have gotten older no matter where we went to college. In the words of Lear's Fool, we should not have gotten old before we got wise.

It should be no surprise that whatever wisdom is, it can't be a readily transferable body of information, or a bundle of technical know-hows, or the ability to produce impressive, inscrutable gnomonic utterances. We already knew that coming in. If there is wisdom, it must be a way of living, a way of carrying ourselves in the world, a willingness to be open to wonder even about the things that are most familiar to us. It might be fleeting and intermittent, maybe even a little edgy and discomfiting. By saying "a way of carrying ourselves," I do not want to imply that wisdom is a mannerism, merely a demeanor of visible thoughtfulness that we can put on to persuade ourselves and others that we are thinking profoundly. But there are behaviors we can

assume that will help us. If I can make myself talk a little less-- always a difficult task for me-- it's more likely that I can get better at listening. If I can stop judging myself and others, I may open the space that will allow me to be surprised. To describe this attitude, Socrates uses the word "care" or "attend"-- ἐπιμελεῖσθαι. In the *Apology*, *Crito* and *Phaedo*, he shows us through both his words and deeds that attending to one's self in the right way (ἑαυτὸν ἐπιμελεῖσθαι) is also attending to others, to the city, and to the gods. So if in taking leave of you, I tell you to take care of your self, it is more than a conventional gesture of friendly concern. To care, to maintain an attitude of full attention, to my self, to other people and other things requires an effort that can be exhausting. What I'm trying to attain is the stance of the learner, a mostly unironic combination of great boldness and great humility. What I'm trying to avoid is the flattering voice that says, To question is already to answer, to strive is the same as to succeed.

One of the many things that make other people think that Johnnies are strange is that we learn to use the word "soul," in non-religious contexts, almost casually and without embarrassment. It's certainly not because this College has made us all religious. It's only partly because there are words in Greek and French and German, used by our authors, that seem to correspond better to "soul" than to anything else. I think the main reason we speak about souls in this way is that our habits of reflection and introspection, practiced as we learn together, have made us aware of the complexity of the inner life, the ways that "mind" and "heart" and "will" and "sense" are all mutually interwoven in one unitary self. Each of us is a more complicated mythical beast than Typhon, or the Centaurs, or Chimera. And trying to know other things means also trying to know your self. One consequence of this complexity is that we are not willing simply to accept the bright line that Aristotle draws between intellectual virtue and practical, moral virtue. In asking what we know, we naturally also ask how we should live. The

immersive experience of being a part of this community results from not drawing that bright line. *The things of friends are common.* The program we have in common, our common objects, the books we read, our common understanding of our undertaking, the community within which we live and grow-- all these bind us more closely in virtuous friendship. If we are wise in no other way, we are wise enough to reflect on this experience and to value it as it deserves.

The word "commencement" is peculiar-- it says "beginning," but it certainly feels like an ending. Probably most of us would replace it with the word "graduation." But this is another peculiar word. In my capacity as the college's resident crank about grammatical minutiae, I want to point out that in the older and stricter sense of the word, you do not graduate, you are graduated. This is not an action that you perform; it is something that is done to you. If you feel that there is an arbitrariness about how you are being thrust out of the door at the end of a prescribed period, you are perfectly right. Why stop at a fifth year, or a fifth segment? Even thirty-six years is not enough. More than a few years ago I wrote an essay about the *Essays* of Montaigne, in which I claimed that no essay you write is ever finished. My essay about essays was never finished either, even though I delivered it on a Friday night; it just stopped. My colloquy with you today has no conclusion either; so I will just stop here. Please, take care of your self. "We shall not cease from exploration"-- The activity of inquiry continues, and our friendship will continue, fostering in us the growth of some virtue we don't know how to name.

Thank you.

Jonathan Tuck