

Graduating students of the College and the Graduate Institute; family and friends; faculty and guests: it is my honor to speak to you this morning.

As some of you know, I am partial to concise works—among them, the fragmentary remains of Sappho's poetry, Anselm's minimalist proof for the existence of God, and of course the slightly lengthier six hundred pages of Herodotus' *Histories*. This morning, I would like to mull over just one sentence from a Platonic dialogue, in which Socrates tells the young Theaetetus a story. I say "young" because from the outset of the dialogue that bears his name, we know this conversation takes place when he was just starting out in life. Perhaps Socrates had a weather eye on his young friend's future when he told him this story.

It is said that while gazing up at the stars, Thales—one of the Seven Wise Men of Greece—fell into a well; a witty Thracian serving woman, upon observing this, remarked, "How is it, Thales, that being so wise in the affairs of heaven, you should fail to see what was before your very feet?"

So who is Thales? Herodotus tells us that he was one of the first to predict the time of a solar eclipse, so it is no surprise we should find him star-gazing. In the tradition, he is considered the first philosopher, and Aristotle specifies that he was the first seeker after the wisdom of nature. So in a way, he is the progenitor of our tribe, someone who, like Socrates, delved into the things under the earth and peered at those in the sky. Thales posited that, "All is water," which might be a way of saying that beings change their form as water does, but their underlying material remains what it is. He had many accomplishments to his name, not least of which was an ingenious way to cross a river. Right now you might be in agreement with the Thracian serving woman that Thales was rather foolish to fall into his own first principle, so I will tell you this other story to establish his credentials as a genuine thinker.¹ And I tell it because you too might be concerned with how to get from Here to There.

¹ I owe this particular formulation of Thales' fall to Joe Sachs.

The army of the Lydian king needed to cross the River Halys and Thales was given the task. Instead of moving the army over the river by conventional means—boat or bridge, Thales changed the ground it stood on. He realized that the river was *already* moving, and instead of transporting the army over the river, he diverted the river around the army, leaving it on an island between two new channels. Because the whole was divided, both channels could be crossed. That is a clever solution, and perhaps one which only someone who had spent some time thinking about the nature of water would devise.

Now to return to our image from the *Theaetetus*. Thales is a natural philosopher investigating the mysterious motions of the stars, and cannot be blamed for tracing the paths of the gods even as he walks those more terrestrial ones. The Thracian serving woman on the other hand is down to earth. She has a practical occupation, useful to herself and others. Her witty question reveals theory to be both useless and dangerous. Stay grounded, she laughs. You too have noticed, perhaps, that too much time in the hot air balloon above the Socratic Thinkery can make you light-headed.

But the more I think about Thales falling into the well, the less it seems to warn against the conflict between theory and practice, and the more it seems to describe an utterly typical event in a thoughtful life. One minute you have your head in the clouds, inventing likely hypotheses and following premises to their as-yet undiscovered conclusions, and the next, the ground has disappeared. What you perceived or understood or believed is no longer there for you as the immovable ground it was moments before. What is it about a thoughtful life that with some regularity the ground you stand on will vanish and leave you spinning in mid-air?

Let me give you an example of what I mean. You are demonstrating at the chalkboard a geometrical proposition from that infinitely patient book, Euclid's *Elements*. You complete the diagram by drawing the long final line between points A and B. But as you carry out the proof, you realize something is wrong. Your ratios are jumbled, the triangles you remember are not the triangles on the board, and none of the assistance you receive from friendly classmates makes any sense. Your foot has come down on nothing.

You will no doubt recognize this condition—fluttering in your stomach, disorientation and embarrassment, confusion. This is the straightforward way to fall into a well—to make a mistake. Perhaps that line wasn't supposed to go to B, but rather to C. Or maybe one of your given conditions was wrong. Or you didn't understand compound ratio as well as you thought you did. Standing there at the board, exposed and off-balance, you can now recognize your kinship with that first thinker, Thales, patron saint of bewilderment.

Because most of you are young and intellectually limber, losing your footing can still be agreeable. Like one of Darwin's tumbler pigeons, you can perform a Backwards-Triple-Lutz-Somersault more gracefully than those of us who have been land animals for a longer time. The Graduate Institute students are by and large older and more experienced, and deserve special praise for choosing to have the ground pulled out from under them with some regularity—ground that often was hard won. It is a daunting thing to fall into a well when you are supposed to know better.

Lest we ever think too highly of our acrobatics, there is the Thracian serving woman with her ready wit, waiting to point out how ridiculous we thinkers can be at any age. She is integral to this philosophical image because she reminds us of the perils of losing one's intellectual footing in public. What are those perils? There are three.

The first is embarrassment. When you lose your footing, your cheeks burn and you tiptoe away from what you've done. Your self-mocking laughter separates you from yourself. "I couldn't have done *that*," you think. If the mistake is serious enough and you deny it too angrily, you separate your present from your past; though as Freud would say, that denial also means you cannot get *over* what you've done. And just as shame can alienate you from yourself, it can also exclude from the conversation others who have made mistakes. But if you have experience at making a mistake in public, you will learn to own what you've done, and alienate neither your own past self nor other thinkers.

The second peril is that you will be distracted from what you were trying to do. When you fall down a well, the world disappears. It is very difficult to maintain continuity with your past endeavors. You must reach back in memory and find the thread that led you to the

present, however circuitously. But if you have practice at weaving these strands together, you live a more intricate, coherent life, one in which the activity of your mind persists in spite of both failure and success, and time holds, an unbroken braid.

The third peril is that you break faith with your fellows. As we all know, there are more unsettling ways for the ground to disappear than losing the thread of a Euclidean proposition. You may find yourself doubting what the right thing to do is, or if there is a right or wrong at all. You may find you've harmed a friend and couldn't say why. Being confused about your place in the world can render you useless for its present needs. I will name this peril incivility, with the understanding that I do not mean mere impoliteness but the failure to fulfill the responsibility you have to your community because you did not have firm ground to stand on. But in this failing, you can learn to see what your community is and requires. You can learn to ask for forgiveness from it, and not allow your own failings to excuse you from your responsibility.

Herodotus tells us that Thales was also a statesman of sorts. He recommended to a number of neighboring cities that they choose a single meeting place to hear disputes and decide matters in common, as if each polis were a district of a larger political whole. I wonder if Thales had this commitment to a common political life because he occasionally fell into a well and found himself fractured by embarrassment, distraction, and incivility. Thales' meeting place is the solid ground on which to work at being undivided. It should remind you of our own classroom: one table, many voices.

There are other ways the ground disappears that have nothing to do with making a mistake. How often have you talked your way somewhere in seminar and like Elizabeth Bennet found that you had "wandered about until you were beyond your own knowledge?" You reach for a familiar world and find it upended and whirling. Time varies with velocity, matter is energy by another name, God is love: after a particularly good conversation you might well, as Pentheus did, see two suns in the sky. Aristotle tells us wonder is the source of wisdom, and perhaps it is by having the ground fall away from beneath us that we are prepared to behold the world with new eyes.

Since you are heading out into the world, I feel bound to tell you something particularly true of it in this present age: most people are terrible at falling down wells. This is not surprising. They have little to no practice at making mistakes in public and they believe that the purpose of education is to learn how to become a certified non-mistake-maker, that is, an expert. At most, they acknowledge that failure is important, but only as a ditch one leaps out of, something to laugh at from a more comfortable vantage point. Many commencement speakers are probably telling graduates right now to accept failure as a necessary evil on their predestined path to success. I think Thales and the Thracian woman would have a few choice words for them.

I hope it is clear by now that I am not giving you advice. I am praising you for what you have been doing here all along. You have not learned how to land on your feet every time you fall down a well. That would be sophistry—the skill to say something plausible no matter the circumstances. But you *have* learned to welcome a fall when it comes. Falls come in varying heights—from incorrectly drawing a geometrical diagram to realizing that your whole account for your place in the world didn't make adequate sense. In the period of your course in these halls you have practiced disorientation: having your ground—perceptual, intellectual, moral—fall out from beneath you. You have learned to be more committed to the conversation than your own embarrassment, distraction, or incivility. You have learned to remain at the table.

The sun is not yet at its zenith, but this is well past the midpoint of my address and I would like to tell you a story about my own encounter with a well. Many years ago my family visited the house where my grandmother was born, in Greene County, Virginia. It had long since been in other hands, but she wanted to see it again, and she wanted me to see it for the first time. My grandmother, parents, and I drove down one summer day, warmer than this one, and turned from the highway onto country roads, until we came to the old home place. The property was overgrown, and I was the only one who ventured into the abandoned house. Young trees grew through the floor of the living room and stood like motionless hosts. Only leaves breathed the quiet air of the house. When I returned to the car, I found my grandmother upset by the dilapidation of the present and this rough return to the past. But even in consternation she asked me, “Did you find the well?”

The well was an underlying figure in the landscape of her childhood. She was a rare and powerful storyteller; her memories of that childhood live on in those who heard her stories. I have a vivid image of her drawing water to cool that morning's milk as if I had been there to hold the pail. When I take a drink after a long row here on the Severn I sometimes remember how she quenched her thirst at the well after a long walk home from school. And I did find this same well. She told me to watch out for it before I left the road and went into the woods. The well was deep, and its wooden cover was surely rotted away. But I discovered it in time, near the back porch stairs—a dark opening in the earth.

This memory gives me cause to rethink my telling of the Thales story. I have praised what you undertook here at the College. But like Socrates in the *Phaedrus*, perhaps I have not yet done justice to the end of that enterprise. I have considered one aspect of the thoughtful life—when the ground disappears, but I have yet to address another—falling into a *well*. Allow me to begin my encomium again, giving due praise not to the fall, but Depth.

You fall, yes, but into what? Thales fell into his own first principle—water, which he took to be the underlying material beneath everything else. In other words, he fell into the source of the world. The word for source in Greek is *arche*, a word that has many resonances with us here at the College. An *arche* is a beginning, a cause, a source for the way things are, a spring that pours forth much. The sources of the world are deep. You cannot always climb down but must trust the fall. I am reminded of what the German poet Hölderlin wrote, “*Wo aber Gefahr ist, wächst / Das Rettende auch.*” “Where danger is, there salvation also grows.” It is no accident that we find water in the deep places of the world. There is a secret bond between the high and the deep. When we set our gaze on the ageless dance of the stars we also find ourselves falling to the very heart of the world. But I want to describe more specifically what we fall into when the ground gives way.

When I was in high school, trying to persuade my parents to let me attend the College, we were invited to an event for prospective students at an alumna's house. My mother was not at all sure that this strange school would be worth the risk. I think my father was happy enough that I was interested in crew to sign off on the whole dubious project. Wouldn't it

be better to go somewhere with more options, somewhere more conservative, more affordable, somewhere with a study abroad program? We met a tutor at the event, Nancy Buchenauer, and my mother asked her a challenging question: what is the worldview of St. John's College? Ms. Buchenauer paused, but did not shy away from an answer. "We believe there are certain questions that *must* be asked." My parents were convinced.

The more I ask opening questions at the beginning of seminar, the more time I live with the great books that pose those certain questions with unyielding intensity, the more I believe that a question is not a statement disguised by uncertainty, nor is it an indication of, or an attempt to induce, confusion. A question is a well-spring sunk into the heart of the world. A question demands that *you* must answer it now, in the present, and for yourself; no one can do it for you. Who am I? What is nature? What ought I do here? What is fleeting, undying, beautiful? These wells do not run dry however much we draw from them. They are springs of living water, nourishing tree, city, and soul.

Our time is at its end and you are about to return to a source. I know the College sometimes seems self-sufficient, but the great world to which you go is one of our sources, and we, its tributary. Plato has given you many ways to picture life in the world. The darkest is in the *Republic*. There it is like living in a cave, chained by injustice, bound to see only images of the truth. But in the *Theaetetus*, he gave you another way of picturing that place underlying all others. Going back to the world is like falling into a well. Disorienting at first, but in it you may discover the source of what is. I believe the well of Thales was a place for reunion and betrothal, like a well in the book of *Genesis*; or like the pool of Bethesda, where an angel troubled the waters and the lame came to walk again. Thales falling into the well is an image of what happens to human beings after they have strained to see the undying beauty above them, but lost their footing and found themselves in fathomless depth. Perhaps instead of being forced down to earth as in the cave, they fall there, as Alyosha does, in praise and wonder.