

From Here to There

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This evening marks Holy Cross's 115th Commencement. We tend to think of a commencement ceremony as a conclusion, as a kind of epiphany sanctifying past achievement. However, commencement denotes just the opposite: it is not an ending at all; it is a beginning. To commence means "to get on with it." Accordingly, tonight my service to you, the Tigers of 1994, lies within that context.

There is a line in DELIVERANCE where James Dickey observes: "We were not – or at least I was not—what we were before." Moments hence, when you receive your diplomas, YOU won't be what YOU were before. The rest of your life will be staring back at you and challenging you to "commence" honorably.

Well, how should you proceed "from here to there"? I have some thoughts on that process. As former "poet laureate" of the Crescent City, Jim Metcalf, was fond of saying: "Please, to begin...."

PART I. About English

William Raspberry, a columnist for the WASHINGTON POST recently won the Pulitzer Prize for 'commentary.' But he also delivered a "prize-winning" lecture to students at Dillard University.

"I will tell you what I have learned over the years," he said. "Good English, well spoken and well-written, will open more doors for you than a college degree. But bad English, poorly spoken and poorly written, will slam doors that you don't even know exist."

Raspberry had yet another piece of advice: "Read. It's the best thing you will ever do for your education. Read everything. It may not teach you to think, but it will keep you supplied with something to think about."

As WWL's Phil Johnson stated in an editorial tribute to Mr. Raspberry: "What good advice, honestly given by a man who should know. Students everywhere can benefit from it if they would only listen." Indeed, "if they would only listen."

Part II. About Hope

We all know about the three great virtues: faith, hope, and charity. CHARITY, the greatest of the three, is synonymous with “love.” FAITH defines our beliefs and determines our trust in one another. But HOPE is more elusive, more difficult to get a handle on –like a misunderstood child seeking his identity and craving attention. Czech dramatist and poet, Vaclav Havel, puts hope in perspective: “Hope is not the same as joy when things are going well, or a willingness to invest in enterprises that are obviously headed for early successes, but rather it is an ability to work for something to succeed.

“Hope is definitely NOT the same thing as optimism. It’s NOT the conviction that something will turn out well, but the certainty that something makes sense, regardless of how it turns out.

“It is this hope, above all, that gives us the strength to try, even in conditions that seem hopeless. Life is too precious to permit its devaluation by living without faith, without love, and finally, without hope.”

It is encouraging that our school’s motto, “CRUX SPES UNICA,” champions the virtue of HOPE. It means, of course: ‘OUR HOPE IS IN THE CROSS.’

Part III. About the Viscera

The grand interpreter of the Southern soul, William Faulkner, said: “People NEED trouble—a little frustration to sharpen the spirit on, toughens it. Artists do. I don’t mean you need to live in a rat hole; but you have to learn fortitude, endurance. Only vegetables are ALWAYS happy.”

The sage of South Bend, Coach Lou Holtz, said: “Life is 10% what happens to me and 90% how I react to it.” Interesting insights from this unlikely duo, the trouble seeker and the counterpuncher. In parlaying their views, let us, then, establish a kind of ‘posture.’ When you confront adversity – and such confrontation is unavoidable—consult your mind but rely on and react from your viscera – the blood, bones, bowels, and bile. This visceral response is what we call “instinct” or “intuition.” It is an involuntary gut check, spontaneous and instantaneous.

Trust in these primal impulses because they emanate from all that you have ever been, all that you are, and all that you are capable of ever being. They describe “how you are built,” and they explain “what you are made of.” They define your character. They are you.

The words of General George Patton underscore this response mechanism: “when you reach down into a pile of goo which used to be your friend’s face, you’ll know what to do.”

Part IV. About “One Thing”

In his book *ON FIRE*, Larry Brown writes: “You have to do something in your life that is honorable and not cowardly if you are able to live in peace with yourself.”

Remember Jack Palance’s gesture to Billy Crystal in the movie *CITY SLICKERS*? Same message: “You have to meet the thing is what it is.” One thing. Simply. Bravely. With clenched teeth. With taut muscles. With the eye of the tiger.

Roger Rosenblatt echoes a similar notion in the March issue of *MEN’S JOURNAL*: “The art of living well involves sublime simplification –that is, reducing one’s existence to a fundamental structure that concentrates on one’s best strengths and desires, and casting away all that is unnecessary.

“Growing happier means growing smaller; but it also means growing larger, since the concentration that a life achieves is, likewise, its totality. ‘Is THAT all he is?’ translates to ‘That is ALL he is,’ which translates to ‘He is ALL THAT.’”

Part V. About Caps

Don’t I look stupid like this? Of course I do. I look like a damn fool. And when you wear your caps in reverse order, you look stupid and foolish, too (only younger).

Like a book, a cap is somehow sacred. It is an American icon. It stands for the good stuff: innocence, idealism, and the folk wisdom upon which people of my generation have based their lives.

Inasmuch as anything that is inverted or transposed implies the opposite of the original, a cap with the bill astern becomes an alarming symbol. And it stands for the bad stuff: our coast-to-coast drift toward decadence.

This trendy display signifies a reversed world order, a nation turned around, a society going backward, a regressive culture, and a generation retreating—certainly not “commencing.” It erodes our “field of dreams” and declares that “something is WRONG here!”

Stop this blasphemy. Quit turning away, even from yourselves. Face it: the really important things never change. That’s what TRADITION is all about. It’s the glue which unties us toward a noble purpose. Don’t mess with the glue.

Conclusion

As you advance from the relative “comfort zone” of the here and now to the ominous “twilight zone” of the there and thereafter, discover those portals which good English

opens, understand and embrace the real meaning of HOPE, rely on and react from the viscera, anticipate your rendezvous with the “thing,” and recognize and acknowledge that the really important things never change.

And as you “get on with it,” you must ultimately decide to which species you belong: you’re either a Holy Cross graduate or a Holy Cross Man. And there IS a hell of a difference.

Those comprising the latter group have withstood the fearsome flight of the almighty hawk – the blasts of frozen air sent from the tundra to measure the size of their hearts and to test the strength of their wills....Soaked and spent, they have endured the torrential rainstorms and have defied the white-gold lightning bolts serrating the charcoal sky – that mystical firmament beckoning them to a higher calling.

Therefore, thus initiated, only they possess the privilege of “commence” with a SINGULAR glory. Only they perceive their unique celestial summons, for only they possess the power to “SHAKE DOWN THE THUNDER!”