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Gratitude: a religious attitude?

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BACCALAUREATE ADDRESS 2007

Gratitude: a religious attitude?



Delivered by Lawrence Vogel, Professor of Philosophy

Because the Baccalaureate is an occasion for reminiscence, I thought I had a great idea for my remarks today. My mother, Naomi Gaberman Vogel, was a proud English major and graduate of Connecticut College, Class of 1949. She even served as Chair for her 50th Reunion class before the ravages of Parkinson's set in. Mom died on December 10, 2003, during the fall semester of our current graduates' freshmen year. What wisdom, I wondered, had her Baccalaureate speaker passed on to her class over a half-century ago? Would these words still ring relevant today, or maybe sound hopelessly outdated?

With the thrill of a detective, I called Nova Seals, the Library's Archivist, to find out who had spoken and what he (I was pretty sure it was a 'he') had said. After some research, she relayed the disappointing news: there's no record of the Baccalaureate speeches from those days, only the names of the speaker and the title of his address in the following year: 1950. The orator was one Bishop G. Bromley Oxnam, and his title was "The Christ Who Came Too Soon."

I couldn't but think: How must my mother and her family, all Jewish and many from the Norwich-New London area, have felt sitting through such a ceremony just four years after the end of the Holocaust? Frankly, we don't have to know just what Bishop Oxnam said in May, 1950 to realize how "politically incorrect" such a Baccalaureate address would be today. To be sure, one shouldn't fault the Bishop. For traditionally, the Baccalaureate was a farewell sermon, drawing on Scripture, delivered to the graduating class by a clergyman the day before Commencement.

How puzzling this occasion is, then, in our pluralistic environment!! Given that our Baccalaureate is a celebration of diversity at Conn. College, one has to wonder whether this should count as a religious ceremony at all. It would be inappropriate for me to speak to you from my particular Jewish faith - or even from the standpoint of religious faith as such - for our diverse group surely includes many agnostics and atheists, too. So, in keeping with my departmental affiliation, I pose a philosophical question: How can our celebration possibly be inclusive - true to our diversity - and also religious?

I propose that we still participate in a religious service today because the Baccalaureate is a form of collective thanksgiving. Graduation is forward-looking; it's about leave-taking and hope. Graduation anticipates your entry into the so-called "real world" - although, as Meryl Streep famously said, she couldn't wait to escape high school and get to college: only to find, upon graduating from college, that "the real world" seemed all too much like high school. The Baccalaureate is backward-looking; it's nostalgic and opens up a space for gratitude. This is a religious sentiment because it binds us to our shared past: a gift bequeathed to us by nature and by previous generations.

In a recent essay playfully called "Thank Who Very Much" philosopher Ronald Aronson suggests that the core of "spirituality" is the experience of gratitude for the natural and social gifts on which we depend to make something of our lives: gifts that are evident when we take a good hike or enjoy a family celebration together - or, I would add, when we take pause to reflect on four years shared at Connecticut College. As Aronson puts it, "One's map of dependence. . . sketches the paths for one's gratitude. It tells, after all, the story of our connections with the world and the universe, and it gives us a core of obligations and a core of meaning." But the spirit of "thanks-giving" need not be sustained by faith in the existence of a Creator or a belief that there is a wider purpose we help to actualize on earth, much less in cosmic history as a whole. I think life may be received as a gift even if there's no Giver, and there can be plenty of purpose and meaning in life even if there's no transcendent purpose and meaning of life.

I hope you'll join with me, then, in lingering for just a few minutes on your personal "map of dependence": a map that may help you sketch a path for your gratitude. It's natural to think first of your parents, family, friends, teachers, coaches and counselors whose support brought you to this campus. They deserve a big tip of the cap. When you showed up here, most of you ventured onto unknown terrain. But now its physical contours and horizons are etched in your mental landscape. Upon learning that I teach at Conn. College, everyone I meet remarks on the beauty of the campus: especially the view of the Sound and the glorious arboretum. But these don't go without saying, as all of you who've been involved with the recovery from Hurricane Katrina can bear witness to first-hand. We owe a debt of gratitude to generations of conservation biologists who've exercised stewardship over our delicate inheritance. With the spirit of the great restoration ecologist, Professor Bill Niering, permeating our campus, you can be sure that when you return for a visit, you'll be able to retrace many of the steps you took while you studied - and played - here.

Even if the physical environment remains pretty much intact, the College's human landscape may seem as tenuous as the proverbial boat on the sea whose planks get replaced one by one over time. Eventually the boat isn't comprised of any of the original slats of wood. The philosophical chestnut, of course, is whether it's still the same boat. A similar conundrum applies to the passage of academic time. The senior class graduates, and a new crop of freshmen replaces them. Within five years, the whole student body will be different. On a grander scale, this happens with Departments, too, and of course the Administration. This is a sobering thought, with its echoes of mortality, but it's also a reminder of renewal. Since your arrival on campus, we have numerous new Deans, a new Chaplain, a new Center for the Comparative Study of Race and Ethnicity, a new dance-company-in-residence, many new faculty members (most important of all, two new members of a five-teacher Philosophy Dept.), and, of course, a new President.

In the midst of all this change, the only way you can preserve your human map of Conn. College is by staying in touch with people who influenced you and by telling stories that memorialize the great moments and sustain the relationships. Think of all the new faces you've met during the past four years: friends, professors, staff, members of the wider New London community, visitors who've come to speak or perform at the College, perhaps even folks you encountered in your study abroad. While we share this campus as home plate, each of you carries an interpersonal map occupied by a unique set of people. Yet we all belong to the same community because our maps intersect. In the Baccalaureate - and perhaps Bacchanalian - spirit, I bid you to continue our celebration this evening and tell lots of stories: keeping as many of your acquaintances on your map as you can, for over the years the fabric of historical continuity frays at the edges, if not at the center.

Even small vignettes, seemingly incidental at the time, can leave an indelible mark if you tell a story about them. My tale comes from my seminar in American Philosophy at the close of this past semester. Our class read chapters from W.E.B. DuBois' *Souls of Black Folk*, published in 1903, as a prelude to our discussion of Cornel West, who draws heavily on DuBois. Each chapter in *Souls* is preceded by a poem - many by familiar poets like Byron, Tennyson and Mrs. Browning. Then, several mysterious bars of music appear: without words or citations. Because few of us can sight-read these bars, we're inclined to pass them over and move on to "the real text," as had the students in my class.

Without having planned it, I asked them whether anyone played the piano well enough to hammer out the melodies, but then realized that there was no piano in our room. A senior Philosophy major, Michael O'Neill, not only volunteered; he knew from long experience in Blaustein that there's a piano in Room 207. So we migrated next door, exchanged places with the Russian seminar, and Michael sat down at the keyboard where he felt his way through the plaintive tune whose lyrics still had to be filled in:

Nobody knows de trouble I seen,
Nobody knows but Jesus;
Nobody knows de trouble I seen,
Glory, hallelujah.

It's only in the last chapter of *Souls* - entitled "Sorrow Songs" - that DuBois explains the presence of those anonymous musical notes at the beginning of each chapter. "By fateful chance," he writes, "the Negro folk-song - the rhythmic cry of the slave - stands today not simply as the sole American music, but as the most beautiful expression of human experience born this side of the sea." They are, he opines, "the singular spiritual heritage of the nation and the greatest gift of the Negro people," though they've become "neglected," "half-despised," and "persistently mistaken and misunderstood."

Michael's musical skill and willingness to pitch in brought this heritage to life for us on the spot and turned a prosaic class into a poem - at least for me. This is just one small thing for which I'm thankful this year. It's a moment I'll never forget; it came as a surprise and a real gift. And it opens up a third landscape - beyond the physical and human - for which, I believe, we owe a debt of gratitude: I mean the liberal arts tradition that binds us to generations who attended and supported this College, and, more broadly, to our fellow liberal arts institutions. We feel a special solidarity with students and faculty at Virginia Tech because we know what it is to cherish the classroom as a sacred space where languages can be learned, history explored, concepts discussed and ideas debated in a safe environment.

The classroom needs to be safe precisely because ideas are a serious business, and we easily feel threatened by what the liberal arts require of us: that we listen to others, see ourselves as they see us, and take their criticisms to heart, even if we eventually decide that we disagree with their opinions. Listening and self-criticism as prerequisites to judgment are real-world skills. Would that our current Administration in Washington had embraced them during the pre-war deliberations of 2002 rather than treating the liberal arts spirit - otherwise known as "the pursuit of truth" - as a sign of weakness and moral equivocation.

By cherishing the physical, human and intellectual landscapes that make up Connecticut College, you can ensure that your "alma mater" will welcome you home even after your birth mother no longer can. This is true now in my own case, and it was also true for my mother when her mother, Dora Schwartz, Class of 1919, died in 1989. Because of Alzheimer's, my grandmother never knew that I had landed a job at, of all places, her "alma mater": a place that outlives her almost a century after having launched her into adulthood with a first-rate education. So if you want this place to outlive you, then take my grandmother's advice, "Don't forget to come home - once in a while."