

GETTING SOMEWHERE : ON ENDS & MEANS

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The tragedy of modern man is not that he knows less and less about the meaning of his own life, but that it bothers him less and less.

Vaclav Havel¹

Good morning. My wife and I are delighted to be here with you in this lovely part of the Commonwealth—the “Old Dominion”—of Virginia, to celebrate the graduation of the Class of 2014 from this wonderful place: The Covenant School. I also bring best wishes and congratulations from the faculty of the Templeton Honors College at Eastern University.

Your headmaster, Mr. Sanker, invited me to say a few words to you who graduate today. As a college professor, I feel privileged to be asked to reflect on and to share what I wish my students knew before they arrived on campus.

Ever since you were young, you have probably been asked, “What do you want to be when you grow up?”, a question which has now become “What are your plans after high school?” or (for those going to college) “What will you major in?”, and other variants of the economic question—“How do you intend to support your self?”. This is a good question, especially when it is asked out of genuine interest, or concern, or love. It is not, however, the question that I am asking you today.

WHAT? OR WHO?

I would like instead to consider this question: “*Who* do you intend to be?” That is, *what sort of* man or woman do you hope to be when you are thirty-four, or fifty, or eighty-two? This is not another form of the economic question—it is not about your choice of career, or your marriage, number of children, type of house, car, &c., or whether or not you plan to retire healthy, wealthy, and (still) good-looking.

I am instead asking *what kind of person* you intend to become—your character and the habits of your heart: What will motivate your decisions and choices? How you will use your time and energy and resources? What you will like, and what will you dislike, and why? What hobbies and skills and abilities do you intend to develop? What will your relationships be like (including your relationship to Christ).

¹Havel 1988, 237.

Aristotle discusses this question in the *Nicomachean Ethics*—it is the question of ends and means. Socrates said, “An unexamined life is a life not worth living” (*Apology* 37e-38a), to which Aristotle is said to have added, “The unplanned life is not worth examining.” (Adler 1997, 77) Unless you and I live deliberately, setting a goal before us and using that goal to guide our hearts and lives, we drift along, reacting to the pressures of the moment, striving for the goals set by our culture and those around us.

What ought the goal to be?

There are two primary answers to this question. One goal is simple: wealth, power, prestige, ease of life, and “whoever has the most toys wins”. The means are obvious: getting good grades that lead to degrees from the right schools, making the right connections (whoever can help you), getting a job with the right company, being promoted, and retiring with a good portfolio so that you can relax—you made it!

This is our culture’s goal for you, and you stand well-primed to reach it. If this is your goal, then your only real concerns are to do and to get. Now, there is nothing wrong with doing and getting in their place, but if they become the guiding principles of your life, you will (sooner or later) find that you are at war with your self: such a life is based on a lie, the lie that the material is all that exists and all that matters. But we are not merely material beings; we are both physical and spiritual.

Oh—one more thing. You will also need to be ready to hear “You fool! Tonight you die and your soul is required of you. Now whose will these things be that you have stored up for your self?” This goal entails insurmountable problems, and it is the goal of nearly everyone and everything around you: good school + good job = good life.

AN ALTERNATIVE

There is another answer for the Christian, and it seems equally easy: Be like Jesus. But what does that *mean*? For nearly two thousand years, the Church has answered that question with a list of seven traits, four borrowed from Greek philosophy and three from the New Testament. One Christian philosopher summarized these virtues in seven propositions (Warning: These are dense.):

First: the Christian is one who, in *faith*, becomes aware of the reality of the triune God.

Second: the Christian strives, in *hope*, for the total fulfillment of his being in eternal life.

Third: the Christian directs herself, in the divine virtue of *love*, to an affirmation of God and neighbor that surpasses the power of any natural love.

Fourth: the Christian is *prudent*; namely, he does not allow his view on reality to be controlled by the Yes or No of his will, but rather he makes this Yes or No of his will dependent on the truth of real things.

Fifth: the Christian is *just*; that is, she is able to live “with the other” in truth; she sees herself as a member among members of the Church, of the people, and of any community.

Sixth: the Christian is *brave*, that is, he is prepared to suffer injury and, if need be, death for the truth and for the realization of justice.

Seventh: the Christian is *temperate*; namely, she does not permit her desire to possess and her desire for pleasure to become destructive and inimical to her being. (Pieper 1991; emphasis original)²

For centuries, teachers of the Church have identified these virtues as the *telos*—the goal—of human existence: faith, hope, love, prudence/insight, justice, fortitude/courage, temperance/self-control. (And your teachers have also identified the four cardinal virtues as so important that each of you now belongs to a house named for one of them.)

If these are the goals, then what are the means? The primary means of realizing these goals come from Sunday School: read the Bible, pray, worship, believe—they are obvious (or ought to be for those who have grown up in the Church).

I want to suggest, however, other means that are no less important: reflecting on what is good and true and beautiful with good friends and good teachers, both living and dead.

How does this relate to life, whether in school or after school?

THE RÔLE OF SCHOOL

As you may know, the word “school” comes from Greek σχολή (*scholê*) which is often translated “leisure”. But the leisure of Socrates and Aristotle was not the “leisure” once described to a friend of mine: “I know how to relax. I get home from work, change into grubbies, pop a beer, and watch a movie or a game. What’s the big deal?”

To the Greeks, *scholê* meant the freedom from the pressures of work³ that allows us to do three things: (1) to consider what it means to be human; (2) to think about what we have been made to be; and (3) to encourage each our selves and each other to live as we ought, or—in the words of the Apostle Paul)—to “urge one another on to good works”.

² Josef Pieper wrote a small book about each of these virtues (1991), and organized excerpts from his own writings about them (1989).

³This is why Aristotle encouraged his readers to free themselves from having to work with their hands—physical labour tires us out and makes it difficult for us to think about these things.

This is not the frantic “leisure” that spends hundreds and thousands of dollars on “vacations” that leave us worn out, needing a “real break”, and worried about how we will pay for our “leisure time activities”. It instead means deliberately setting aside time to think about who you are and where you have come from (your families, your churches, and—in your case—this school), why you are here, and where you are going (you will continue to age, and eventually decline and die). (That last thought is not morbid—it is realistic.)

This ought to be the primary reason for continuing your education, whether or not you go to college: to make a place and time apart from the normal rush of life, time in which you read great books, think deeply and well, have good conversations, and check whether or not your life is still “on course”.

In a perfect world, this is what you will find in college: schools in which students, faculty, and staff work together to foster this kind of reflection, both individually and with fellow students and faculty.

And in fact you will meet profs who care deeply about their students, who see them as real persons with real lives. But many of them will be busy with too many students, with so many other demands on their time and energy that they can offer little real guidance when it comes to choosing courses—they will ask what interests you, what you need to take in order to graduate with your chosen major, what fits your schedule, and sign your advisee slip. They are not deliberately neglectful, merely overworked.

Many of the busiest, however, will happily take time to listen to you in order to help you choose as wisely and as well as possible, to help you match your interests, concerns, abilities, and passions with what is available. And I promise you this: when a prof realizes that you are genuinely interested in learning, not just in “getting a good grade” or “just getting by”, they will give you as much time and energy as they can—such a student is *avis rara*, a “rare bird” indeed.⁴

THE CHALLENGE

The reality is a bit different, and—since this is my world—I’d like to share with you some things that I wish someone had told my incoming students.

All or most of you will be entering a college or university this fall. College freshmen have little choice about what courses they take. You may get an introductory course in your major, but most likely your entire first semester or two will be filled with what are often called “gen-ed” (for “general education”) courses.

⁴They will also try to entice you into their field of study, because we are all looking for this sort of student to study with us—we want people who want to learn!

The school sees these courses as a way to accomplish three goals: (1) to give you and your classmates a common educational experience (the so-called “core”), so that you can talk with each other about what you are reading and learning; (2) to introduce you to fields of study that you might otherwise avoid or remain ignorant of, but that you may find so interesting that you switch the focus of your studies; and (3) to provide you with what the school considers “basic” education—what an “educated” person ought to know. And, taught and taken with the right attitude, they can serve all three of these purposes.

I am sorry to say, however, that not everyone at your college or university will share this view of the opportunity to study further.

Many majors allow “free electives”—hours that you can fill with anything that you like—and “required electives”, in the form of “Choose one of these fourteen courses in order to fulfill the ‘multicultural’ requirement”, but then offer little or no guidance about how to choose, or how you might “shape” your courseload.⁵

You will have classmates who encourage you to enroll in courses that are easy (“guts”, as they were once called), so that you can be assured of a good grade for little or no work. Some of those same “friends” will ask you to join them in cheating so that you can all get an even better grade. And some of those same “friends” will invite you to join them in far more foolish activities—things of which “even the gentiles are ashamed to speak”—not because they are philosophical hedonists (although they may be), but because they think that that is what college is all about.

Professors will try to entice you to major in their field without weighting your aptitude for it, since higher enrollment means that their department brings in more tuition dollars, which makes their jobs more secure.

You may be required to take courses that seek to undermine your faith in Christ, your trust in Scripture, your relationship with what your parents and church have taught you, often in the name of “objective” or “critical” or “scientific” inquiry.

You may be bombarded with sexy or trendy course titles, some of which are themselves titillating, some of which promise cheap thrills later on.

It is easy, you see, to be seduced into doing what is “easy”, into throwing away tens of thousands of tuition dollars on an education (so-called) that amounts to a piece of very expensive wall art—your diploma.

And *you will be seduced*. You will be seduced, that is, unless you begin your studies having already established who it is that you want to become and having a plan that will help you become that person, so

⁵See Henrie 2000.

that when you come to these forks in the road, you will already have determined—in your heart, by your prayers, and with the help of those who truly love you and wish your best—that you will follow the plan so that you choose wisely and well, course by course, prof by prof, term by term, and end up with an education that suits you and that strengthens your ability to love God and your neighbour.

This may mean harder courses. It may mean a lower gpa.⁶ It may mean changing majors, choosing an unpopular major, or even having no major—a program in “general studies” that allows you to create your own academic “program” (the kind of “major” that people mock). You will, however, be marching to the tune of music that you hear. (with apologies to Thoreau)

A FEW FINAL WORDS OF ADVICE

Whether or not you attend college, begin now to surround yourself with good books, good music, good art, and friends who also appreciate them—not as barbarians, who “appreciate” things because they are valuable or on the “top 100 list”, but as fellow seekers of wisdom.

Set aside Sundays as a day of rest and reflection: no studies. Worship in the morning, read, reflect, and rest in the afternoon, and go to bed at a good hour Sunday evening. Make this an inviolate rule: a law of your life. (No doubt this sounds like Mom talking, but I have taught many 8:00 and 8:30 a.m. classes on Monday.)

Set aside time every day to read the Bible, to pray, and to read something theological or philosophical; keep a journal so that you can reflect on your week and month and term. One of my students this past term told me that she started going to bed earlier so that she could get up an hour earlier to read the Bible for our class, and was surprised at the difference it made in her ability to understand it.

Read great literature. Read *The Count of Monte Christo* (Dumas) and *Hamlet* (Shakespeare), because before the end of your life you will be tempted to avenge yourself for some wrong. Read *The Lord of the Rings* (Tolkien) and *The Moon Goes Down* (Steinbeck), because you too may face desperate situations and the loss of all hopes. Read the poems of Robert Frost or Emily Dickinson and gain a new way of seeing reality and your self.

Seek out good music and art. With a friend or two, attend concerts offered at your school; jot down a few words after each piece, and then discuss the music afterward over coffee. Learn to listen and hear, rather than merely respond. If your school has an art gallery, do the same—learn to see.

⁶Ten years after you graduate, no one will know or want to know what grade you received in this or that course. This is true. For everyone.

Listen—attentively, not as background music—to Handel’s *Messiah*, to Brahms’s *Requiem*, to Palestrina and Tallis and Bach, and study paintings by Brueghel, Vermeer, Rembrandt, and consider the nature and meaning of beauty. Let their work help you pay closer attention to the way things are, and to the mystery of being and of truth. And let what you read and hear and see raise the question of the meaning of beauty and its rôle in our lives.

Learn to sing and to play an instrument well enough to participate in the musical ministry of your church, or to play and sing for and with your family and friends.

Learn a practical skill—carpentry, wood-working, or plumbing—and use them to help those in need.

In other words, make a life for your self—a truly humane life in Christ! Do it deliberately, and begin now. *Do not wait* for “after” (your parents know what I mean): “after I graduate”, “after I’m married”, “after I’m settled in my job”, “after the kids are out of diapers”, “after this promotion”, “after the kids are out of college”, “after I retire”. (There are no more “afters”; and all of this coming far more quickly than you can imagine.)

We get only one shot at this life, so aim well. And whatever you do next—college, apprenticeship, work—begin. Be intentional about your life, and be blessed. Begin now. And may God grant that you finish well.

Again, congratulations and best wishes! Thank you very much.

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