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"The Revolution Will Not Be Televised" 1998

W. Michael Weis

In the words of the great philosopher, Jackie Gleason, "How sweet it is!"

Before I begin, I'd like to thank the two people I'm told are most responsible for my being here. The first is much more deserving of this award than I am. More than a friend, Jim Plath has been an inspiration to me. He is, perhaps, the most caring, courageous, and creative person I know. The second person, Mike Young, has already won this award. He has been both a congenial colleague and my mentor these past ten years. Our styles are different, but I have tried to emulate his honesty and integrity. Thanks Jim and Mike.

And thank all of you for coming. Although I like being in the classroom, talking in front of such a large and prestigious group makes me nervous. And, I am competing against the IRS. I am also fully aware of the fact that the DuPont Award is the most prestigious award given at Illinois Wesleyan and my predecessors have all been gifted teachers.

This has been a difficult talk to prepare. The DuPont address has no rules and there are so many things I want to say. As a historian in a liberal arts institution, I am a generalist by nature and Illinois Wesleyan has always given me the opportunity to pursue my diverse interests. I've taught fifteen different courses here, everything from Latin America and International Studies to recent America. I've traveled to five countries, including four trips to Brazil. I've also had the opportunity to serve in a variety of administrative roles—in fact, I've had Acting Director or Chair attached to my title so often that sometimes I think I belong in the Theater Department, or Hollywood. The pressure has been mounting these last few weeks so that I feel I'm the title role in "Dead Man Walking."

All of these experiences give me a lot of options, but make it difficult to focus on a topic. Many of my colleagues gave me advice—talk about your research and do something on the Amazon, or gear your talk on the need for a new American foreign policy in the post-cold war world, or talk about globalization, or the new millennium. Every time I discussed one of these ideas with a different colleague, they would invariably roll their eyes and say something to the effect of, "For God's sake, I have to be in the audience, don't make it a hold hands, we are the world, we are one, save the rainforest kind of speech." Virtually the only thing my colleagues could agree on was to make it brief.

Despite the negative feedback, those are compelling subjects for me. I have a certain amount of passion for each of them and they have influenced my writing and teaching of history. And history has always been special to me. History is

alive. I believe that the study of history is essential to live life fully and with the greatest understanding of our world. Historians study change over a period of time, which makes change less frightening. We see change as an organic part of being human—and so we learn to look for change intuitively in our lives. In graduate school we used to joke that historians have an awesome power denied even to God—the ability to change what happened in the past. Unfortunately, the worst practitioners of my craft do so, and too often (though not always) these practitioners are film-makers and the self-appointed culture police. Bad history has disastrous consequences for us and is a major cause of the historical amnesia that pervades this culture and allows us to feel nostalgic about golden eras that never really existed. This historical amnesia threatens our nation. Thus, with this great power comes great responsibility; one that I've always felt as a professor.

In my confusion, last November I decided to seek out the opinions of my favorite students over the years. I wrote forty-one of them and asked for ideas for a topic and asked them specifically what they had learned from me, and what they hadn't learned from me that they wished they had. I received thirty replies. Those letters have been some of the most gratifying and uplifting correspondence of my entire life. I urge my colleagues to do this some day when you are questioning your career choice or wondering what you would do differently. All of us can produce such letters, and I suspect most of the students here could write one. This is evidence that we have an outstanding faculty. Although I hadn't kept in contact with most of these students since they left Illinois Wesleyan, the whole spectrum of middle-class America was represented in this unscientific cross-section: doctors, lawyers, school teachers, social workers, insurance agents, corporate managers, graduate students, legislative aides, college professors, and museum curators.

I really didn't know what to expect from my students, although since they were my favorites I expected some praise (I don't have the courage or humility that Kathie O'Gorman had a few years ago to read some of her negative teaching evaluations). And a lot of what they wrote did not surprise me. Most focused on personal traits—that I motivated them to try harder, that I helped them to think critically and write better, that I was willing to spend considerable time with them outside the classroom, that my classes are entertaining (or else they like stupid jokes). They noted my enthusiasm and that I like and respect students. Since it's my day, let's just pretend it is all true. Several of the letters moved me. One wrote, "You sparked within me what I am sure will be a lifelong interest in a topic that, prior to taking your classes, I had no interest at all." Another one noted, "You convinced me that engaging the world and being present in the community is not the 'correct' thing to do, not the 'progressive' thing to do, but the right thing to do. You cared and taught me to care." Still another admitted that she had already forgotten most of the content in my courses, and wrote, "I never thought you were teaching history; I thought you were teaching me."

These former students convinced me to talk about teaching and the impact that a teacher may have upon students.

The title of this speech, "The Revolution Will Not be Televised" comes from a 1974 song by a jazz-rock fusion artist named Gil Scott-Heron. The title was suggested to me by Jim Matthews as we were exercising together at the Shirk Center. I had just given him a cassette tape of various songs that included Ian Hunter's "Cleveland Rocks." Since I have always loved rock music and rock lyrics have been a source of inspiration to me, the idea seemed excellent—besides the title was catchy and if I got stuck, I could always play some of the song and dance. If it had been a different tape, the folk version would be Bob Dylan's "The Times They Are a Changing," while the rock version would be the Beatles' "Revolution," and the reggae version would be Bob Marley's "Get Up, Stand Up!"

I went through adolescence and young adulthood aware that I lived in revolutionary times mainly through Walter Cronkite and rock music. Rock music was something my generation used to demarcate its values and ideals from our parents or "The System." I play some of those songs in my post-1945 and Sixties history classes and I think those songs provide a chronologically accurate portrait of what became known as "The Movement." Dylan sought a return to the Garden of Eden with a dream of hope, confidence, and vision of peace, equality, and justice that captured the spirit of the early sixties. John Lennon expressed the ambivalence; hope mixed with fear of violence and the realization that it was more necessary to change yourself—"we all want to change the world, but you better free your mind instead." The Gil Scott-Heron and Bob Marley songs both came out of the mid-1970s, while I was in college. By then the Movement had crashed and burned—the failure of reform; the defeat in Vietnam; Nixon's resignation; the oil crisis and the start of the decade-long recession. Gil Scott-Heron and Bob Marley provided hope mixed with defiance and resignation. Bob Marley told us that even in defeat, we had to march on, while Gil Scott-Heron explained that even disintegration and economic decline could not stop the revolution, because the things that caused the revolution could not be stopped or reversed: things such as the increasing rapidity of change, technological innovation, economic and cultural globalization, threat of nuclear holocaust, growing inequality, and the yearning for a better America. The Revolution will not be televised because it is happening everyday in subtle and profound ways. He urged us to look beyond Hollywood, to not be blinded by the glitz and glamour, to not trust the manufactured news of talking heads and spin doctors and to learn to see clearly and really live. Most of all, The Revolution must be in our hearts.

The song works on many levels and its message still rings true. The Revolution will not be televised! There will be no re-runs, no instant replays because The Revolution will not be televised! The Revolution is both within and without. We still live in revolutionary times, even in this age of political reaction

and uncertainty. Indeed, our century has been revolutionary. Revolution dominates the history of the 20th century: the great uprisings in Russia, China, Mexico; anti-colonialism; the industrial, technological, & consumer revolutions; the conflict between capitalism, socialism, and fascism; and the great wars between rival empires and between religion and science. The 20th century is also known as the "American Century," a term coined by Henry Luce. We have sent "lawyers, guns and money," missionary and soldier, capital and culture to the four corners of the earth. America has wielded great power, wisely and foolishly, selfishly and benevolently and it has been a tremendous force for change. My fascination with revolution is partly why I chose to study United States Foreign Relations.

In 1962, in an oft quoted speech, Fidel Castro proclaimed to the world that "the duty of every revolutionary is to make the revolution." I am not a revolutionary, no matter what pretensions I had as a college student in the 1970s. I live a privileged life. I am a tenured professor. I have a mortgage, a wallet full of credit cards, a good pension, and in the words of theologian Martin Marty, I have "burnt too many bridges to a pluralist and compromising society to be credible or convincing as a prophet" or revolutionary. I am not a revolutionary; I am only a professor and my job is not to turn my students into revolutionaries, but to create revolutions inside my student's hearts and minds. This is the task of the university and of all of us who toil in the trenches of the classroom. If we really do our job well, we convey the great joy that comes from a lifetime of learning, that these four years are just the beginning (and not the end) of a long and wonderful journey, or as the Grateful Dead said, "a long and strange trip." Our excitement and enthusiasm for our subject, no matter if it is Philosophy or Biology, can help students to see the value in a liberal arts education that comes from studying a variety of subjects, that comes from having an open mind and the desire to learn more about our world, including those that have different faiths, ideologies, and cultures. Our job is not to install our values or beliefs on our students, but only to show that the richness of this diverse world helps make the human species interesting and viable. In understanding and appreciating the similarities and differences of peoples, perhaps we will become more tolerant of those that disagree with us---or as a good friend of mine told me, "put the liberal back into the liberal arts."

As important as toleration and diversity are to the world and to the university, it is not sufficient. There are two more important goals of a liberal arts university. Good teachers need to show their students the power that each of them has to change their world and to gain control over their lives—to make a revolution. Most of us are frightened by the prospect; we struggle to remain in charge of our classes, setting ourselves up as the ultimate authority, keeping our students powerless and silent—except in ways that are pre-approved, safe, and "conducive to learning." The result is that our students are well-meaning and ambitious, but docile and afraid to take risks. They become another brick in the wall. They don't feel empowered, or significant or able to "make the revolution."

Thomas Jefferson observed that a quality education is indispensable to good citizenship and democracy. Jefferson was perhaps the greatest American ever; he certainly embodied the most contradictory elements in the American character. Jefferson was an exponent of slavery and liberty, of empire and local autonomy, of communing with nature yet being its master. Jefferson the revolutionary was a man who doubled the size of this country without the loss of a single life, but who still rated his founding of the University of Virginia as his most significant accomplishment. Two months ago, Nobel laureate Oscar Arias declared that "to govern is to educate" and expressed indignation that Americans didn't know more about the state of the world. What kind of citizens do we want to unleash onto America? What kind of community do we want to create? What kind of America do we want? These are not unimportant questions. Last May, Rex Nettleford, a distinguished Jamaican educator, addressed Illinois Wesleyan. Nettleford noted that even after five hundred years of environmental degradation and human destruction, America still represented the best hope for humanity. At the end of the millennium, for good or ill, all the world seems to be America, just as John Locke once wrote, "In the beginning, all the world was America." Nettleford's America is more expansive and inclusive than normal definitions. It includes the entire Western Hemisphere, where the descendants of British, French, Spanish, Portuguese, Africans, Asians, and Native Americans live together, proving to the world that we can live together, if we would only, in Nettleford's words "embrace the light."

The light that he talked about was the same that Massachusetts Governor John Winthrop called for in 1630 when he exhorted his colonists to become "a city on a hill," a beacon in the darkness. It is the same light that Kevin Strandberg captured in sculpture in his retrospective, "Out of Darkness." In the shadows, the twilight, our deepest contradictions and darkest characteristics meet. The light contains our noblest aspirations and ideals. We must embrace the light. Professors are the molders of dreams and if America is to build the city on a hill, the university must lead the way. After all, what is a university but a community of learners, a microcosm of what Winthrop, and Nettleford, and Dylan, and Gil Scott-Heron envisioned?

I know the teaching of citizenship is a quaint idea, but the liberal arts are one of the last bastions of the communitarian ideal, where everyone's talents are recognized and valued, and where the good of the community is more important than that of the individual. Maisa Taha, a recent IWU graduate and one of my students sent me an essay by Wendell Berry entitled "A Continuous Harmony." Berry notes that "like a good farmer, a good teacher is the trustee of a vital and delicate organism: the life and mind of the community. The ultimate and defining standard of his discipline is his community's health and intelligence and coherence and endurance. This is a high calling, deserving of a life's work." We are not revolutionaries in any pejorative sense, or as George Will calls us "tenured radicals." We are stewards. And on good days, when we heed our noble calling, we can be inspirations of a better world. Thank you.