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Convocation for New Students

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Convocation for New Students
Jonathan Green - remarks
16 August 2011

As you may know, I began my work at Illinois Wesleyan this month, so like you, I am “Turning Titan,” and I am proud to consider myself a member of the class of 2015, so welcome fellow classmates.

“Ti esti?” — What is it?

“Ti esti?” is the Socratic question, quite literally, “What is it?”

A few days ago, President Wilson and I were discussing the rich lineage of teachers and students on this campus, and in a very true sense, your experiences with your new faculty are yet another link in a chain of young scholars stretching back to Plato and his teacher, Socrates.

We have learned from Plato that Socrates’s approach in his dialogues was not aimed at framing what he knew, but rather what he did not know. To him knowledge was achieved through an awareness of one’s own ignorance. An understanding of the nearly empty vessel defines its sparse contents. The most learned among us are those most humbled by this awareness. Knowledge is contextual.

Socrates was perhaps at his best when posing ineffable questions like “Ti esti dikaiosune?” “What is justice?” The most meaningful aspects of our lives: justice, truth, beauty, and love are also the things we most struggle to understand, and yet here we gather at the brink prepared to plunge into the inky shadows of the unknown.

The art of this game is that it is actually an intricate terrace, each seemingly bottomless brink catching the plummeting student when the questions can be answered. This provokes harder questions that lead to a new ledge dropping further into the darkness. In this sense Socratic enlightenment is an endless descent into the infinite.

Inquiry-based learning starts in the realm of the cub reporter’s questions. “Who,” “what,” “where,” and “when” provide the fodder of

much education; however, at Illinois Wesleyan, you will dwell on the much more rewarding and exasperating “how” and “why.”

Plato used his “Allegory of the Cave” to similarly explain the intellectual journey: the cave dwellers knowing nothing of the world except for the projected shadows cast by the fire behind their heads. Through inquiry a resident of the cave may become free and venture into the light of reality outside the cave. At this point you might think Plato and I have diverged: I have sent you careening into the darkness and he has released you into the light, but Plato continued his allegory by suggesting that the brightness outside the cave and the newly exposed forms are overwhelming and unfamiliar until the student adapts to this new environment.

Had Socrates made a better beverage choice (never order the hemlock) and survived to read Plato’s *Republic*, I believe he would have suggested to his most famous pupil that the cave is really a matrushka doll of caves with each successive enlightenment being a step into a new, more clearly defined cavern.

In 1837, Ralph Waldo Emerson delivered his speech, “The American Scholar,” to the Phi Beta Kappa Society in Cambridge, Massachusetts. Despite its exclusively male reference, it was a remarkably forward-looking essay that did much to transform higher education and higher thought in our nation, and ultimately, the world. Oliver Wendell Holmes, Sr. referred to it as America’s “Intellectual Declaration of Independence.”¹

In his speech, Emerson stated:

The office of the scholar is to cheer, to raise, and to guide men by showing them facts amidst appearances. He plies the slow, unhonored, and unpaid task of observation. He is to find consolation in exercising the highest functions of human nature. He is one, who raises himself from private considerations, and breathes and lives on public and illustrious thoughts. He is the world's eye. He is the world's heart. He is to resist the vulgar prosperity that retrogrades ever to

¹ Cheever, Susan. *American Bloomsbury: Louisa May Alcott, Ralph Waldo Emerson, Margaret Fuller, Nathaniel Hawthorne, and Henry David Thoreau; Their Lives, Their Loves, Their Work*, 80. Detroit: Thorndike Press, 2006.

barbarism, by preserving and communicating heroic sentiments, noble biographies, melodious verse, and the conclusions of history. Whatsoever oracles the human heart, in all emergencies, in all solemn hours, has uttered as its commentary on the world of actions, — these he shall receive and impart. And whatsoever new verdict Reason from her inviolable seat pronounces on the passing men and events of to-day, — this he shall hear and promulgate.²

Those sentiments are as true today as they were 174 years ago, but the world is a different place and the institutions like this one were formed to become the advocates of these ideals.

Emerson's model of the modern scholar was Johann Wolfgang von Goethe. Now remembered as one of the greatest poets and playwrights of his era, Goethe, a leading figure in the Enlightenment, was also a respected natural scientist and philosopher. His work on morphology influenced Charles Darwin, and his studies in color theory had a profound impact upon visual art in the nineteenth century. Goethe was a remarkable polymath, but he was not a divisibility of talents. His gifts were integral and interdependent. When Emerson defines the scholar's training as a study of nature, he is asking us to recognize the interconnectedness of our world and of human experience. This is the essence of liberal education.

We are here to seek truth and understanding through observation and interpretation. Our ability to observe perceptively is dependent upon our knowledge and experience, and our ability to give even the most objective meaning to these observations is dependent upon courage, imagination, and humility. To freely analyze or create requires a willingness to be emancipated from all preconceptions. We must embrace an intellectual heroism through which we sincerely treat knowledge and experience as our context and not our lens. Without declaring our freedom from preconception, we are doomed forever to find what we seek rather the truth.

As the academy has matured since Emerson's address, it has embraced a multiplicity of disciplines, acknowledging the rich diversity of human intellectual achievement. Today's "American Scholar" is more likely to

² Emerson, Ralph Waldo: *The American Scholar*. 1837.

be a woman than a man and represents an almost countless range of cultures and traditions. You are today's American Scholars.

You have the great fortune at Illinois Wesleyan to be able to conduct your work from a broad-based, holistic intellectual perspective. You will not only observe nature and come to understand yourself and the human experience through its metaphors, but you will recognize how the world has been corrupted and our future threatened by the hand of man. You will analyze these challenges against the backdrop of received wisdom and experience with a mind open to all possibilities, and you will diligently apply what you learn to effect positive change.

As future leaders, you need constantly to ask why things are as they are and how they can be changed for the better. Look to your faculty as models. When their Socratic inquiry leads you out of the cave, take time to reflect not only on what you have found on the outside, but think about how you were led to that point of transformation, because there lies the power to make an important difference in the world. You are fortunate because the assembly of scholars with whom you will work are truly expert guides, and today it is my pleasure to introduce one of our very best, Professor William Munro, recipient of the 2012 Kemp Foundation Award for Teaching Excellence.

William Munro is Professor of Political Science. He joined the University in 2000, where he teaches courses in international politics and has led our International Studies Program. Today he will speak to us about, "The Second Question." Dr. Munro...