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Finding our Circle of Light: Writing, Reading & the Liberal Arts Education

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WHITWORTH UNIVERSITY WRITING AWARDS – KEYNOTE ADDRESS
Spring 2014

“Finding Our ‘Circle of Light’: Writing, Reading, & the Liberal Arts Education”
By Professor Anthony E. Clark

Transcript of Talk:

French existentialist, Albert Camus, I think described best the life of professors who lecture, when he said, “Some people talk in their sleep. Lecturers talk while other people sleep.” I hope that my talk today is both nourishing and keeps you awake. I once asked a professor how to become a good writer, and the answer was unexpected: “To be a good writer,” he said, “you must first be a good reader.” So, today I shall attempt to inspire good reading – reading that happens alone, in silence, with a good book, that is perhaps illuminated by “circle of light” cast by a good lamp.

After living in China three times I have learned to see the world as a place of paradox, where things that seem unpalatable to our day-to-day impulses are actually good for us. I am going to talk today about one of those curious paradoxes that most professors - no, ALL professors - encounter every time they teach a course. While professors know that the best thing for students to engage in is reading, it is often what they seem to loath most about college. I’m often approached before the first day of class with the question: “How much reading will there be in your class?” Inevitably I tell them how many books we’ll read, and inevitably they tell me how much they don’t like to read. I have seen this disdain for reading grow over the past decade; less and less do I see campus benches occupied by lounging students, lost in Machiavelli, Spinoza, Kant, St. Augustine, Goethe . . . or Jane Austin, Mary Shelly, or Raymond Chandler. Raskolnikov’s anguish in *Crime and Punishment* over why he

murdered a pawnbroker has, it seems, been replaced by Luke Skywalker's angst over discovering his father is Darth Vader.

We have never seen an age of so many choices: television, radio, movies, parties, chat-rooms, comics, video games, and social media. There is a pervading notion today that choices equal freedom; the more choices we have the more freedom we think we have. The lavish cornucopia of choices we face today makes it difficult to make order of what Hugh Curtler calls "a bewildering variety of goods." It is sometimes thought that we are more free as our number of choices increase; but this is what Irving Babbit has called "the freedom of the lunatic." For the lunatic is one who is bewildered by so many choices. A liberal arts education, I suggest, is one that teaches us to choose which choices matter, and which ones to ignore. It is an education that teaches us to make order out of the lunacy of bewilderment. I am going to follow today Friedrich Schiller's advise, who said that one must, "Live with your century, but do not be its creature; render to your contemporaries what they need. not what they praise." So, I'll talk tonight about what Whitworth should value highly in its mission, and what colleges were first created for in the Middle Ages - reading. Not just any reading, but GOOD reading.

I am really not being entirely novel today with my topic; when I was initiated into Phi Beta Kappa, the speaker then made reading the point of his talk. So in a sense, I am continuing a Phi Beta Kappa tradition. The speaker then, Professor James Earl, said that when he begins his classes, he tells his students, "The work of this course doesn't take place in the classroom; it takes place at home, or somewhere else where you can be alone, and quiet, undisturbed and undistracted . . . a place where you can read." Professor Earl does not say this merely to inspire his students to do the assigned readings so they can acquire the "A" every student hopes for. He exhorts his students to read because it brings her or him

into what University of Chicago president, Robert Maynard Hutchins called “The Great Conversation” – the conversation that all great minds enter into and contribute to through the written word. When I begin my courses I tell my students that the reason they are in my class, indeed the reason they are in college, is not ultimately to become employed, but to hopefully become smarter than their employers.

Let me dispel here the terribly destructive myth that college is only about memorizing events, dates, equations, periodic charts, chronologies, and biographies. John Henry Newman said that, “A great memory does not make a great mind, any more than a dictionary a great piece of literature.” “Phi Beta Kappa” are the initials of the Greek motto “Philosophia Biou Kybernetes,” which means “Love of wisdom, the guide of life.” And wisdom, enhanced as it is by what we have memorized, requires deeper intellection. When I first opened Plato’s *Republic* – it was not assigned in one of my classes; I just picked it up one day – the moments when the text became richest were when I looked up from the book and stared out the window from my chair on the fourth floor of the university library. Somehow, processing Plato’s allegory of the cave while looking at Oregon’s beautiful green fir trees settled Plato’s ideas into my mind in ways that rote memorization could never have done. Reading Plato was such a life-changing moment for me that it led to a long love affair with just picking up a classic from a dusty shelf, and letting myself enter into the “Great Conversation” described by Hutchins.

So, my message, then, is to suggest that reading enters us into a world of ideas that teach us to think deeply and make decisions on the basis of knowledge rather than on the whims of influence and popularity, and good reading inspires the requisite thoughts of good writing. Let me also say that by entering into the very quiet and individual realm of books and reading, you will also be entering into the often-uncomfortable world of paradox.

You will be confronted with opposing ideas: Denis Diderot, Voltaire, and the French Philosophes of the eighteenth century asserted that Reason is the mother of truth, and concluded that there is no God. Thomas Aquinas, Roger Bacon, and the Scholastics of the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries asserted that Reason is the mother of truth, and concluded that there is a God. John Locke, David Hume, and the Enlightenment vanguard argued that all knowledge is ultimately derived from the senses. But Jean-Jacques Rousseau, Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, and the other Romantics disparaged the Enlightenment thinkers, stating that strong emotion legitimizes individual imagination as a critical authority.

The Romantics valorized freedom and feelings as the bedrock of truth. For as Friedrich Schiller exclaimed, “Man is never so authentically himself as when he is at play.” According to the values of a liberal arts education, it is within the paradoxes of great ideas, ensconced as they are in great books, that we find the materials with which to build an intelligent view of the world and make order of the bewildering array of choices we all face today. And there is another paradox I would like to mention; while the objective of a liberal arts education is to seek, and hopefully find, the truth, we do not at first have to agree what that truth is. To be truly a person of the mind is to honor disagreement – to engage in collegial disputation. Former president of Mills College, Barbara M. White, once said that, “The purpose of a liberal arts education is to learn that a person can like both cats and dogs!”

While I’m not entirely sympathetic to the Deconstructionist movement of Jacques Derrida – I may be one of last remaining Thomists – I do think that we have much to gain by respectfully listening to ALL intellectual views. And where do we access those views? Well, you could easily answer that the ideas of all these thinkers is readily available on the internet. I suggest, though, that scrolling up and down a computer screen is NOT the best

venue for serious contemplation. There is something temporally gratifying about finding a quiet place, in a dark room perhaps, to sit within a lamp-lit “circle of light,” as Earl calls it . . . and read – alone with the thoughts of our author . . . and our own.

Sitting and reading is so often nowadays viewed as “wasting time.” Sitting down with a good book and getting lost in its pages is seen as doing nothing. But Professor Earl reminded me that universities were designed to facilitate the long hours of sitting and quiet that are required of thoughtful reading that makes one a better writer. He noted that, “The green lawns of the campus evoke a pastoral tradition. The campus has been set aside from the hustle-bustle world of commerce and the demands of ordinary life, as a place where people can slow down, read, listen, and learn.” In fact, the great paradox here is that the best things that come from a college education are the result of just this “doing nothing” that so many people disparage. I don’t think that any parent wishes his or her child to emerge from college and remain unemployed. Fats Domino said that, “A lot of people nowadays have a B.A., M.D., or a Ph.D., unfortunately they don’t have a J -O - B.” Yes, professors do wish fruitful employment for their students. But they also want fruitful thought for the times in their life when they are not at work. Robert J. Kibbee, of the City University of New York, said that, “The quality of a university is measured more by the kind of student it turns out than the kind it takes in.”

Finally, I would like to commend those of you here who have distinguished yourself as good writers. Your work brings honor to the values of a liberal arts education, and I acknowledge with gratitude that you have excelled in such an education. But let me tell you what Professor James Earl told me when I was about to receive my first college degree. We can’t “catch up with the future by sitting in magic circles of light, chatting with the ancients, just listening quietly. . . . No, now there’s a new magic rectangle of light; there’s an

information highway running right through the green campus, with an on-ramp on every desk where people used to sit and read. The future may be in computers, but the past is in books.”

I would like to add to this wise exhortation one more wish for each one of you. I believe that books still hold the great ideas that make us better men and women, and better writers, and I hope that you will all continue to read in your lamp-lit “circles of light” for the rest of your lives – wherever you go. And I hope we all can bear in mind Professor Earl’s advice that, “If we don’t remember and respect the past, we have no reason to hope the future will respect us.”