

St. John's College Graduate Institute
Convocation Address
Spring 2017
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Living in the In-Between

Good Afternoon and Welcome – New and returning students, families, friends, and tutors – to the spring term of the Graduate Institute at St. John's College.

In particular, I'd like to welcome you who are today becoming students in the Graduate Institute. The year 2017 marks the 50th year of the GI. We'll be celebrating this anniversary at events through the year, so it seems appropriate to say something today, at the beginning of this year of celebration, about the beginnings of the institute, especially as its beginnings reveal something of the community you are about to join.

As those of you doing the mental math will have figured out by now, the first GI classes were held in 1967. To be precise, The Institute came into being in the summer of 1967, on St. John's brand new campus in Santa Fe New Mexico. Then-president Richard Weigle obtained a grant from the Carnegie Foundation offering support for five summers to found a summer graduate program in the liberal arts. The initial sketch of the curriculum was drawn up by Lawrence Berns, in consultation with many of the members of the Santa Fe faculty at the time, for a

program originally called the “Teachers Institute in Liberal Education.” That initial summer saw an enrollment of 33 students. It wasn’t as many as the founders had hoped to attract (though it seems to me like an impressive accomplishment!)- but aside from that the program was regarded by all as a great success; every student who enrolled for that first summer elected to return in subsequent summers; there was NO attrition. . To quote a report by Robert Goldwin, the institute’s first director, students were “Like (people) too long in the desert suddenly transported to an oasis. This was just what they had always hoped for but had never really seen.”

I won’t move forward now with a year-by-year account of the emergence of the program, though I would like to mention Elliott Zuckerman, who took over the leadership of the Institute from Robert Goldwin after that first summer, and Geoff Comber whose persistence is largely responsible for bringing the GI to the Annapolis Campus. A lively account of the history of the GI has been written by Larry Burns and is available online in the college digital archives.

Instead, I’d like to return to talking about the students. Even in that first year, there was some surprise at the variety of students to whom the program appealed. At the end of that first summer, Goldwin suggested changing the name from the Teachers’ Institute to the Graduate Institute, to make it clear that this education was for anyone who desired to undertake it. That first diverse group of

33 did include a number of teachers - nine from inner-city schools in Baltimore - as well as various residents of Santa Fe, Los Alamos and a places further afield. Some came straight from college, but most already had some graduate work in their backgrounds; many even had advanced degrees. Which is to say, that the first GI student body looked in many ways like the student body we have today - a substantial number of teachers, but also retirees, recent college graduates, people working in other professions, in the military, government agencies, and NGOs. They were also like current GI students in another, more significant, way; they, like you here today, were willing to make a deliberate and unusual educational choice at a time of life when it is neither expected nor convenient.

Such a choice must arise from a real and serious desire for the activity we engage in together at the college. At its core, this activity is the same in the Graduate Institute as in the Undergraduate Program. We are all engaged in liberal education, in an education that we believe will render us more free. But making the choice to undertake this education- *in medias res* as it were- necessitates a different relationship with or stance toward your studies than that of the typical St. John's undergraduate. Very few undergraduates here attend part time, and most of them live on or very close to campus. They are able to separate themselves, not entirely but somewhat, from the world – forming a tight-knit community in what you will sometimes hear called the “Johnnie Bubble.” But members of the

Graduate Institute can't live in a bubble (no matter how much some of us might wish to from time to time!) Whether you come in the summer or during the academic year, you have commitments – careers, families, the multitudes of obligations of adulthood- that can't and *shouldn't* simply be put aside. Of necessity you find yourself living in the in-between, engaging with these texts and this community as you remain engaged also with what is called, with greater or lesser degrees of irony, the “Real World.”

This in-between-ness puts demands on you, and in turn on the educational Program. Some of the differences between the forms the Program takes at the undergraduate and graduate levels – such as the ability of GI students to take a preceptorial, which is to say an “elective,” every semester – I think can be simply put down to a sense that students who are older and more experienced may be offered a modicum more choice. Other differences, though, were originally the result of rethinking the Program in light of what it meant to offer a program of liberal education, that would be rigorous and true to the mission of the college, to students with unavoidable ongoing commitments.

A couple of these differences have become defining features of the Graduate Institute program today. The most significant is certainly the division of the program into segments. The founders of the GI considered this a *concession* – not so much to an academic culture obsessed with marking out territories of expertise,

as to the fact that they needed to divide the program into coherent chunks that could be offered in eight weeks of intensive summer study to students who would have a substantial break between terms. Evidence that it is a concession is found in the very term we use for each of these chunks; we call them “segments.” The word segment comes from the Latin, *secare*, to cut; a segment is something cut off. So “Politics and Society” for example, the segment that some of you will be taking this semester and that was offered during the first GI summer, is not considered to be a subject-area unto itself but instead something cut off from a larger, integrated whole.

The fact, again, that although we adhere to a strict order *within* the segments, the segments themselves may be taken in almost any order was also a concession – this time to the fact that we can’t offer every segment every term, but we need to bring in new students every term, and so students need to be able to start with whatever segments are being offered. And this again has necessitated that we focus less on technical subjects such as mathematics and foreign language study where a certain amount of expertise must be developed cumulatively and in order. The majority of our students earn the Master of Arts in Liberal Arts degree without engaging in any foreign language study – and it is possible to do so without without taking any mathematics (Although I urge you not to! Many GI students, and especially those who were most hesitant to take it, find the Math and Natural

Sciences segment find it the most freeing of all.)

What emerged from all this necessary adjustment, however, was not simply a cut-up, truncated version of the undergraduate program; rather, as my predecessor in this role Jeff Black made clear in an address entitled “Liberal Education for Adults,” it is a version of the St. John’s program with its own integrity and distinctive features. For instance, reading the books organized into segments means that certain questions arise more persistently over the course of a semester, and it is easier to trace a strand of thought or a question from an ancient to a modern thinker. The fact that both new and returning students are likely to be present in any class means that the discussion of the class remains more focused on the books in that particular segment, rather than ranging widely over a long list of books that everyone can be presumed to have read. The fact that we do less math, science, and foreign language study means that we have more time in tutorial to devote to a close reading of key texts within a segment. These differences help make a program in the liberal arts that is particularly appropriate for older students living between worlds.

Finally, though, no educational program, however well-conceived, could ensure the success of this endeavor. What sustains the community of learning in the Graduate Institute year after year, as students and faculty alike negotiate the tension between engagement in liberal education and engagement with the world?

It's a pressing question not only for students of the Graduate Institute, but for all of us. For (assuming that we remain engaged in learning at all after leaving school) the space within this tension is where most of us spend our lives. I won't attempt to answer this question fully in my remaining few minutes, but I think even to begin to answer I must return to what I was saying about you, the students of the GI, and the unusual choice that brought you here. As I said earlier, it is a choice that evidences a strong desire to undertake the project of liberal education. What can we say about such a desire? The desire to become more free through learning, already requires both the self-knowledge to admit that we are *less* than fully free and at least the hope that we might become *more* free by pursuing knowledge about essential things. We admit that there is something about this undertaking of being human in the world that we don't fully grasp. But of course, *realizing* that there is something we don't grasp is only the first step. To know that we only have to look at Meno- rich, good-looking and well-connected, certainly engaged with his contemporary world - who, when his ignorance about virtue is exposed, responds with bluster and threats – then throws up his hands as he makes the debater's argument that it is not even worth trying to know such things. I think I can safely say that most of you, unlike Meno, at some level already believe that it IS worthwhile to seek what we do not know. But the task is not easy. It requires that we be, in the words of Socrates to Meno, “energetic and keen on the search.”

Without a continual recommitment to the search this life in-between would be impossible. We rely on this quality in you, this resolve to resist the claims of the immediate and return again and again to search with us for what we do not know; we rely on it, and I think as a community we can encourage it in one another – but as the example of Meno again makes clear we can't simply instill it where it isn't present. Socrates tells us that this belief and this search will make us “better, braver and less idle.” It is something very close to virtue; and as with virtue, it is hard to say where it comes from. - Maybe, as is suggested regarding virtue in the second half of the dialogue, it is a gift from the gods. - May we for the next 50 years continue to be blessed with students so gifted.

I would like to conclude by mentioning four study-groups that will be taking place this spring in the Graduate Institute, open to all members of the college community. There will be one on *Don Quixote*; the quantum physics group will be reading Gamow's *Thirty Years that Shook Physics* and Bohr's *Discussions with Einstien on the Epistomilological Problems in Atomic Physics*; one on Krishnamurti's *The Awakening of Intelligence*, ; and one on several of the works of Hannah Arendt. Information about all the study groups is available in the GI office and will be circulated in an email.

I invite you now to enjoy the refreshments at the back of the Great Hall before going to your tutorials, which will begin at 5:15.

The spring 2017 session of the Graduate Institute in Annapolis is now in session.

CONVOCATUM EST.

