

## **Of Bees, Fish and Cannibals**

### **Convocation Address**

Annapolis, Maryland

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President

Welcome to the newest members of the class of 2007, to the new members of the Graduate Institute, and to their families and friends. And welcome back to the rest of the college community.

By way of introducing you to St. John's, I want to say a few words about cannibals and cannibalism. I spent some time over the holidays with one of my favorite essays of Montaigne, *On the Education of Children*. Montaigne is, incidentally, one of the authors you will be reading in your sophomore year. It happens that he also wrote a little essay on cannibalism, but that has little to do with my object today. In his *Education of Children*, Montaigne offers loads of good advice. To parent he suggests that they send their children away from home to be tutored. To students, he counsels that they should be silent and modest for social intercourse, but fastidious in choosing and sorting their arguments, and fond of pertinence, and consequently of brevity --- above all to surrender and throw their arms before the truth, wherever they encounter it.

Montaigne also has a wonderful understanding of what learning is all about, and it has to do with grasping something the student may call his own her own. Let me quote from two of his passages:

*Let [the student] be asked for an account not merely of the words of his lesson, but of its sense and substance, and let him judge the profit he has made by the testimony not of his memory, but of his life, let him be made to show what he has learned in a hundred aspects, and apply it to as many different subjects, to see if he has yet properly grasped it and made it his own . . . It is a sign of rawness and indigestion to disgorge food just as we swallowed it. The stomach has not done its work if he has not changed the condition and form of what has been given it to cook.*

And later:

*Truth and reason are common to everyone, and no more belong to the man who first spoke them than to the man who says them later . . . The bees plunder the flowers here and there, but afterward they make of them honey, which is all theirs; it is no longer thyme or marjoram. Even so with the pieces borrowed from others; he will transform and blend them to make a work that is all his own, to wit, his judgment. His education, work, and study aim only at forming this.*

As I was chewing on this essay, I recalled how I was used to receiving copies of speeches written

by your Marshall here, Miss Brann, with a little note saying that they were “for cannibalistic use.” Now, those who know Miss Brann will readily recognize that such talks would be veritable gold mines, filled with things a college president might want to use in talking about liberal education. Let us call these things a “banquet” so as not to mix metaphors. I had been invited to remove parts of what was contained in a paper that I might use them in my own talks from time to time — parts of a talk that was not of my own making.

Often, we quote from others to add ornament to our own words. But cannibalistic use is not ornamental use. Somehow, I was meant to consume the talk before making use of it. Just as the stomach must change the condition and form of the meal it has just eaten in order that the body may receive nutrition, so must the mind transform the written matter it has taken in, in order that it may be nourished and its judgment improved. I figured I was being invited to plunder in order to make a work of my own, after I'd sifted through the material, considered it carefully, judged for myself what was worthy and for what purpose, and transformed it somehow to fit me.

In this reflection, I was beginning to understand Montaigne, I think. But I was also getting an insight into the heart of liberal education — that the students themselves must learn to become their own guardians, that in the end they must use their own reason to find their way. So, I asked myself whether it mattered what food was served up and how it was served to our students.

Well, I know I am preaching to the choir here. You would not have come to St. John's College in the first place — if you had not had at least an intuitive grasp that it matters deeply that the food we serve up for thought is the best we know for the nourishment of the mind and soul, for the development of their faculties. And you know just as well that it matters deeply how it is served. You want a banquet set before you and you need the time to taste everything served, to test it and question it before forming a judgment and rejecting it, doubting it, or making it your own. You understand that the authority of teachers can become an obstacle to learning precisely because their authority belongs to them and is not your own. So you want the teacher to listen to you before responding in turn. You want the liberty to chew on your own questions, not just take in someone else's gospel. You want to be the arbiter of your own opinions, but you need the tools to judge your own questions fairly, with your eye on the truth.

I think that is why you are here at St. John's. We offer you tools for working with questions. We offer you opportunities for extended conversation and leisure for reflection about the questions that will help you shape the person you will become. We offer you rich reading material as food for thought, and a faculty modest enough to know that the books themselves make better teachers than the more ordinary mortals sitting on the other side of the aisle.

We want you to plunder the ideas these many books have to offer, but afterward make of them honey which is all yours. We want you to digest what you read and hear, and change what you take in to make it a work you can call your own. This means that purely bookish competence is not what we seek (even though competence in all the books in this program would take many lifetimes to achieve). Instead, we hope to help you build a kind of “honest curiosity to inquire into all things,” to help you exercise the habit of shared inquiry, where you will learn to listen well to others, speak when you have something pertinent to say, and build a kind of confidence in yourselves that comes from exercising your reason freely for your own purposes. We want

you to learn the freedom that is required to make wise choices for yourselves so that you may live better lives.

There is a rather wonderful image for all this in another book you will be reading before long — an image I was reminded of another generously spirited tutor. I am referring to Dante's *Divine Comedy*, a poem written in three parts, where our hero Dante is guided on a journey through the Inferno, the place of despair, Purgatorio, the place of hope, and Paradiso, the heavenly place of fulfillment. As Dante, a mortal man and visitor, is led into the second realm of Paradiso, which is inhabited by shades in a blessed spirit world, he is swarmed upon as if by fish to their food. Dante puts it this way:

*As in a fish-pool that is calm and clear the fish draw to that which comes from the outside, taking it to be their food, so I saw plainly more than a thousand splendors draw towards us, and in each I heard: "Lo, one who will increase our loves!" And as each shade came near it appeared to be full of happiness, by the bright effulgence that came forth from it.*

The simile suggests that even in the heavenly sphere the human spirit is fed by fellowship. The eagerness for human company and the conversation (which follows) is seen as food for the spirit, and is made apparent by an increase in the heavenly light permeating them. These spirits rush to their new visitor for the increase of their love, which for Dante seems to follow from a knowledge and understanding of the way the world works and the heavens move.

I close with this image to remind you that you are not only here to feed. You are food for the rest of your classmates and friends. Fellowship and friendship come from learning like this in a community where each of its members flocks eagerly to the newest arrivals, its freshmen, to share and to learn for the sake of learning itself — and for the happiness that follows from the activity of learning together.

We bid you to come to the table. The banquet set before you has more variety and depth than the imagination can capture. Eat generously. Chew it all carefully and thoughtfully, taking in what you come to know is right, placing in doubt what seems uncertain, and rejecting what you know to be wrong, what you know can never be used cannibalistically, because it simply is not something you can call your own.

I welcome the cannibal in each of you, and encourage you to make cannibalistic use of the four-year program of instruction we will be setting before you.

And in that spirit, may you learn to love the project you are embarked upon and the fellowship of your classmates. May you succeed in taking in our program, and making of it something beautiful which is also something you may call your own.

Thank you.

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I declare the college in session this 14<sup>th</sup> day of January 2004.

*Convocatum Est!*