You Too Have Read Newton!

Commencement Address
St. John's College
Santa Fe, New Mexico
May 20th, 2006

"The manner of forming [one's] ideas
is what gives character to the human mind."
Rousseau[1]

I. Who is the Class of 2006?:

Welcome to all, candidates, parents (never forget parents), family, friends, continuing students, and staff and faculty colleagues.

Let me begin first with a personal note to the undergraduate candidates.... Here we are again, you and I. Four years ago you came here as freshmen. Four years ago—actually three and a half—I joined your freshman class in seminar. Today we graduate together.

When Ms. Cassel took maternity leave, I joined Ms. Martin at the other end of the table. Our reading that evening was from Thucydides and I had the opening question. The question *then* was—Mr. Mason made me promise to mention it today— "*Envied, feared, hated...who are those Athenians?*" But that was the question *then*.

Our opening question *today* is *somewhat* different. The question for both graduate and undergraduate candidates is "*Who is...the class of 2006?*" and, if I may be so bold, who are *you* individually? One can't ever answer that question fully. We might, however, make a beginning and say something about who you *are*, or rather who you *have become* over the past years of growth at the college under the transformative magic of the program.

We say years of growth, because this college is a place where one grows.[2] The college you've attended is no ordinary college; its program is no ordinary curriculum; and *you* have been no ordinary students. While at *other* schools it's quite possible for one to keep the curriculum at arms length and to remain essentially unchanged during one's period of study, that is *not* possible here. Our books are too great, their concerns too profound, and our mode of conversation too intimate, for you not to have been touched, deeply touched, indeed even transformed by your encounter with them.

Indeed throughout our tradition, from Plato through Nietzsche, it was generally recognized that education—the *manner* in which one learns and not just the *content* of what one learns—in shaping your mind, also shapes your person, your character, indeed your community. And so our question today.

II. Founding Thoughts:

"If there is such a thing as
an assimilation of a body of knowledge
without previous questioning...
this has very little to do with learning
and even less with thinking."
Jacob Klein[3]

Our curriculum, the New Program of 1937, emerged in a time of world crisis, the moral and political crisis of the early and mid-20th century. It took its shape over against what was perceived to be the profound failures of the modern university (convenience store) model of education, failures to prepare us for "our life's work" (Barr),[4] not to mention for the impending war.

The founders of our curriculum looked around and saw what many of our program authors feared: a world 1) where production was maximized but not our individual capacities, 2) where we learn, in Rousseau's words, "to use the reason of others"[5] but not our own, 3) where our thinking becomes more extensive yet less penetrating, and 4) where we are fearful in the face of what we do not know, 5) where our sense of responsibility is confined merely to ourselves, and 6) where, finally, we are forever dependent on others. They saw, in Tocqueville's phrase, "narrow individualism[6]" abound. This, many of our authors and the program founders sought to forestall.

From Plato they learned what must always be a fundamental concern of all educators: that our intellectual faculties are inherently ambiguous (or as we might say, value-neutral). What we generally call "intelligence"—expertise, learnedness, erudition, even genius—can all be put to questionable ends. The danger comes, Socrates says, from the ambiguous power of "sharply sighted souls,"[7] and thus one need face the problem of *power without prudence*. Indeed in his view, all education then—and he would say now—is such an *education in ambiguity*, falling short of the highest good and far from genuine thoughtfulness. As Socrates recognized, and as time has shown often enough, failure to distinguish between well-directed and misdirected thought only results in our having to live out the consequences of our human obtuseness and failure of self-knowledge. The question of his ***Republic,*** therefore, is how to make the maturation of *judgment* the proper goal of education.

So too the founders of the program read authors like Alexis de Tocqueville, a French aristocrat who came to the United States in 1830 to learn about a new and powerful form of government then sweeping the continent, *democracy*. In America he found a people with a wondrous capacity for community and working together and yet an intellectual inheritance of Cartesian ego-centrism and abstraction of thought that threatened to undermine this very potential. He saw an isolating individualism at work where "the bonds that unite generations are relaxed or broken"[8] and that puts a society at risk of losing its centering customs (*nomoi*). And while he didn't know our contemporary preoccupation with "majors" and "specialization," he did know first hand the debilitating effects of modern labor: "There is nothing that tends more...to *materialize* man and to deny even the trace of soul in his works," he wrote, "than the division of labor." Production is increased while we at the same time are rendered smaller. By contrast he sought to reawaken the recognition of what until then was widely acknowledged: "[Multiple occupations might perhaps]," he continues, "detract from the perfection of industry but serves powerfully to develop the intellect...." "One's capacity [becomes] more general [and] the sphere of intellect more extensive."[9] Education in America had, then, to offset these narrowing and

splintering forces that our strengths might still flourish. In contrast to his homeland, he had hope that America would find a way to overcome this contradiction.

Similarly, the founders of our curriculum learned from authors such as the young Friedrich Nietzsche that our modern universities themselves compound our problems. Modern learning, with its skeptical roots, prepares a kind of "historical vertigo," he saw, by continually undermining our ability to find any footing in the world, eroding any vestige of a foundation, cultural, religious, or political. "If the doctrine of sovereign becoming," Nietzsche wrote, "of the [ultimate] fluidity of [all] concepts, types and kinds... [is] flung at the people for one more lifetime in the current *mania for education [that is mis-education]*, then let no one be surprised if the people perishes of pettiness and misery, of ossification and selfishness...," and the future be one of individual egoism, rapacious exploitation, and utilitarian vulgarity.[10] A metaphysics of becoming puts us all out to sea, that of disenfranchisement, disaffection, and distrust. Education at the very least, then, has to present us with a fuller sense of what might yet be possible, if not alternatives to such thinking.

Indeed Nietzsche was not alone in thinking that we are ill-prepared by an educational system in the service, not of ideas, but of "interests" (Tocqueville), commercial and political, and a mode of education that renders us the more dependent and unoriginal. To this one might add the paradox of our present "information age"—information being "knowledge" severed from the process of learning—that it is, quite literally, *in*-formative, not formative. For how can what is digested by others be nourishing to us? "Indigestible knowledge stones," Nietzsche called them.

III. An Alternative Vision:

"Tyrants forbid citizens to do their
duty as free men;
Free governments permit them to do it;
Liberal education enables them to do it."
Stringfellow Barr[11]

Modern education, in short, had lost sight of essential conditions of human well being (prudence, community, and delimited horizons). The founders of our program, by contrast, recognized that an education to prepare one for life, to be humanly enabling, had to make available to each of us our *intellectual inheritance*—both the questions that we *all* as human beings must face, as well as the questions, problems, challenges and answers that have come to form our *specific* worlds—and it had to make available to each of us our *individual resourcefulness* that we might live thoughtfully in such a world. It had, in short, to be *liberal education.*

Our program sought to do these things by having you encounter the fullest and deepest of the traditions that have made us who we are *and* in such a way that it is *liberating*:[12] 1) that by exercising your minds, unmediated, with the most challenging thinkers, you might develop proportionately; 2) that by experiencing original thought in the making, your own capacities for original thought too might be inspired; 3) that as you are taken to new heights, you would discover places "where you had not gone before" and develop your own capacities to ascend thereto; 4) that in facing the toughest of the tough human questions, you might thereby be strengthened; 5) that as you are introduced to the whole range of what our authors have deemed worthy of human responsibility, so your own sense of responsibility might grow; 6) that in learning how very complex our world and its correlate, the world of thought, are, so you might become ever more comprehensive in your outlook; and lastly, 7) in doing all this yourselves, you

might in the most fundamental way, be "brought back to [your] deepest selves" (Barr) and achieve a heightened fullness of independence hitherto unrealized.

8) And one more thing essential to your experience here: your encounter with greatness has taken place in a context of constructive mutuality, of *civility*. You have had the good fortune to be part of a *community*. That is, you have had the opportunity to learn together what individuals do not necessarily know by themselves. In seminars and tutorials, day in and day out, you have learned with and from others, learned how to fuse and adjust your ideas and interests, formulated common purpose, been effective agents within a larger whole. You've learned, in short, that effective independence requires thoughtful interdependence. This too has been essential to, what Tocqueville would call, your "apprenticeship of freedom."

The intellectual rigor and communal enterprise of the college have thus shown you, we hope, an alternative to "narrow individualism:" weak, isolated, overly dependent, self-consumed and finally self-doubting.

Our alternative vision: vigor of mind, originality, strengthened human fiber, increasing resourcefulness, mutual autonomy, that is, "individualism" in the best sense of that term. This is the promise of liberal education. But it will be up to you to realize its fullness.

IV. Newton:

"Goethe teaches courage...
that the disadvantages of any epoch
exist only to the fainthearted."
Emerson[13]

The great books program of St. John's College has thus sought from its inception to counter the challenges of our "exorbitant present," as Goethe would say. But it too is not without its risks. Courageously insisting on introducing us to "the greatest problems that human destiny presents" (Tocqueville), the great books approach gives us an opportunity to confront these questions and problems but without promising to answer them for us. *What, then, are we to do with all these questions?* To find a way to live with such profound questions, and the uncertainty that they may remain so, without having this undermine a responsible and fruitful life, is the burden of modern freedom.

If someone were to ask me, then, what we needed most to have learned at St. John's, I would say, in a word, *courage*, inconceivable as a goal of popular education perhaps, though proper to one called "liberal." Plato, too, in his ***Republic***, recognized courage as more necessary for life even than for the battlefield. Indeed he saw it as most necessary in *study*, for there we encounter the most frightful and discouraging prospect of all, *ourselves* in our ignorance and inadequacies.[14] And this brings me to a story.

A tutor in Annapolis, Mr. Larry Berns, now retired, is reported to have said the following thing about the benefits of a St. John's education: "Anyone who has studied Newton," he said, "will not be daunted by much in life." Newton? Courage? Life?

When I first heard this, I thought it sounded right, but I didn't fully appreciate its deeper human truth until years later, when, having breakfast with a member of the college's Board of Visitors and Governors, I had the following conversation that brought its meaning home. I was with a graduate of the Santa Fe campus who is now an executive with Honda America.[15] He's

involved with their new generation cars and thus with their most advanced technologies. I asked him, if, after graduating from St. John's, he went on to engineering school. "No," he replied, "I read... Newton." I couldn't believe my ears. "There's no technical manual," he continued, "no textbook as difficult or as challenging as Newton's *Principia.*" He had tackled that book, and many other such challenging works on the program, learned how to learn, *and in so doing learned how not to be daunted in the face of difficulty* and so continued to teach himself what he needed to know throughout his career. "Having read great books" took on a deeper meaning.

I relate this as an example of an education that lives, that continues to inform a life, and where the virtues of study prove to be no different than the virtues of life. You too have confronted some of the most difficult works of our traditions. *You too have read Newton, Aristotle, the Bible and Shakespeare.*

You too, then, need not be at a loss in the face of life's difficulties, for you now have your own growing resourcefulness to draw upon and the shining, and dare we say, living examples of the authors of the program who themselves were not "fainthearted" before the formidable challenges and responsibilities they too had to face.[16] In short, you are *ready*, or, in the words of Nietzsche, you are "*ripe.*" "If you live yourselves in the history of great [authors] men," he said, "you will learn from it the highest commandment, [yourselves] to become *ripe* and to flee the paralyzing...constraints of the age."[17]

V. Commencement 2006:

"The example [of your lives] will serve
...better than all our books."
Rousseau[18]

And so if we, all of us, have done our jobs well, then the process of liberating you *to* your developing resourcefulness and *from* your dependencies on others has commenced.[19] It is now time for you to stand on the foundation of your considerable abilities, ever resourceful, independent, courageous—remember, you have read the likes of Newton—in short, "individuals" in the best sense of that term.

You leave here, then, with two uncommon gifts: You have seen *greatness.*[20] You have known *community.* However a gift is only as beneficial as our capacity to use it well. Your education is thus not over. And so, in the spirit of commencement, that is beginnings, **we ask you today** to pledge yourselves anew to the unfinished work that these authors so nobly began.

And so now we go off to other things, I to resume my long conversation with Plato, and you...that is the question, a question that will be answered by your lives. We congratulate you on an immense accomplishment and trust that, with the beginnings you've made here, you will continue to develop and realize the fruits of this potent and seminal education.

Our hearts and our hopes are with you. Make us proud. Live lives of distinction.

Thank you

Endnotes

[1] Jean Jacques Rousseau, ***Emile or On Education***, translated by Bloom, New York, 1979, p. 203.

[2] When my daughter Nicole was applying to college, she asked me where she should go. My advice: find a place where you can grow.

[3] Jacob Klein, *The Art of Questioning and the Liberal Arts*, ***The College***, January 1979, p.1.

[4] Levine, ***Four Sides of a Cube: Or, Why A Certain Question Needs to be Asked Again and Again***, Dean's Lecture, 2001, pp. 3-7.

[5] Rousseau, ***Emile***, p. 125.

[6] Alexis de Tocqueville, ***The Old Regime and the Revolution***, translated by Kahan, Chicago, 1998, p. 87.

[7] Plato, ***The Republic***, VII 519a.

[8] Alexis de Tocqueville, ***Democracy in America***, translated by Mansfield and Winthrop, Chicago, 2000, II 403. (Also, II 538: "The Americans have...reduced selfishness to a social and philosophical theory.")

[9] Tocqueville, ***Democracy in America***, I 387, II 541; see also II 417, 434.

[10] Friedrich Nietzsche, ***On the Advantages and Disadvantages of History for Life***, translated by Preuss, Indianapolis, p. 55.

[11] *Report to the Board of Visitors and Governors, May 1941*, ***Stringfellow Barr, A Centennial Appreciation of his Life and Work, 1897-1982***, edited by Nelson, Annapolis, 1997, pp. 109-116.

[12] See Levine, ***Four Sides of a Cube***, p. 9. There may be others as well.

[13] Ralph Waldo Emerson, *Goethe as Writer*, ***Representative Men***, New York, 1995 [1850], p. 195.

[14] Plato, ***The Republic***, VII 535b.

[15] Robert Bienenfeld, SJC SF '80.

[16] Or, as a student recently wrote seeking readmission to the college, that she, even after only two years here, had already learned how to be "....at peace with the challenges facing her."

[17] "...The paralyzing constraints of the age" (Friedrich Nietzsche, ***On the Advantages and Disadvantages of History for Life***, p. 38; also "There will come a time when one will wisely refrain from all constructions of the world process or of the history of mankind, a time when one no longer considers the masses at all but once again [considers] the [great] individuals who constitute a kind of bridge across the wild stream of becoming" p. 53). See Plato, ***Phaedo***, 99.

[18] Rousseau, ***Emile***, p. 474.

[19] Cp. Archytas, ***Diels*** B 3.

[20] Cp. Plutarch, *Numa Pomplilius*, ***Lives***, translated by Dryden and Clough, New York, 2001, I 99; also I 420 (and Levine, ***The Forgotten Faculty, The Place of Phronêsis in Liberal Education***, Dean's Lecture, 2004, pp. 4-6).