

St. John's College Graduate Institute
Convocation Address
Summer 2015
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Good Afternoon and Welcome – New and returning students, families, friends, and tutors – to the summer term of the Graduate Institute at St. John's College.

Today, the new students among us are becoming members of the St. John's community, a community dedicated to liberal education - to an education that is freeing. That the goal of this education is to make us free is proclaimed on the seal of the college. You don't see the seal around quite as often as we did at one time, but you may still find it in many places. For instance, it is embedded in the brick section of the quad, before the steps descending toward the playing fields and college creek. On the seal is a motto in Latin: “Facio Liberos ex liberis libris libraque.” Or, less alliteravly, in English, “I make free adults out of children by means of books and a balance.”

I've chosen to begin with this motto, (and in fact I will only talk about the first half of it: “I make free adults out of children..”) both because it offers a succinct summary of the aim of the college and its program – and also because of part of it that might be particularly interesting to us as members of the Graduate Institute. “I make free adults,” it says... “out of children.” This reference to children seems roughly appropriate when we apply it to the 17 and 18 year-olds who will walk across the stage of the Francis Scott Key auditorium when the undergraduate program welcomes a new class in

the fall. But for many years now, the college has also offered a Graduate Program. Can the aims of the Graduate Institute be understood in the terms proposed by the motto?

Looking around this room – where are the children here? All of you have completed a Bachelor's degree, many of you have spent years in a career or more than one, you have raised families, you have other educational attainments and professional accomplishments. Do we fit within the purpose set forth on the seal? If so, how?

So: “I make free adults out of children.”

Reading the phrase again, what might we notice? First, the motto asserts that freedom is not something simply given to us, either as human beings or as members of a particular political society. We do not come into the world as free. And this should make us wonder what is meant by “freedom.” Certainly one popular understanding of the term would have us suppose that we are MOST free when we are children, and become less and less so as we enter into the responsibilities of the adult citizen. The motto, however, claims that free people – whatever we may mean by that - are not born, they must be formed. Accepting, for the purposes of the address, this rather bold assertion I will then focus on the question - But what does it mean to say that these free people are formed “OUT OF CHILDREN?” Are we **all** are somehow children, no matter our age, until we have undergone some process of education? Or is there perhaps something special about children, such that **only** out of “children” can free people be made? Both possibilities are worth thinking about, and I will say a little about each.

In order to consider this question farther, I will turn now to a text we now all have in common; some of you may have read it for the first time in preparation for yesterday's orientation seminar. I mean, of course, Plato's dialogue *Meno*. I think I can find in that dialogue at least three characteristics of what it might mean to be a child, or at least to be childlike. Two highlight ways in which we are **all** children in so far as we are not educated, while one demonstrates a sense in which we must **be** childlike in order to **become** educated.

You all know that in this dialogue, Socrates makes the young man Meno admit (quite grudgingly) that he cannot give an account of something he had thought he understood. Stunned by the torpedo fish Socrates, Meno finds himself unable to define "virtue" - a topic about which he himself says he had "made many speeches ... before large audiences - and very good speeches I thought." Meno has been exposed. Not only does he not know what virtue is, until this very moment he did not know that he did not know! He has assumptions about virtue, and about other things as well no doubt. These assumptions are based somehow on examples he has encountered of men, women, children, slave and others who are called "virtuous." But he has never held these assumptions up and looked at them or questioned them. He has left them unexamined and so he does not know the shape even of his own thoughts on the matter, much less how to conduct an inquiry into whether or not these thoughts are true. In this way he is like a child, and like all of us in so far as we lack education. We move comfortably

through the world, even perhaps thinking we know a great deal - but it is only because we cannot really imagine anything about anything beyond the swarm of examples we encounter in our immediate experience. We are full of unexamined, and quite possibly false, opinion that we mistake for knowledge.

At this point in the dialogue, Meno, frustrated at having been made to look foolish, challenges Socrates with the idea that one cannot seek for knowledge that one does not have – for not knowing it already, how would one recognize it when one had found it? Socrates in response tells Meno something he has heard from “wise men and women... whose care it is to be able to give an account of their practices.” According to these, and I quote: “As the soul has been born often, and has seen all things here and in the underworld, there is nothing which it has not learned; so it is in no way surprising that it can recollect the things it knew before, both about virtue and other things. ...searching and learning are, as a whole, recollection.” So, Socrates suggests that we have already learned everything in a time before our births, and that learning for us now is a sort of remembering. Thus when we find what we have been searching for, we can recognize it – much as we can recognize a name we have forgotten when someone else mentions it.

It's an odd story, and aspects of it may strike us as not very plausible. Socrates himself says he would not insist on every detail. But note what it essentially asserts. Learning is not simply filling up a void called ignorance by pouring in content called knowledge. Real learning has not taken place until the child, or student, checks the new

information against something within herself. In other words, we are able to learn because of something that is **already within us**. In order to be a child capable of being educated, and thus of being made free, we cannot come simply with our unexamined opinions; we bring something else, too. The account Socrates gives here suggests that what we bring is in some way the knowledge itself already in us, and that learning is recollection, almost a sort of “matching.” Other texts we read will suggest different ideas and images for what we bring to the process of learning and how it takes place; I do not want to recommend one or the other of them to you today; I simply want to note that we have hit upon a second aspect of what we all have in common as children who can be formed through education: as children, we are ignorant and full of unexamined opinion— but we also have that within us that makes us educable.

Continuing now through the dialogue - in order to demonstrate that learning really is a form of recollection, in the sense that it makes actual something that was in the learner all along, Socrates asks to interact with Meno's slave boy. According to Meno, the boy knows Greek but has not otherwise been educated. You all know what happens. The slave boy first misidentifies the side of the double square. But then, when Socrates shows him his error, he genuinely desires to know the truth of the matter. And when Socrates points him in the right direction, he is able to recognize for himself the line that was sought.

Like Meno, he begins by not knowing – and not even knowing that he does not

know. Unlike Meno, however, when his ignorance is revealed to him, rather than defending his initial intuition, or becoming obdurate or threatening, he begins to seek for the truth and is able to learn. He began as childlike in the ways that we all are childlike before we have begun to inquire. However, over the course of the conversation with Socrates he evidences a childlike attitude in a different way. The dialogue doesn't give us much to go on, but I like to imagine the slave boy shaking his head in puzzled wonder when he realizes that the double side does not make a double square – then eagerly following Socrates' diagram, and smiling with satisfaction when he sees the answer for himself, or “recollects” it. Of course, there may be a different type of “showing” involved in revealing virtue than there is in pointing to the side of the double square. The example itself inspires a multitude of questions. However, my interest in the analogy here is simply in what it shows us about the attitude of one who genuinely makes progress in an inquiry. The slave boy is teachable. He is not angry or ashamed when his ignorance is exposed; instead, he begins to wonder. It is this attitude that I want to call childlike in the third sense. We are all children in the beginning, accepting as given the presuppositions that define our world- but also somehow equipped with that which will make us able to learn, to recollect the truth for ourselves. All free people are made out such children - necessarily. But as the example we have just seen illustrates, it is only when we are childlike in the third way, when we pursue knowledge openly and courageously, with wonder and delight, that we are able to be educated, and thus to be made free.

It may seem like I have veered a little from speaking about free adults being made **from** children, to urging us to **become** children. There are certainly some books on the program at St. John's that do urge this. Jesus says to his disciples that to such as these little ones belongs the kingdom of heaven. Nietzsche's Zarathustra presents the child as the third metamorphosis of the spirit, a "sacred Yes." It is deeply true, though I don't have time to address it here, that in some ways the condition of being childlike may come, if we are fortunate, at the End of our explorations, when, as Eliot puts it, we "arrive where we started, and know the place for the first time." For the moment, I not recommending the state of being childlike as an end, but as a necessary part of the beginning. It is in order to **become** Free Adults mentioned that we must begin as children – not only as ignorant, and as essentially teachable, but as ardently desiring to learn.

But of course, in recommending to you here this ardent desire to learn, I am preaching to the choir. Your status as students in the Graduate Institute I think puts a special emphasis on your desire to learn. As I mentioned at the beginning of this talk, each of you has a Bachelor's degree, the culturally accepted credential of a generally educated person. In differing arenas, you have found a way the world. And yet, here you are, some of you probably confounding the expectations of those around you who would propose that there are more practical ways you could spend your time. Here you are, wanting to learn and to *know*.

Although you are all probably tired of hearing about it by now, I want to return one more time to the phrase that was the beginning of these reflections: I make free adults out of children. A couple of weeks ago, a friend and former Associate Dean asked me what I was writing about for my first convocation address. I replied that it would be some sort of reflection on the motto of the college, referring to *Meno*. My friend said that he, too, had once written a convocation address reflecting on the motto, but that he had criticized it. The part he had criticized was the phrase “I make.” And of course, he was right to be critical here. I think our example from *Meno*, and the third way we have identified of being childlike, point to this. One thing the dialogue makes clear is that no one can force another person to learn. Socrates can expose Meno’s ignorance and leave him stunned, but he can’t make him go any further. It may be possible to help another person to learn, as Socrates helps the slave boy to discover the diagonal, but unless the person has a desire to learn and a willingness to submit to the process of inquiry – unless the person is childlike in the third sense we have identified - nothing will happen. Whosoever may be the voice that is speaking through the motto, the “I” of “I make,” (is it the voice of the college? Of the Program?) that I cannot claim simply to make free adults out of children through education. The college, and the program, may provide the opportunity for learning to occur; but in the end you, the students, through the course of study set before you and your own real effort, shape and make yourselves.

I’ll note in closing that the very structure of the activity we engage in together

stresses this fact. Your tutors (who are not, after all, “professors”) will not stand in front of the room and dispense information to you. Instead, you will sit together around a table, with your attention focused on a different teacher, the text – and on a conversation that moves from one to another as each of us picks up portions of what the text brings to us, compares it to our own assumptions, and allows ourself to be challenged and even changed. It is in this way that we come really to know our world and to be able to inhabit it as free adults – choosing, rather than accepting unthinkingly, the way we inhabit it. So I invite you now to come, to read and to talk with us as we all grow more fully into our freedom – together. Thank you.

Before we disperse, let me announce that there are two Graduate Institute study groups taking place this summer. One group is reading classic texts of psychoanalysis; the other is reading Kant's *Critique of Pure Reason*. Both groups are meeting on Saturday mornings from 10 until noon. For information on the psychoanalysis group, contact Mr. Maxwell; for the Kant group, contact Mr. LaFleur.

Also, this Wednesday night at 7:30, here in the Great Hall, we will host the first in our Wednesday night lecture series – Mr. Abraham Jacob Greenstine will speak on “The Problem of Absolute Knowing.”

Please join us now for the refreshments waiting at the back of the Hall, before your preceptorials begin at 2 o'clock.

The 2015 summer term of the Graduate Institute is now in session. Convocatum est!