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The Gift of the Gadfly

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Christopher B. Nelson

President, St. John's College, Annapolis, Md.

> *"I was attached to this city by the god – though it seems a ridiculous thing to say – as upon a great and noble horse which was somewhat sluggish because of its size and needed to be stirred by a kind of gadfly. It is to fulfill some such function that I believe the god has placed me in the city. I never cease to rouse each and every one of you, to persuade and reproach you all day long and everywhere I find myself in your company."*

Socrates makes this claim in his own defense against charges of impiety and corruption of the youth of Athens. It is typical of Socrates that he makes it hard for us to determine just when he intends to deny the charges brought against him and when he would positively embrace them. Socrates is a defense attorney's worst nightmare and a grave digger's delight; when in a hole, he will take up the shovel and dig himself deeper.

Presented with one bill of particulars, Socrates adds new charges to the list against him. Prosecuted for threatening the city's good order, for challenging its authority figures and questioning their wisdom, he claims to be a gift to the city. Threatened with death for his behavior, he gives no thought to himself, but instead begs to argue the case for the city. He asks the jury, for its own sake, and the sake of the city, to avoid mistreating god's gift to them by condemning Socrates, the city's greatest blessing–a blessing in the form of a gadfly, attached to the city, to stir it and rouse each of its citizens, to persuade and reproach them, all day long and everywhere. On trial at age 70, Socrates will not go quietly into retirement. His jury was sufficiently impressed with his defense that it sentenced him to death. It does not take much imagination to picture what a pain in that noble horse's rear this gadfly, Socrates, must have been.

I apologize to our freshmen for giving away the outcome of the trial, for each of you will soon read the account of it in Plato's *Apology*. But I wanted to open my remarks with reference to it because I think that each of us here at the college has something at stake in this trial, at least something at stake in Socrates' defense. Socrates certainly thinks so, and he will fight for it with all he has, comparing himself, ironically but rightly, I think, to Achilles, another hero our freshmen are encountering this week: the man of action, praised for his courage, his warrior's excellence, and his fighting spirit. (More about this later.) Perhaps, I am also drawn to the dialogue as a former trial lawyer. While I cringe when Socrates mocks both his accusers and his citizen jury, I find myself

cheering his courage and willingness to embrace the claim that he may be both a threat to the established power structure and a gift to the city. Armed only with questions and the will to question relentlessly, he threatens the status quo and the peace of mind of the city's public opinion shapers, and challenges the citizens' thoughtless acceptance of whatever they are told. Socrates is a destabilizing influence. Is he really the blessing to the city that he claims to be?

Let us first look at our city. Socrates claims that Athens is great and noble, made sluggish by its size. What can he have meant by this? Not every city is great and noble. Indeed, we learn in a later dialogue that Socrates would rather be put to death in Athens than be released to live anywhere else. I can imagine a number of ways to think about the problem of this great city, but I'd like to offer one for now. Athens is a democracy, or a kind of democracy of free male citizens; it is built upon a respect for the individual and a trust that its citizens are capable of self-governance. Surely, the protection of a democracy and the freedom of its citizens require that those citizens have an education both in the traditions of the city and in the arts of freedom. The traditions of a city, its customs, its idols, and even its laws, will frequently be at odds with the very things that encourage the autonomy of the individual citizen---those arts that allow us to think for ourselves and to question the city fathers, popular opinion, and social custom.

One might say that a democracy of any size can only work well if its citizens agree on the need to hold on to this tension between the needs of an ordered society and the needs of a free people. I imagine that only in such societies can a Socrates have a home. Athens may be the best hope for home for the free individual. But it may also be that in any well-ordered and relatively happy society there will always be a tendency for the people to fall asleep, to become comfortable in their prosperity, to follow without much reflection the will of the many, and to ignore, resent or repress the individual voice that would challenge custom and the comfort of its citizens. Let me call this tendency to sleep a form of decay or corruption of a democratic society, which can only be countered by the wakeful vigilance of its citizens and the persistent effort to find ways of renewing the city's spirit, recalling it to its purposes. If the city's business is justice, the citizen leadership must always be alert to signs of corruption and open to correction; it must encourage in its citizens a respect for justice which will require the people to think about what is right and wrong, not just what is comfortable or expedient---to think about building a better tomorrow, not just protecting their inheritance.

It is probably the case that even the good city is more likely to tolerate its gladflies than to learn from them. Socrates seems to understand this; he argues and reproaches, to be sure. But it is never clear that he has a particular lesson to teach. He would convince us of our ignorance, without finding for us an answer. His chief work would seem to consist in prodding us to wakefulness, to keep us from the smug self-satisfaction that comes from sleeping through life without examining who we are and what we ought to become. He seems to take it as an unqualified good that we should be kept awake to this examination even if we can't resolve the questions that such examination requires us to ask.

How does Socrates prod us to wakefulness? Certainly not by giving us life's answers. We've all slept through those lectures. He does it by asking questions which open us up to the world. These are not the questions you need to know to pass your multiple-choice or true-false exams; they are not the questions designed to test your knowledge. Instead, they are questions that should help you understand how much you still need to learn, and how little you really understand what you thought you knew or were told by others. They are questions that will reduce you to a state of perplexity so that you may wonder at your ignorance and search hard for a better understanding.

For Socrates, it is human to want to know, and the prod to encourage the human desire to know something is the prod to be human. We all recognize that the desire to know something is grounded in what we don't know. Therefore, the best preparation for life, for becoming more fully human, is less the acquisition of knowledge than the understanding of our ignorance. This in turn will help us find the questions we need to ask to bring us to a better understanding. For a question to help us, something must be at stake for us; it must make a real difference to us how we answer the question. When Socrates tells the reader toward the end of the *Apology* that the unexamined life is not worth living, he is telling us that we might as well be dead (or never born) as live a life that is unexamined–a life without questions, the answers to which really matter to us.

For Socrates, what is at stake is literally greater than life or death. Here is where he compares himself to Achilles who, knowing he will soon be killed after he slays the royal Hector, nonetheless despises death: " 'Let me die at once,' he said, 'when once I have given the wrongdoer his desserts, rather than remain here, a laughing-stock by the curved ships, a burden upon the earth.' "

Like Achilles, Socrates is not just willing to risk death for something he believes in; he is without *thought* of death, as he faces danger rather than the disgrace of withdrawing from the search for self-knowledge, the pursuit of which is Socrates' only reason for living. The disgrace for Socrates would be all the greater for backing away out of fear of the unknown. "To fear death, gentlemen," he says "is no other than to think oneself wise when one is not, to think one knows what one does not know. No man knows whether death may not be the greatest of all blessings for a man..." True to his search for self knowledge, mere death is no barrier. Socrates and Achilles live the lives that belong to them, fully and completely, because they have some understanding of who they are and what they are meant to do.

You will discover that Socrates is a local hero to many at this college. I know there are other such heroes here; some are unyielding, bulwarks, upright (take Ajax or Antigone), while others are survivors, with a kind of practical wisdom that will see them through a changing world (Odysseus and Penelope). In the literature throughout the Program, you will find examples of men and women who will invite imitation. The question we must ask of each such character is this: who is this man or woman, and what is at stake for me that I need to understand what moves them to do what they do? The question that underlies Plato's *Apology* is not the guilt or innocence of Socrates. It is something closer to this: "Who is this man, Socrates? Is he living a life worth living---the life that truly belongs to him? Does it matter to me and to the City that this man's life should continue or come to an end? Is it perhaps, even, a life worth imitating or undertaking as my own?" We cannot judge Socrates until we know him better. And in judging him, we reveal ourselves. We had better understand what is at stake for us before we decide the fate of Socrates and either keep him with us or consign him to Hades and take up another. This is the prod to wakefulness that Socrates represents. And these persistent questions can be as annoying or inspiriting to the sleeping soul within each of us as the gadfly is to the noble horse.

This whole program of instruction is designed to give you the tools to ask the question "Who are you?" The invocation here is the same as the words at the entrance to the temple of Delphi, consulted by Socrates in his youth: "Know Thyself." It presumes that the question "Who are you?" is a real one, and that you yourselves have not answered it. It presumes that the stakes are high, that your happiness depends upon your investigation into this question. It suggests that coming to know yourself is a high and sacred duty, a task of monumental difficulty, requiring courage, and worthy of being called "heroic." And it suggests that the way each of you will choose to live your life after St. John's may depend on how you go about exploring the answer to the question: "Who are you?"

Nearly every book we read together will help you consider who you are and what your place is in the world. What makes you a featherless biped, a rational being, a lover of wisdom, a son of Adam, a child of God, a collection of molecules and a product of genes, an evolved kind of ape, an acquisitive animal, a noble savage with a life that is solitary, poor, nasty, brutish, and short, but created equal and endowed with certain inalienable rights? Those are just a few of the possible answers you will consider in your four years with us. In reading these books and asking of them whether they speak any truths to you, you will be participating in an education appropriate to a great and noble democracy–an education in the traditions of society, the arts of freedom, and the tension between the two.

You will come to ask yourself whether answering these questions will help you shape your character. I cannot begin to imagine how each of you will find your own answer to that question. But I think I can say with some confidence that your pursuit of these answers, and your wakefulness to the things that matter, will be worthy of the humanity that lies within each of you.

We will ask each of you to remember the gift of the gadfly, prompting you to remain wakeful---and ask each of you to serve as a prompt to the rest of the college community whenever we appear to be sleeping. (Now, I ask you not to take this last injunction too literally but to allow yourselves, your classmates and your tutors those hours of repose required for us all to remain alert and fit for daylight classes.)

On behalf of the entire college community, I welcome our newcomers to St. John's College, welcome back the returning members of our community, and invite one and all to participate together in this search for our humanity.

Thank you.

Following the recessional, I invite everyone to a reception behind the Mitchell Art Gallery.

I declare the College in session this 22nd day of August, 2007.

CONVOCATUM EST!