

**The Pursuit of Happiness**  
**Convocation Address, August 24, 2016**  
**Christopher B. Nelson**

Welcome to the Class of 2020, to the entering students in the Graduate Institute, and to their families and friends. To our returning students, faculty and staff, welcome back. I hope that all of you are as happy as I am to see a new year underway.

It was on just such an occasion 50 years ago that I shook the hand of our president, signed the College Register, and sat where you freshmen are sitting today, awaiting the happy start of a four-year adventure into the books and conversation that comprise our Program of Study at St. John's. As I began to prepare today's remarks, I tried to call up what it was I seeking when I chose to apply to St. John's those many years ago. Some of it was very clear in my mind; some of it was quite foggy, not because of the passage of time, but because I lacked the vocabulary to describe it.

First of all, I was very tired of hearing my teachers tell me what I needed to know, and then regurgitating it back on tests designed to measure my learning, as if I could not determine that for myself. I wanted to make my education my own, to participate in it, to talk through what we were studying, to take it seriously ... for *my* sake.

And then, there were the books, many of which I could not imagine reading on my own. I was happy to have found a college where the faculty had formed a judgment that some books were better than others. I am quite sure that it was not out of laziness that I thought it better to give myself over to these judgments when I was just 18 years old. I knew at least that much about what I did *not* know to trust a well-read faculty to help me get started on my education.

But there was something else that caught my attention, and I don't think I could have described it well back then. It was this: the College's Program was said to be a kind of whole, like a fully-jigged puzzle, where all the parts fit together. I think I understood that no one on the faculty would claim that the Program was really complete or that the jigged pieces were perfect fits. I knew that parts of it had been rearranged and substituted for others over time, and I imagined that the Program would continue to be rearranged with experience, even that its elements might change. At the same time, I knew of no other college that claimed it was trying to present a kind of whole to its students, and that there were unifying aspects to its parts. And I thought it meant something that a faculty would care as much about the whole as of its many parts, each of which held its own attractions which presented temptations to concentrate on a part at the expense of the whole. (The rise of countless majors and electives over the last century and a half in other colleges is proof enough of such temptation.)

I am sure my experience with life cannot have been so different from yours that you would not recognize a yearning for a sense of wholeness in your life, that there often seem to be competing parts of the soul fighting with one another while we are also trying to get a more complete understanding of ourselves and the kind of life we wish to live. This desire for wholeness, a one-ness within us, is something we often call "integrity", borrowed from the word "integer", signifying unity, something that can help each of us be the same person in public as we are in private, the same person when facing a trial as when at ease with the world, the kind of person worthy of the trust of his or her family, friends and colleagues. The satisfaction of this desire to make a complete whole for ourselves is something I wanted to call happiness. I am convinced that this pursuit of happiness is what drove me to St. John's College, and I hope it has been a part of what has brought you here as well.

To satisfy this desire for a life of integrity, one needs to ask the right questions and explore the possible answers: What does it mean to be human? How does my humanity reflect itself in my own unique life? What kind of world do I live in and how is it changing? What tools do I need to navigate that world and make sense of it? What ought I to do with my life? How might I help make this a better world? Is there a divinity at work and what difference would that make?

I could not imagine being happy but unable to ask these questions in the company of others who also cared about their answers. It seemed that my happiness was bound up with others in a common search for understanding such things.

Frankly, it took me some time at St. John's College to see how many of the books that asked such elemental questions were expressly concerned with human happiness. And it was through reading these books and discussing them at length that I came to realize something rather obvious, that our happiness requires that our actions are not only harmonious with one another and with our will, but that they are directed toward what is truly good for us. Happiness comes from living a *good* life, enriched by all that a human being really needs. But recognition of the good is not always easy, and not everyone agrees that it can be pursued even if it is recognized.

We read the Iliad and see our heroes vying for honor and glory and ask if this is a proper object of desire. Some of our warriors are saved by a god or goddess who loves them and would keep them from their fate. Others come to an unhappy end, and we ask why some god did not swoop down from Olympus to divert the spear flying toward its end. What control did these heroes actually have over their fate when even the son of a god could be slain in battle? Or did the happy intervention by a god on behalf of a hero suggest he was somehow worthy of the god's love and attention, a sign of his character, something within his power to shape?

We read of Odysseus weeping to find his way home and into the arms of his Penelope. What is the relationship between his happiness and their reunion, between his happiness and home itself? Indeed, what does it mean to have a home? Odysseus had to leave home to find it, to suffer both abroad and on his return in order to earn the right to repossess his home. But then what do we make of his desire to leave again and in search of what end? Or is the search for happiness simply unending and the object of the search always changing?

Herodotus tells us the story of Croesus, King of Lydia, who seeks the advice of Solon of Athens as to who is the happiest man in the world, believing it could be none other than himself, the man with all the wealth and power one could want. Solon answers with the stories of three men who lived well and died well too. He cannot say of Croesus that he is the happiest, or most of blessed of men, until he has brought his life to its end. Croesus does indeed suffer a terrible reversal of fortune, losing his kingdom and his son in the bargain, and when facing death atop a funeral pyre with flames licking his feet, Croesus renounces his pride, recognizing Solon's wisdom, and exclaims that no one who lives is happy, calling out Solon's name, whereupon a storm burst forth and put out the flames. Happiness has deep roots in luck, chance, fate, and the gods! Happiness is what happens to us, the story seems to say; it is not in our control.

Aeschylus weaves the drama of Agamemnon, who chose to sacrifice his daughter in order that he might achieve glory and lead the campaign against Troy... only to suffer an unhappy end at the hands of his queen. And of Orestes, who killed his mother as an act of justice for her murder of his father. Sophocles tells us of Oedipus, saving a city while fulfilling a prophecy that he would kill his father, marry his mother, and sire by her four children, themselves doomed to live out unhappy lives. For years, I just could not see why each of these men and women should not be held fully responsible for everything that came down upon their heads.

Then, in time, I came to wonder if I was not being too hard on them. The choices they had to face are the choices writ large that we all face from time to time, between family and country, duty and love, self-sacrifice and self-preservation, purity and compromise, and more. Resolution of such conflicts is not easy, and each choice has consequences. No simple happy endings for these tragic protagonists! All contributed to their own undoing; all were hunted down by gods or pursued by family curses for the choices they made. Salvation, if it came, was a gift from the gods; man could not control his happiness in this world. Mankind, in the words of the chorus of Sophocles' *Philoctetes*, is an "unhappy race", and the man or woman who escapes the tragic predicament of their humanity requires the intervention of the divine. All others suffer.

I have to say that this view of humanity and the possibility of happiness did not sit well with me, not when I first read these painfully beautiful plays, and not after many more readings. Even with another five decades of experience behind me, reminding me of the aches and pains of growing up and then growing older, the heartaches and losses that accompany our mortal condition, and the caprice of fortune's wheel, I take comfort in a conviction I have that I can find a measure of happiness in the choices I make in shaping my life. I act as though I have freedom of choice, and I have convinced myself that this freedom and my acting on it make a difference in my fortune, my search for happiness.

Freshmen and some of you in our Graduate Institute will soon be reading Plato's *Republic*, in which Socrates faces a challenge from two young brothers that he show them why their happiness depends on living a just life and fighting injustice. One brother, Glaucon, makes the case that if it were not for fear of getting caught and punished, we would all follow a life of injustice, seizing for ourselves whatever we desired, not caring where we got it or how. Imagine, he says, that a man could have the power of an ancestor of Gyges who took a gold ring from the finger of a corpse in a well that opened up during an earthquake. This man found that when he wore the ring and turned it inward toward himself he became invisible, but when he turned it outward he became visible again. He discovered he could take what he wanted without being caught, and promptly proceeded to do so, taking first his King's wife and then his life, securing to himself wealth and power to rule over all. Such a man could become like a god among men.

Then Glaucon asks us to imagine that the unjust man is so supremely unjust as to persuade others that he is in fact just. He must *seem* to be what he is not and have the sterling reputation of a just man throughout his whole life right up to his death. And the just man? He will be made to suffer the extreme of injustice: "he'll be whipped; he'll be racked; he'll be bound; he'll have both eyes burned out; and at the end, when he has undergone every sort of evil, he'll be crucified..." Glaucon spares no detail in describing the suffering that will be heaped upon this genuinely just man, who will have a reputation for injustice to his dying day.

It takes a pretty long dialogue for Socrates to persuade Glaucon that it is better to be just for its own sake, that it is thus better to suffer injustice than to do injustice, and that justice is a virtue of the soul necessary to the happiness of the individual. Socrates does this by showing that justice is concerned with the inward man, the one who sets in order his own inner life and is at peace with himself. We have within us by our very nature the power to set this inner life in order and to become our own master.

You will read the *Nicomachean Ethics*, where Aristotle argues that every action or decision seems to aim at some good. The ultimate good or final end of living is our happiness. And our most distinctly human activity is the exercise of reason. Just as the good doctor procures health through the practice of medicine (the doctor's distinct virtue), the good warrior achieves victory through the making of war (the warrior's distinct virtue), so the good human being will attain happiness through the exercise of reason

(mankind's distinctly human virtue.) Happiness, for Aristotle, is "an activity in accordance with virtue." By positing that mankind is intended to fulfill a singular but common purpose, he allows for the possibility that we can exercise our intellect to secure our happiness, and that we *should* in fact *seek* the happiness which is appropriate and available to us all.

Questions concerning the possibility of the search for happiness run throughout the four-year undergraduate curriculum and in all segments of the Graduate Institute, in our tutorials and laboratories, as well as in our seminars.

Sophomores are opening the year with *Genesis* and the Hebrew Bible. What does it mean to be made in the image of God, and does this help us imagine a path to our happiness, or does it only reveal the chasm between man and his Maker as to make happiness on Earth seem impossible? Is happiness to be found in following God's law? Is happiness available only through the Grace of God?

Juniors have spent the summer happily reading *Don Quixote*. Have you figured out what the object of his quest is? Cervantes tells us:

"It now appeared to him fitting and necessary, in order to win a greater amount of honor for himself and serve his country at the same time, to become a knight-errant and roam the world on horseback, in a suit of armor; he would go in quest of adventures, by way of putting into practice all that he had read in his books; he would right every manner of wrong, placing himself in situations of the greatest peril such as would redound to the eternal glory of his name."

Through Cervantes' masterful portrait, the good Don seems to have achieved that eternal glory. But how did he do it, this Sorrowful Knight of ours? And why, in order to stamp out injustice, did he need to suffer the cruel abuses to his body in Part I and the torture of his mind in Part II? This is not the book that first comes to mind in a discussion of happiness, and yet we yearn to see our hero assert his will, time and time again, to achieve the greatness he would have in his re-imagination of himself. Our fine old gentleman, Alonzo Quijano the Good, seems to achieve his end in making a new self in the figure of our knight-errant.

Seniors are reading Tolstoy's *War and Peace*. Prince Andre seeks happiness in doing his duty, but loses sight of those who are closest to him. Meanwhile, Pierre learns in the time of his captivity and deprivation that man's happiness lies within himself and that unhappiness arises from superfluity, from having too much of what most men think they want. Pierre would give up considerable wealth in search of his happiness. But if we can say that he secures his happiness, it would seem he actually found it in his flashing Natasha.

How could I end a reflection on the pursuit of happiness without addressing our national birthright, proclaimed in the *Declaration of Independence*? "We hold these truths to be self-evident: that all men are created equal; that they are endowed by their creator with unalienable rights; that among these are life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness." I imagine that there are many who read this right to pursue happiness as a right to seek whatever each of us desires for himself or herself, a statement approving of the autonomy of each individual citizen to determine what is his or hers by right. But such a reading leads to pure anarchy, where each citizen is given license to pursue his heart's desire, hardly a recipe for a democracy intended to achieve a people's peaceful self-governance. What is the place of the public good?

Jefferson, principle author of the *Declaration*, was also known to say that "Happiness is the aim of life, but virtue is the foundation of happiness." He sounds a lot like Aristotle, and we should not lose sight of the double aspect of the pursuit of happiness in the tension between its public and private aspects.

Alexis de Tocqueville may have found the best way to explain how Americans reconcile the pursuit of their individual self-interest with a desire to serve the greater good. "In the United States," he says, "hardly anybody talks of the beauty of virtue, but they maintain that virtue is useful and prove it every day." "They...content themselves with inquiring whether the personal advantage of each member of the community does not consist in working for the good of all; and when they have hit upon some point on which private interest and public interest meet and amalgamate, they are eager to bring it into notice. Observations of this kind are gradually multiplied; what was only a single remark becomes a general principle, and it is held as a truth that man serves himself in serving his fellow creatures and that it is in his private interest to do good." "Americans are fond of explaining almost all the actions of their lives by the principle of self-interest rightly understood."

I will leave it to you to sort out this argument, and to determine whether it is a sustainable principle. But I rather like the idea, and think it exerts a restraint on the blind degeneration of the pursuit of one's individual happiness into nothing but self-regard.

Every democracy requires free citizens, and free citizens must have free minds. A liberal education, literally an education for freedom, is designed to free the mind to perform its public function. But above all, that free mind is necessary for our personal happiness, for living a good life, the life suited to our nature. On behalf of my colleagues at St. John's College, I invite you to join us in uncovering this gloriously human project of freeing ourselves to find our way to a better life. Discover for yourselves whether you can and will pursue your happiness.

While we hope for you happiness, even joy, in your studies with us, we also hope you are able to have a little fun while you're at it. And there are loads of activities beyond these intellectual pursuits to satisfy your many other desires, from participating in the athletic program to acting in a dramatic production, from writing for the Gadfly to taking a painting class, from gazing at the stars to canoeing on the Severn, from singing in one of the choral groups to playing in the orchestra. And here I am at the end of a reflection on happiness with hardly a word about the joy and beauty we usually associate with happiness. So, let me call upon our upperclassmen to remedy this deficiency, to rise and welcome the newest members of our community with beautiful song! Mr. Stoltzfus, will you assist?

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Welcome to St. John's College!

Thank You.

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After the recessional, please join us outside the Mitchell Gallery for a reception and further conversation.

I declare the College in Session this 24<sup>th</sup> day of August, 2016.

CONVOCATUM EST!