

EMPATHY, JUSTICE, AND JESUIT EDUCATION

Good morning members of the class of 2011. I'm very pleased to see you all here this morning, and honored to have this opportunity to speak to you at the start of your college career. I choose those words carefully: "start of your college career". It's a common way of speaking, and I bet there are hundreds of people like me this week talking to thousands of people like you using exactly those words. But while the words are commonplace, the meaning is not. I venture the guess that four years ago no one talked to you about your high school career. Because high school is not "a career". It does not shape the arc of one's life. But college does. And it starts here, today.

When you leave this hall this morning you will meet with your professors to spend time discussing Tracy Kidder's book, *Mountains beyond Mountains: The Quest of Dr. Paul Farmer, A Man Who Would Cure the World*. It is your first academic activity, for which you have prepared, I trust, during the summer. If you are not prepared, if you read the book cursorily, or not at all, if you have not thought about what you read, then you have made a serious mistake. You have not understood that you are embarking on a career. And you probably shouldn't be wasting your parents' money on a Jesuit education. But let us assume that this is not the case—let us assume that you are all genuine college students, well prepared and eager for what lies ahead.

An exercise I frequently do with my students is to ask them why they're here. I'd love to do that with you this morning, but I'm afraid there's too many of you. So let's imagine a small group, and I'll tell you how the dialogue probably goes. I say, "Why are you here?" "To get a college degree." "Why?" "To get a good job." "Why?" "To make a lot of money." "Why?" "To live well." "What does that mean?"

Notice the annoying habit of the philosopher. We love to ask why. And like little children, we know that there's always another 'why' waiting in the wings. Which is why at some point just about every adult has said as an answer to 'why?' "because I said so!" But that's not a satisfactory answer here. The questions are not part of a precocious child's game. They are meant very seriously. When all is said and done, why are you here? And if eventually the answer to that question is some version of "living well", what does that mean? What would it be like to live well? And in a rather circuitous way, that brings us to Paul Farmer. How might he answer that question? Tracy Kidder subtitles his book "The Quest of Dr. Paul Farmer, A Man Who Would Cure the World." Is that what you think Farmer would say, if we could ask him these questions this morning? I think he would go beyond that. I think he would say "read Matthew 25." (By the way, if you don't know what Matthew 25 says, you should. Perhaps you can talk about that in your discussion group this morning.)

In the fourth century B.C.E., almost 2500 years ago, Aristotle asked that question in the Nicomachean Ethics, which, according to tradition, Aristotle wrote to (or at least dedicated to) his son, Nicomachos. Here he asks the question whether there is some end that we seek for its own sake, and not for the sake of something beyond it. In other words a goal for which the further question 'why' would be irrelevant. His answer is at once incredibly simple and terribly complex. He says the end that we seek is "happiness". (Or at least that's how most of the translators have it.) The Greek word is εὐδαιμονία--eudaimonia. The closest we can come to it in English is something like 'human flourishing'. It's not a feel good term. We're not talking about some sort of jump for joy experience. Aristotle says eudaimonia is "the activity of the soul in accordance

with complete excellence." So this changes the question a little bit. If the reason you come to college (or indeed do anything that is genuinely human) is to 'live well', and that means eudaimonia, then the question before you today, and for the next four years, and indeed for the next fourscore and ten years, is what is the activity of the soul that is in accordance with complete excellence. That, by the way, is what the rich young man asks of Jesus. (Matt 19-16-22) And also, by the way, there are very few of us who like the answer. So what is this—the activity of the soul in accordance with complete excellence? And what does all this have to do with Paul Farmer?

The search for eudaimonia, for human flourishing, is at the heart of liberal education, and in a very special way, at the heart of Jesuit liberal education. When St. Ignatius Loyola placed his sword at the foot of the statue of the Black Madonna at Montserrat and took up his pilgrim's staff, at the moment when the Society of Jesus was a seed about to germinate, he had only a vague idea of what he wanted to do. He planned to make a pilgrimage to Jerusalem, and once there, he wanted to "help souls". As it turns out, this vague ambition to help souls leads Ignatius back to school, sitting as an adult in classes with children, learning Latin, so eventually he can go to the University of Paris, and there come into contact with the forces of Renaissance humanism.

There is a quote from Petrarch, the father of Renaissance humanism, that says it all.

What is the use of knowing the nature of quadrupeds, fowls, fishes, and serpents and not knowing or even neglecting the purpose for which we are born, and whence and whitherto we travel.

Notice three things: (1) Petrarch is asking a question about eudaimonia, about human flourishing. (2) What he will tell us is that we can only learn "the purpose for which we

are born, and whence and whitherto we travel" by studying the humanities—by looking to history, and literature, and rhetoric, where these questions are perennially pondered, and answers are, in a fashion, proffered. (3) Ignatius will find in this humanist tradition a way to understand what it means to "help souls". The education you are beginning today, this Jesuit liberal arts education, is shaped by Ignatius' experience at the University of Paris and beyond, shaped by the understanding that develops among the members of the Society of Jesus of how to help souls.

What can we learn from Paul Farmer? Or, for that matter, from Tracy Kidder? You're all starting four years of college. You [present tense] read this book and perhaps you say to yourself "Wow!! he's a pretty impressive guy. A saint, perhaps. But that's not me. I can't do that sort of thing—commit myself to the preferential option for the poor. Mother Teresa did that. Albert Schweitzer did that. The Jesuit martyrs of San Salvador did that. But they are exceptional people, and I am a very ordinary person. What can I learn from them?

Paul Farmer's great gift is the gift of empathy. He has the ability, partly through temperament, partly through training, partly through the history of his own life, to put himself in the place of the other. Notice the word—em-pathy. Not sym-pathy. Sympathy has to do with understanding or caring for another's situation or circumstances—it is a feeling "with". Empathy is the ability to share someone else's experiences or emotions—it is feeling "within". When you read what Tracy Kidder tells us about Paul Farmer, and even more, when you read

Farmer's own books, this empathy for his patients strikes you in the face. He doesn't write in the cold, disinterested, third-person prose of the natural or social scientist. Not that he isn't capable of this style of writing. He does it as well as anybody. But he frequently brings his argument back to the individual patient—the woman fleeing the horror of Duvalier's dictatorship, quarantined at Guantanamo because she has been diagnosed with HIV; the man dying of multiple-drug-resistant tuberculosis and coughing up blood because the multiple antibiotic treatment regimen that can save him is deemed too expensive. The power of Farmer's commitment is his empathy—this is his preferential option for the poor, or in the irreverent shorthand of PIH that Kidder so vividly reports, "the O for the P."

This is not an easy skill. Most of us do not have it. We have to cultivate it. We do not empathize. Quite the contrary—every one of us divides the world up into those who are like ourselves and those who are other—and we dismiss the others, we "dis" them, precisely because they are not like us. And as a result, we cripple our understanding of what it means to be fully human—we cripple our understanding of human flourishing, of eudaimonia—we throw away our ability to see, in a truly comprehensive way, what "the activity of the soul in accordance with complete excellence" is. So the first lesson I want Paul Farmer to teach all of us is the lesson of empathy. Do not dismiss the other!! Find a way to BE the other.

Think here about the story Kidder tells us of Farmer treating "Joe"—the 35 year old HIV+, coke and IV drug user and possible TB case—at Brigham and Women's Hospital in Boston. Think of how we might respond to this person—so far away from

our comfortable upper-middle-class suburban life. But Farmer posts a note on the social work department door that says "JOE—OUT=cold; their drugs; ½ gal. vodka/ IN= warm; our drugs; 6 pack Bud." And he gets Joe into a homeless shelter. So again—Do not dismiss the other!! Find a way to BE the other.

I want you to take the resolve of empathy into your academic work. Remember the point of a liberal education—the point of the humanities. It is to discover the purpose for which we are born, and whence and whitherto we travel. To discover that we have to be open to the other, we have to be empathetic. You will, over the next four years, be exposed to many ideas, many visions, many points of view. They will, beyond any doubt, often be different from your own. It is easy to dismiss them as wrong, or stupid, or silly, or irrelevant—precisely because they are different, because they are OTHER. If you do that, you will not learn what human flourishing is all about, you will not come to understand what the activity of the soul in accordance with complete excellence is. A soul that is not empathetic, that is not open to the other, on the other's terms, is not flourishing.

It is not enough to understand things from your own point of view. That's easy, but it offers only impoverished insights, a very limited perspective. Take something you've no doubt done already in high school. Take "Hamlet". Easy to read Hamlet from your point of view—try reading it from his. Understand the profound emotional tug-a-war between familial responsibility—avenge your father's murder (if indeed it is a murder)—and societal responsibility—Claudius is king, Fortinbras is marching through your land. Try to be Hamlet, not as he would be in the 21st century, but as he was to Shakespeare. Learn what he has to tell us about human flourishing—and the ways in

which it fails. And beware of simple formulae and pat answers. Sir Laurence Olivier's film of "Hamlet" describes the play as the story of a man who could not make up his mind. What utter nonsense. "Hamlet" is not about indecision—it is about how difficult responsible and momentous decisions can be. You have to think yourself into Hamlet's world, and then you will learn what Hamlet can teach you. Empathy is the essential tool for learning from the humanities, and therefore the essential tool for a Jesuit education. It is the way we learn whence and whitherto we travel.

I say it again: In the work you do here for the next four years, perhaps especially in the work you do in the humanities, you will be tempted at times to dismiss what you are reading. You will think—this is stupid, or this makes no sense, or I don't believe this, or this is a waste of my time. When that happens, you have privileged your own limited point of view, you have cut yourself off from the OTHER, you have forgotten the lesson of empathy. And when that happens, you are missing what you can learn about human flourishing.

Let us move to justice. Empathy should lead us to justice. If we can put ourselves in the place of the other, then we should be able to ask—is it fair, is it just, that I should be here and that other person should be there. As I learn about the ingredients in human flourishing, I should ask what one minimally needs in order to flourish. Aristotle again is very instructive here. He understands that I can't begin to ask questions about those activities of the soul in accordance with complete excellence which I should cultivate until I am sure that some very basic survival needs are met. You can't think about

flourishing if you're starving, or homeless, or your immune system is ravaged by HIV, or your lungs are torn apart by a pneumococcus bacteria that resists standard antibiotic treatment. There is a decent minimum that enables one even to raise the question of human flourishing.

One of the twentieth century's most profound thinkers on the topic of justice is John Rawls. His book, *A Theory of Justice*, takes up the question of how we might decide whether a particular social/political structure is just. He offers us several principles we should employ in constructing a just society. The first, which I will simply mention and then pass over, is the liberty interest. A just society is first of all one in which everyone has the maximum freedom compatible with the freedom of others. This principle comes before all others, and cannot be sacrificed for the sake of other values. But once we account for liberty, things get interesting. Fairness does not necessarily mean equality, it doesn't mean everyone gets the same. That may be true of the slices of a birthday cake, but it's not true of the distribution of goods within a complex society. Certain inequalities of wealth, of power, of privilege may work to create conditions within society that are beneficial to all. Imagine three societies—in the first everyone earns \$20 a day. Such a society has a certain simple justice, a certain fairness about it. Now imagine a second society—in this society some people, because they possess certain characteristics, earn \$50 a day. And because those people with those characteristics raise the productivity of the society, everybody else makes \$30 a day. Now imagine a third society—in this society some people, because they possess certain characteristics, earn \$100 a day, and everybody else earns \$5 a day. Which society would you want to live in? It depends, doesn't it, on what your place in the society is? So, following Rawls, lets

impose what he calls 'the veil of ignorance' on the question. You don't know what position in society will be yours. Which society would you choose?

Rawls suggests that there are certain conditions that need to be met for inequalities to be fair. First, they must be beneficial to the least advantaged members of society. And second, opportunities to occupy those positions of wealth and power and privilege must be open to all. What Rawls is offering in this discussion of justice is another application of empathy. Be the other!! A society is just if the least advantaged member of that society is better off than he or she would be under other possible social systems. John Rawls' veil of ignorance is another way of getting to the preferential option for the poor, the O for the P.

Thinking this way, thinking about justice with empathy, leads you to some interesting conclusions. It naturally leads to a consideration of what Farmer refers to as structural violence—the violence that is embedded in a system that establishes inequalities that benefit the advantaged while disadvantaging the already disadvantaged. Think of the Péligre Dam. This was an economic development project, and no doubt it benefitted some people—providing irrigation and hydroelectric power. But to whom? At whose expense? If this did marginally raise the standard of living in central Haiti, who benefitted, and who suffered? And if you honestly apply the veil of ignorance here—is this a society in which you would willingly be a member?

It is not just empathy that should lead us to justice, it is our whole concern for human flourishing, for eudaimonia. What is the activity of the soul in accordance with complete excellence? It is not a private, solitary activity. It is active engagement in the community—a community that stretches beyond the comfortable bounds of the

familiar—a community that reaches out to the stranger—to the other. Matthew 25, as Paul Farmer is fond of pointing out, teaches this in no uncertain terms.

On Friday at the New Student Convocation, Fr. Linnane talked about deconstructing the myth that these four years are the "best years of your life." He's right. These are the years during which you begin to find out how to live the best years of your life. So here's how it works: (1) Be empathetic, first of all towards your academic work. Learn, and learn deeply, what the great books, the great thinkers, the great doers of the world have to teach you. Do not dismiss them because their ideas are foreign—unfamiliar—or different from yours. Do not believe that at eighteen you know already what you need to know. (2) Using that empathetic approach to your education, figure out for yourself what is necessary for your flourishing, for your happiness. What for you is the activity of the soul in accordance with complete excellence? (3) If we take the example of Paul Farmer, when we do this, when we learn about human flourishing, we are led to what the Jesuits and the liberation theologians call "the preferential option for the poor." Human flourishing integrally involves the other. And therefore it involves an imperative for justice. This, I hope you will find, is where Jesuit liberal education leads you. Paul Farmer is a rare and exceptional human being, but the goal of human flourishing should lead us all to the values of a Paul Farmer.