

>BE THE CREAM!=-

ACHIEVING THE LIFE OF THE MIND

26 SEPTEMBER 2008

Father Linnane, Vice President Snyder, Deans, colleagues, parents, students, friends, Barb, Michael and Catie. I thank you all for being here tonight for what will be Loyola College in Maryland=s last Honors= Convocation; next year=s will be Loyola University Maryland=s first Honors= Convocation and I look forward to being there, too. I am very pleased to be this year=s Bernard Nachbahr Award winner, and especially to join the wonderful scholars who have preceded me in receiving this award.

Let me begin with a boast: less than three weeks ago I returned to Loyola from three weeks in Europe, a week at the Middelaldercentret in Southern Denmark, eight days in Venice and a week in Trieste. It was my thirtieth crossing of the Atlantic Ocean in thirty months.

Now I, like all of you, am a product of my experiences and adventures. I have made all of these recent trips, and many more in the two previous decades, because I love going to Europe. I love the sites, the art, the people, and the food. But I especially love learning all that I can about the places I visit. Nor will I stop going to Europe and learning from it, for it is in the intellect, the Alife of the mind,@ that I have found true freedom, perhaps the only complete, individual freedom that is guaranteed to any of us. All other aspects of our existence are limited by familial, occupational, cultural, economic, societal, physical, and political boundaries, but whether and how we develop our Alife of the mind@ is our choice solely. We can be aided by others B family, friends, mentors, teachers B but ultimately the choice is ours and ours alone.

I discovered the life of the mind when I was young, with a couple of years living in Hawaii at the ages of 12 to 14 and in High School where I was especially influenced by two History Teachers, Fred Bennett and Q. Michael Croft, and a debate coach, D.L. Smith. But it was only as an undergraduate student at Brigham Young University, and a two year Mormon mission in Belgium that came within those years, when I discovered that I wanted to pursue premodern and especially medieval studies. Classes in history, literature, art history, humanities, languages (especially Latin, Dutch, and Old English), philosophy, and theology facilitated this study. I discovered Shakespeare, Dante, *Beowulf*, the Old Norse sagas, and *Gawain and the Green Knight*, among others. I had wonderful professors who helped to unlock the intellectual secrets of the ancients: a world renown professor who would only teach one Shakespearean play a semester so I took his *Othello* class and, as they would not give me credit for a second course, sat in on his *Twelfth Night* class; an English professor who first put *Beowulf*, *Njal's Saga*, and *Gawain and the Green Knight* into my hands; a Philosophy Professor and an Honors Program which allowed me as a freshman to write an essay on Woody Allen's philosophy on God carrying the bombastic title, *If it turns out that there is a God, I don't think that he's evil . . . the worst that you can say about him is that basically he's an underachiever* so pretty broad-minded for a very conservative religious academy; and a young, newly-hired Egyptologist who in an Old Testament class made the mistake of telling the 35+ students that they did not need to come to class as long as they did the weekly work, leaving many times where it was just him and me talking about ancient history. And in Belgium I saw castles, cathedrals, Jan van Eyck paintings, and one of the most beautiful sculptures in the world, the

*Madonna and Child* in the Onze Lieve Vrouw Kerk in Bruges, sculpted by Michelangelo when he was in his twenties.

But then I hit a roadblock: graduation. This was not a surprise; indeed, I had eagerly planned for graduation, going to school throughout the summer and, because I was in the Honors= Program, taking extra classes each term (27 2 hours of credit in my final semester, a record that will never be duplicated at BYU B when they discovered what I had done the administration instituted a cap of 20 hours per semester but they did count all of my courses). I had also planned for the next chapter in my life, had been admitted to my first choice of medieval studies graduate programs, the University of Toronto=s Centre for Medieval Studies, and was awaiting a promised admission to Duke University=s Law School. But it was precisely because these two different graduate possibilities presented themselves that the roadblock appeared. I was stunned at how many of my professors advised me to go to Law School, people at whose feet I had learned the knowledge of the world were advising me to do something I perceived would stop or at least narrowly limit my pursuit of the Alife of the mind.@ My parents, too, while supportive of any decision I made, encouraged me to go to Law School.

However, I went to Graduate School. I have often told people that the decision was made when I discovered that Duke was Richard Nixon=s Alma Mater or that the week I took my LSAT exams I also wrote a paper on Dante=s *Divine Comedy*, leaving me with a tangible scholarly achievement on the one hand while a quickly forgotten and pretty meaningless standardized test on the other. Both are true, but neither were the reason I went to Graduate instead of Law School. This decision came after I talked with the Assistant Director of the Honors= Program, Philip Flammer.

I regret I never took a class from Major Philip Flammer, Air Force officer and decorated Vietnam War vet, PhD in History from Yale, and Professor in the History Department. I remember first meeting him as a freshman when he addressed the Honors Program initiation meeting, telling us that in an effort to regain lost intellectual time he had cut his sleeping to 5 hours per night. I was impressed. He became my friend when, at an Honors banquet mock College Bowl tournament where I was keeping score, I whispered to him the answer to the question, "Whose biography did Einhard write?" (Charlemagne), thus allowing the Honors faculty team to beat the University College Bowl team for the first time in perhaps a decade. I visited Dr Flammer's office at the time I was trying to decide between the University of Toronto's Centre for Medieval Studies Graduate program and Duke's Law School. Disappointingly he gave me the same spiel that my other professors had: grad school is really difficult, there are no jobs out there, universities don't pay well, etc. Then he paused and lowered his voice: "I've told you what I am supposed to say. Now let me tell you what I feel. But, remember, the cream always rises to the top. Be the cream!"

"Be the cream!" Those were then and have since been the most inspirational words I have ever heard. Now I have never lived or even been on a farm and, as my colleagues can attest, most of our incoming freshmen have more scientific knowledge than I do, so I don't *actually* know how the cream rises to the top. Instead I have my own definition of what Dr. Flammer meant. Being the cream does not mean being the absolute best. It isn't one cell of cream that makes it to the top, or a single drop, but all the cream. It has been my experience that the perfectionist never gets anything done. One of my graduate school colleagues told me that he agonized for 18 hours over a single paragraph. Not surprisingly 18 is also the number of years it

took him to finish his PhD, which he has never published; nor has he even published an article. His is a great mind, and, although no doubt he has profited personally from his constant interest in broadening his own life of the mind, his failure to share this is scholarship=s loss.

So, be among the best, among the cream. Participating at a high level in a race is as good an adventure as winning it, if you let it be. One can waste a lot of time striving to be A number one@ when there is clearly someone who is superior. Lots of time can also be wasted in regretting not being the best. Karl Malone has said that it was very difficult to be the best in an NBA league that also had Michael Jordan. Still, he never regretted a moment of his playing time and by the end of his career he even had more points than did Jordan (and two MVPs). I have never tried to be the best medieval military historian in the world B that may be my friend, John France of the University of Wales in Swansea B but among the best.

For the past 27 years I have tried to follow Philip Flammer=s advice, and I hope to do so for at least another 27 more. I have learned some things along the way and as I have roughly 1000 more words left let me pass them on.

First, *treat everything you do as a learning experience*. All of your classes should of course fit into this category, but so also should your leisure activities. Once you begin doing this you may find that you start to select leisure activities that also are more and more educationally rewarding. When you are at a bar or on the beach, study the interesting people around you. You=ll learn a lot about the mating rituals and grooming habits of humans.

Second, *be enthusiastic about your interests*. No matter what they are B history is mine B be enthusiastic about them. When I wrote my military biography of Joan of Arc I was certain that she succeeded in her accomplishments because of her confidence. I now believe it was

because of her enthusiasm. People, especially soldiers and military leaders, were attracted to her not just because she believed that she had heard messages from God but because she enthusiastically believed it.

Three, *never see your pursuit of intellectual activities as work*. A few days ago a colleague was astonished when I told her that I take my computer everywhere I travel. As there any time you don't work, she asked. I actually was surprised by the question, as I never considered my research and writing as work. Consider what you do as an adventure; I can promise you that, if nothing else, such Atoil and Alabor will make others very jealous.

Four, *allow yourself to be Aflushed by accomplishment*. Not only should you feel enthusiastic about your endeavors but when you accomplish a task celebrate it. At the very least feel what I call the Aflush of accomplishment, pride in what you've done, even if only because the task is now completed. You may even want to find a silly way to reward yourself. As some of my students will testify I collect bad medieval movies. The latest is *Pathfinder*: Viking child left behind in America defends his peaceful Indian adopters from bloodthirsty Vikings who later visit the same area. It is the very definition of a bad medieval movie!

Five, *let your mind wander*. Fresh ideas come not from what you are working on at the time, but from your mind wandering while you are working on something. Recently, when I was working on a chapter of a book on *Warfare in the Eastern Mediterranean from Troy to Iraq* I had the HBO tv show, *Generation Kill*, on in the background. While stumped on a sentence I decided to look up a particularly sympathetic character on the docudrama (real names were used), First Lieutenant Nathan Fick, a Dartmouth Classics grad who stood out among several hapless Marine officers in the opening days of the current Iraq War. I discovered that Lt. Fick was a

graduate of Loyola Blakefield High School in Baltimore, my son=s Alma Mater. He has also written a book about his experiences. Knowing this has given me even more interest and confidence in his account of the fighting and will aid my writing on this war.

Six and seven go together: *bounce off any boundaries you encounter and don=t dwell on past errors or failures.* Mental and physical boundaries exist, so when you encounter one simply bounce off it. Go onto the next thing; don=t belabor the fact that there is a boundary and don=t waste time trying to break through it. Be happy with your accomplishments to that point. I have long since given up being taller than I am. No doubt had I been so life would have been different, but I can do nothing about that. Besides I fit more comfortably in an airplane seat. Also, we all have failures in life B an experiment that does not produce anticipated results, a thesis that proves incorrect etc. There is nothing you can do about these, and lying about their being failures will always be discovered and, ultimately, more damaging than admitting the failure. Move on quickly and forget about them. Whatever you do, definitely do not dwell on what might have been. I have a mentor who I love dearly but he has wasted his life and his incredible intelligence dwelling on his failures.

Oh, and by the way, *don=t spend time worrying about problems that are potential but unlikely.* This is a terrible waste of time. That is number eight.

Nine, *don=t be selfish.* Share with others. Be generous with your knowledge when it is desired, and always be generous with your praise. A pat on the back, a compliment, or a thank you is always welcome. I have a very famous friend in my discipline, Jeremy Black. About a decade ago at the Institute for Historical Research in the University of London a bad review of one of my books was unconsciously publicized by another friend rather more than I would have

liked. Later Jeremy ran into me and noticed that I was down. When I told him the reason, he questioned, Why read anything by anyone who has not done what you have? It was just what I needed to hear. Jeremy is well known for his generosity to younger scholars. I have two senior members of my department who dole out extremely wise advice, Jack Breihan and Chuck Cheape. When I am listening I profit greatly from them. Had I listened more to them I would not have made some of the errors that I no longer dwell on. (See above.)

Finally, make a list of things you want to do before you die, a so-called Abucket list. Make your list reasonable and make it while you are young. Then seek to accomplish the items on the list. Some should be easy B everyone should see Paris, Venice, and Istanbul before they die B and some should be more difficult B when I lived in Belgium I promised myself that I would be in Courtrai on 11 July 2002 at the 700<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the battle that took place in what is now the city, where Flemish townspeople defeated the flower of French knighthood. In 1976 when I made my Abucket list this was no doubt the most difficult challenge on my list. But I accomplished it. And, when the mayor of the town B whose daughter interestingly had come to Loyola for a year in the 1990s B found out that I was there I was invited to all of the festivities. (I had written on the battle and had edited a translation of the seminal book written in Dutch.) At midnight, on the battlefield, with fireworks exploding around me and Beethoven=s Ninth playing on the loudspeakers B an always good choice for these type of events B I could not keep back the tears. I was, as I said above, Aflushed with accomplishment. (By the way, I only have two more items on my original Abucket list B visiting New Orleans at Mardi Gras, a problem with the academic calendar so far, and being in Siena for the Paleo, the medieval horse race which is still held twice a year.)



Students, parents, colleagues, my own children, even President Linnane: ABe the  
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