The Forest and the Trees: Perspectives on the Past (and the Life of the Mind)

Good afternoon, and thank you for being here. I am very grateful for this honor, although I am rather humbled to be standing before you this afternoon. Reviewing the list of past winners and reading over their remarks, as I did this past summer, is to encounter some of the truly impressive minds that work here at Loyola. Talks on Shakespeare, Freud, Zen Buddhism, on scholarship and activism, on the role of a Catholic University in the modern world, and the place of Loyola in the city of Baltimore, among others; all thoughtful, stimulating, often challenging lectures. It is a privilege to find myself in their company. I am not sure I will be as thoughtful today, but I will try to follow Voltaire's admonition to all historians: first, not to slander, and second not to bore. I feel reasonably confident about the first.

The Nachbahr winner is tasked with giving this talk, whose theme is the life of the mind. I must admit I have struggled with this topic all summer. One big reason is I am not sure I am really living such a life. I tend to think of what I do in more pedestrian terms. I do spend a lot of time reading and writing, but that is true many people outside of academics, including perhaps many of you. Several past winners of this award have noted that the life of the mind is also not an escape from the "real world," because so much scholarship here at Loyola confronts real world issues. The more I thought about the phrase, however, I found myself returning to one theme: work. Whatever else it is, the life of the mind – scholarly pursuits – is

work. It is often joyful work, not real toil, certainly not a chore (although it can be painful at times); it doesn't follow a set schedule and can be done at odd times of the day; it doesn't generally require a suit or a uniform; and I am very privileged to get paid to do what I do. All that said, the "life of the mind" does indeed require labor.

What constitutes this labor? What do we (the faculty) actually do here? And why is this work important? One could approach this topic somewhat abstractly, but I will skip that and focus on a more direct question my father once asked me while I was in graduate school: what do you do all day after breakfast? It was a fair question then and remains one now, as I find many people do not know what faculty do all day, especially in the summer, when we are not teaching. My answer, of course, relates to history, but I think it sheds light on what is happening in various corners across Loyola's campus.

Let me start by saying that in thinking about what historians do, I am not discussing why history is important. I take that as something of a given. To understand ourselves and our world we need to understand where we came from and how we got to where we are. In doing so we come to recognize that the way things are today are not how they have always been. A textbook I use in my Messina course begins with two quotations that appear at first contradictory: The British novelist L.P. Hartley's observation that, "The Past is a foreign country: they

do things differently there" and William Faulkner's famous line that "the past is never dead. It is not even past." Of course both of these statements are true. Things were different in the past and yet, in very real and very direct ways (as well as indirect and sometimes unknown ways), the past haunts our lives. The historians' task is to illuminate both statements: to understand the past on its own terms, to recognize that people thought and acted differently than we do now, but also to consider what influence past people, ideas, events, have had on subsequent times, including our own. At base, historians ask how things were and why they changed.

These goals animate the work of historians, but what do we actually do after we finish our morning coffee? The answer to my father's question, I think, is basically two-fold. First, historians spend most of their time finding new information about past, about how things were and why they changed. They find this information in what we call primary sources – material created by people at particular times in the past. These can be letters, diaries, speeches, newspapers, wills, paintings, material objects, etc. They are sometimes found in published formats (the Papers of Alexander Hamilton). More recently, they can be found on-line, as more and more materials are being digitized. Sometimes they are uncovered in someone's attic or family bookshelf (as was the case with Nat Turner's diary that will be displayed in

the new African American History Museum in Washington). Most often, however, these materials are found in archives and libraries.

These materials can involve the famous (Hamilton) or the not-so famous (a Maine midwife named Martha Ballard whose diary was the focus of a Pulitzer-Prize winning book several years ago). They can be completely new materials that few have ever seen before, or they can be well-known materials that thousands have read and re-read over the years. But even well-known material can yield new insights or result in new interpretations when read by a new set of eyes with a new set of questions. The great biographer Robert Caro notes they may not be one truth, but there are lots of facts, and the job of the historians is to gather as many of those facts as possible. Those facts come from primary sources. So, I spend a few mornings every week during the school year, and most days during the summer, reading material that was either written between roughly 1600 and 1800 or material written about that period.

Having done this research and reading and taking notes, the second thing historians do is to make sense of it. Oscar Wilde once remarked that "any fool can make history: it takes a genius to write it." Alas, that is not true, at least in my case, but historians do seek to share their findings and interpretations by writing. These writings are the metaphorical trees of my title. They are books or articles exploring myriad topics and questions about the past. Some of these are towering oaks,

addressing big, well-known concerns: (what led colonists to declare Independence from Great Britain?). Others may seem mere saplings addressing smaller, more specific, topics. Indeed, some of these studies may seem obscure or esoteric, the scholarly equivalent of a bonsai: one thinks of Jim Dixon in Kingsley Amis's classic novel *Lucky Jim*, struggling with the "strangely neglected topic" of "Economic Influences on Shipbuilding Techniques, 1450-1485." But the best scholarly works, even some seemingly obscure ones, connect to larger, enduring questions, and unlike Amis, I would like to praise such works, not lampoon them. Yes, some work by historians (and other scholars) is narrowly focused. Their books do not appear on bestseller lists and their authors are not interviewed on television, not even on CSPAN. The impact of such studies may not be immediately clear, but over time they can have a profound impact, reshaping our sense of the past, and of our present.

I think of Peter Wood, a name I suspect most of you do not know. Wood went to high school here in Baltimore and taught for many years at Duke. In the early 1970s he wrote a book entitled "Black Majority: Negroes in Colonial South Carolina from 1670 through the Stono Rebellion," (which occurred in 1739). A pretty narrow study by any measure, and not an especially captivating title. Wood's book garnered much praise from historians when it came out, but it was no bestseller. I would submit, however, that over the past several decades Wood's

focused study has had as great an impact as anything that appeared on the bestseller lists at the time. It has helped transform how American history is taught and understood at all levels, and few high school or college textbooks fail to include his findings. I am pretty certain that all of the students out there encountered Wood's work, whether you recognized it or not.

Moreover, these seemingly narrow studies can sometimes have value and use in unexpected ways. My first book explored the impact of hurricanes on the development of British colonies in what I called the "Greater Caribbean," the southeastern mainland colonies of South Carolina and Georgia, as well as those other British colonies that many Americans forget, places like Jamaica, Barbados, Antigua. My goal was to both understand how contemporaries dealt with what were to them an entirely new phenomena, a "strangely neglected topic," I thought, but also to use the disasters to ask questions about colonial society more generally, to think about economic issues, slavery, science and religion, architecture, and politics. The book appeared in the fall of 2005, just a few months after Katrina, and thus seemed to have a contemporary relevance that I never imagined when I started research 8 years earlier. Moreover, my intended audience was other historians and interested general readers, but much to my surprise the book has been used by a researchers investigating a variety of topics, including: work on climatology, past and present, nation-building in 19th-century Argentina and Chile, and faith–based

relief efforts following the 2010 Haitian earthquake. It was used by scholars writing about *Ecological Economics*, and by the authors of book on the foreign policy and national security implications of climate change. Definitely not my intended audience, but I am happy they found the book useful, and hope others will continue to do so.

These focused studies are thus important work. Do some turn out to be of little consequence? Certainly, but many others will have an unexpected impact or significance. And what is true for history is true for other disciplines as well. There are people doing this kind of work across this campus. There are biologists letting pig carcasses rot in the sun to study de-composition and forensics, economists studying the functioning of bond markets, political scientists investigating the working relationships among Congressional leaders, psychologists exploring how young adults construct meaning in their lives. They are answering some particular question relevant to their field, but who knows how others might use their work, and who knows which will prove most valuable? We can be certain, however, that all will make some contribution to the betterment of ourselves and our world because these are dedicated people doing serious work. There are a lot of scholarly tress being planted on this campus, by the people behind me and in front of me.

As useful and important as these individual, focused studies are, it is also important at times to look at these trees as part of a larger landscape, to see forest through the

trees if you will. This is the other kind of work that historians do. They synthesize the mass of information about various topics and craft new narratives or analyses for broader audiences. The finished product can be textbooks that, for better or worse, everyone has encountered in school, but they can also be more focused surveys on topics like the Temperance and Prohibition in America, or in my case, a book that sketches the broad history of Greater Caribbean from colonization through the American Revolution, my effort to expand and diversify what people think of when they consider colonial America. These are books that you will encounter in your undergraduate courses. You will find some in bookstores. Some may even appear on bestseller lists or their authors on television. It is important to remember, however, that in all of these studies, authors have built upon the trees planted by scholars before them, scholars who did the hard work of finding new information in the archives and bringing it to light. Scholarship, particularly in the Humanities, can often seem like a solitary endeavor, as most of us work alone and write alone, but it is really a community undertaking, as we build on the work of others.

So this constitutes what we might call the "working life of the mind" for me and my colleagues in the History Department, but as I noted, on some basic level, this is what all of us, the faculty, do all the time. I think it is serious work, important work, both for what we find in our investigations, but also because it informs that

other part of our working life, teaching. As my colleague Tom Pegram noted several years ago when he gave this lecture, individuals can be great and inspiring teachers without engaging in serious, ongoing scholarship, but universities need active scholars in the classroom, because such scholars can bring to life topics and fields in distinct ways and provide insights that can only come from doing work in the field. The success of a university requires a community of active, engaged scholars.

Let me close with some words of appreciation and with an invitation. First, the appreciation. Because not all scholarship is commercially viable – not every scholarly biography of a Founding Father will inspire a smash Broadway musical – the ability to do this work requires financial assistance. Over the past many years, my research has been supported by various institutions and people: The Mellon Foundation, the Isaac Martindale family, the Union Pacific Railroad, and, of course, Loyola. And also in part by all of you, at least the parents, not only because you pay tuition, but because you pay taxes. The taxpayer-funded National Endowment for the Humanities (signed into law 51 year ago yesterday) helped launch Loyola's Center for the Humanities many years ago and funds scholarly research and outreach across the country. So thank you. And if I may be so bold, in addition to my thanks, let me put in a plea that as taxpayers you continue to support the NEH, the NEA, the National Science Foundation and other federal

agencies that help fund the next generation of research, on this campus and others. (And congrats to David Rivers who was recently awarded a big NSF grant).

I and others also benefit from the great work of the Center staff, the folks in the Office of Grants and Research, and especially the staff of the Library. Doing serious research would be almost impossible without the great librarians who work here. Libraries are reinventing themselves in this digital age, but they remain at the center of a Jesuit, liberal-arts university, for students and faculty alike.

Finally, an invitation to the students here today. You are being recognized because you have made a significant contribution to the communal working life of the mind here at Loyola. You have been doing the kind of work we do: reading, analyzing data, asking questions (or at least answering questions you have been asked), doing experiments, solving problems, and presenting your answers and findings in papers, posters, Powerpoints, and in a range of creative forms, and some in formal publications You have been planting your own trees. And since you have already shown great skill at it, I hope that you will continue to do it. I do not mean you should go to graduate school and work at a university, although no doubt some of you will do that. Rather I hope you will engage in a continual quest for knowledge, in your careers and in your life; that you will continue to ask questions and to seek answers to a variety of issues and problems – certainly there are plenty awaiting attention. I think, in the end, this is what Loyola, as a Jesuit institution, is training

you to do: to recognize that the life of the mind does not end when you leave this campus; to continue to pursue intellectual excellence in all that you do; to not accept conventional wisdom or the status quo, but to seek something more, something better, and to do so with a spirit of generosity; and to use your knowledge and skills in service of others. And who knows what question you ask, what pursuit, what study you undertake will yield the unexpected answer and have the un-anticipated impact? What I do know is that we, (the old folks in here) need you, are counting on you, to ask those questions, to plant your trees, and to continue to live the life of the mind, here at Loyola and beyond.

So, congratulations to the students, thank you to my colleagues for this honor, and thank you for allowing me to speak with you this afternoon. Enjoy the weekend.