

Two -Ty's Through The Blue Haze

“Two -Ty's Through The Blue Haze,” the title of this Convocation address, lifted in part from *Anna Karenina* by the great Russian writer Leo Tolstoy, in Mrs. Garnett's now-classic translation of decades ago:

“Oh! What a happy time you are at,” [said] Anna.
“I remember, and I know this blue haze, like the mist on the mountains in Switzerland. This mist, which covers everything in that blissful time when childhood is ending, and out of that vast circle, happy and [glad], there is a path growing narrower and narrower, and it is delightful and alarming to enter the ballroom, bright and splendid as it is.... Who has not been through it?”

On behalf of the faculty, staff, students, and trustees of Kalamazoo College, I would like to welcome each of you to these convocation proceedings this memorable September afternoon. Those of you in the Class of 2007 entering the College officially today find yourselves—right this very minute—in that blue haze remembered by the young Anna Karenina, a haze recalled with undoubted nostalgia by all the rest of us who have felt the same emotions of delight and, yes, alarm as we stepped through the blue haze at our own first-year convocations into the ballrooms of *our* undergraduate years. Tolstoy, with his customary awareness of the mysterious passing of time, wondrously captures this sense of the ineffable mist that separates childhood from the vast circles of adulthood.

I hope that the rest of you gathered in this pristine quadrangle this fall afternoon will pardon me if I direct my remarks to those entering our College community today. This is *their* moment of passage, *their* entry into one of the most important journeys of life, through the blue haze and into the bright and splendid ballroom of *their* undergraduate lives.

Opening Convocation has long been my most favorite single moment in the entire academic year. September after September, we come together in this beautiful grove of the mind as students and faculty did in the earliest years of the modern academy. Our convocation traditions here at Kalamazoo College carry forward those of the first schools in Western civilization. The faculty would process into the nave of the medieval cathedrals of Paris and Oxford and Bologna in the thirteenth century. The students would assemble to make solemn their entrance vows and pledges. The bishop would officiate, surrounded by the clerics who in those early times were the school's faculty. The academic robes in which you see us today descend from the liturgical vestments worn by the priests, our College mace from the wand carried by the verger at the front of the faculty processions in those times medieval.

The modern academy takes this hallowed tradition of entrance and places it, at least at Kalamazoo College, in this most august of settings. The noble architecture of the campus surrounds us, our own cathedral if you will, this site of enquiry and teaching. The customary trees reminiscent of the shady academic grove of the ancient Greeks and Romans tower over us. The bells ring from Stetson Chapel, harkening back to those bells that once tolled the processions of the faculty in the thirteenth century.

This particular College offers each of you joining our number today a life-changing alternative to most of society as we know it today. In place of the huge and anonymous, we are small and personal. In place of the fragmentariness of modern life, we offer closeness and awareness of each other. Relationships matter mightily here, not those superficial associations

whereby we think we “know” media types by their first names: not the individual who “knows” Madonna, Oprah, Regis, Geraldo, or Dr. Phil by *their* first names. Here people will know who you are, by your real name, will care about what happens to you in this place. For perhaps the most important formative period of your educational life, here at our College you are expressly *not* relegated to being your Social Security number, or your PIN number, or your computer password. Against the world whereby the symbol replaces the human, the isolation of the self before the computer screen, the ATM machine printing out “thank you for your transaction” as some sort of replacement for a human voice, the ethos that reigns here at your new College home stands in sharp contrast.

Liberal arts colleges, and this is one of the best in the country, offer contrasts galore. Here, big is not good; on the contrary, small is cherished. Here, classes are not taught by a far-off professor wearing a lavalier microphone before several hundred students in a vast amphitheatre with graduate teaching assistants taking class roll by checking off the assigned seats that are empty. Here Betty Hall will greet each one of you with a smile and a warm word of welcome every day as you enter the dining hall. Robert, called “the Omelet King” by the students, will exhort you to “bring your plate to the food,” because, he insists, it is unconscionable to waste food when so many others in our world are in want. Here, the Director of Facilities Management, Paul Manstrom, customarily leads one of the summer reading discussions for our first-year students: the director of the physical plant leading a discussion section of summer reading... only at ‘K’. The College faculty, both here and abroad, will challenge you in ways you cannot even imagine. The word *transformation* is the most commonly used noun I have heard repeated by Kalamazoo College alumni around the entire country for the past seven plus years.

Transformation, a “change in character or condition,” to cite Webster. Get ready. You are about to enter the bright and splendid ballrooms of your undergraduate lives. The door is now open, the haze is fading as you sit here in this beautiful quadrangle, and you are just about to pass through to the ball inside.

As you pass through the blue haze of this critically important moment of transformation in your lives, I would like to talk to you today not about what the College is going to offer you once inside the ballroom. Anyone of us could explain at length the exceptional quality of both the faculty and their curricular offerings, the remarkable spate of opportunities abroad from which the vast majority of our students choose, the internships and externships that most of you will undertake, or the Senior Individualized Projects that all of you will write. But those splendid attributes of the unparalleled K-Plan do *not* constitute what I would most like to say to you.

The blue haze which you exit this afternoon, is of fleeting duration, more so than you could possibly imagine. It is dissipating as you sit here in your Convocation this afternoon. So, also, will be fleeting your four years in the ballroom that is this College. Several years ago on LandSea, as we were sitting around a campfire late one night in the wilderness of Killarney Provincial Park in Ontario, one of the students quoted from memory his favorite singer, Dave Matthews:

Wasting time
I shall miss this thing
When it all rolls by
What a day
Wanna stay, stay, stay for a while.

The night before Commencement a few years back, a student friend of mine spray-painted the words “Don’t make me leave” on the left-hand support of the platform we use each year for our Commencement ceremonies. Vestiges of the words can still be found underneath this platform this September afternoon. Our graduating senior, when telling me about spray-

painting the words on the platform, told me that she had just then realized that her four years in the ballroom were somehow, incomprehensibly, over, gone into the haze of the past. She had then, and perhaps *only* then, understood that the time was gone, and gone forever. That moment of astonishing realization will be here for each of you before you can possibly imagine, after you have taken what *you* choose to take from this place.

While you are about the transformative passage of these next four years in this particular ballroom, I would encourage you to consider the critical importance of two words that end in “t” and “y”: civility and responsibility, words that have lost much of their significance in our fractured, confused, and media-deafened world. Although the post-modern society we all inhabit seems bereft of both civility and responsibility, civility and responsibility *must* undergird, *must* inform everything that we do in this place we all affectionately call ‘K’.

Civility seems to be a subject of not inconsequential interest these days. Just a few months ago, George Washington’s 110 rules of civility were republished. Some of the precepts make us smile, however true they may have been in the eighteenth century. For example, we are enjoined: “Spit not into the fire, nor stoop low before it,” (#9) and later “Take no salt or cut bread with your knife greasy” (#92). Michael Jackson, among others, might benefit from reading precept two: “When in company, put not your hands to any part of the body not usually discovered.” Odd, don’t you think, that George Washington’s little tome on civility would appear precisely now, at a time when civility seems to be a lost practice by so many?

A few years ago, the brilliantly talented Stephen L. Carter, an African-American professor of law at Harvard, brought out a fascinating book entitled *Civility: Manners, Morals, and the Etiquette of Democracy*. I recommend it heartily to all of you. My only regret is that Professor Carter published the book in 1998, before Enron, before WorldCom, before the moral and ethical scandals that have rocked the American Catholic Church of late. For, you see, in Professor Carter’s account, he links civility to responsibility, as did the existential philosophers like Kierkegaard, Sartre, and Teilhard de Chardin. One of our most salient responsibilities as human beings, asserts Carter, is to treat others in a civil manner. Good common sense, we all think, but what’s the big deal? But, how many examples of the utter lack of civility and responsibility can we each cite in today’s world? In the first decades of the sixteenth century, Erasmus of Rotterdam earnestly believed that the adoption of his proposals on civility would lead Europe away from barbarism and toward civilization (Carter, p. 34). I have often wondered what Erasmus or Professor Carter would think of Jerry Springer, Howard Stern and his fellow “shock jocks,” Ricki Lake, or Johnny Knoxville and his posse.

Professor Carter much later quotes James Madison’s famous *Federalist No. 10*: “As long as the reason of man continues fallible, and he is at liberty to exercise it, different opinions will be formed” (cited by Carter, p. 132). Acting towards each other in a civil manner does *not* mean that we all must conform to lockstep models of totalitarian or authoritarian thinking. Academies such as Kalamazoo College have to be above all else “free and open spaces” of the mind (Bart Giamatti). Ideas and questions must cross and intertwine, must be debated, argued civilly, but surely always, always, on factual, reasoned grounds. If not here, then, pray tell, where? Our interactions must above all else be formulated upon a common acceptance of difference. Strip off our skin, shave off the hair from our heads, close our eyes, and we all have the same system of blood vessels, internal organs, brains, and hearts. Using your brain, however well developed it might be, without using your heart is probably not a good way to make your way through the ballroom.

Responsibility for your actions and words, the existentialists insisted during their heyday in the middle of the last century, goes hand in hand with acting in a civil manner towards your fellow human beings. One without the other, like a brain without a heart, just will not suffice.

I would guess that Kenneth Lay, of Enron fame, is maybe a nice guy, but how could he be considered responsible when he ordered an Enron jet to France to bring back a mattress for his

daughter, or when he was presiding over corporate machinations that ruined the lives of thousands and thousands of hapless employees, while Enron was the darling of Wall Street, the major investment banks, and one of the nation's most reputed accounting firms, Arthur Anderson? Dennis Kozlowski, former Tyco International CEO charged with tax fraud, evidently was responsible for ordering a \$6,000 shower curtain with company money. Maybe he is a nice guy as well. But what about bearing the personal responsibility for one's own actions? Seems to me that Lay and Kozlowski would fail the existentialists' one most pertinent point: that I, and I alone, am at the end of the day responsible for only one thing: what *I* say and what *I* do. I would guess that Cardinal Law, formerly responsible for one of the largest Catholic archdioceses in the United States, probably does not sleep too well at night these days.

So what do we here at our College need to do? Just last Friday morning, at our annual Fall Colloquium sponsored by our Committee on Teaching, one of the world's foremost experts on our current international situation, Professor Benjamin Barber, insisted time and again that with our rights as citizens come responsibilities that we cannot shirk. And we are all, you, the faculty, the staff, your fellow students, all of us who labor in the administrative vineyards, we are all citizens of this College community, with shared rights and concomitantly shared responsibilities. We should use our brains but listen carefully to our hearts. We should act towards others the way we ourselves would like to be treated by all others around us. We should take responsibility for our own actions and our own words, for no one can do that but we ourselves. The wonderfully gifted author Anna Quindlen spoke at Villanova's commencement exercises this past spring. Listen to her advice to those who were then taking their leave of their school:

You will walk out of here this afternoon with only one thing that no one else has. There will be hundreds of people out there with your same degree; there will be thousands of people doing what you want to do for a living. *But you will be the only person alive who has sole custody of your life. Your particular life.* Not just your life at a desk, or your life on a bus, or in a car, or at the computer. Not just the life of your mind, but the life of your heart. Not just your bank account, but your soul.

While Quindlen's remarks were directed at those graduating from Villanova, they are just as valid for all of us in this quadrangle today, here in our academic community that is our College.

Finally, remember that education is not a spectator sport. Here at Kalamazoo College, undergraduate education is certainly not for the frail of spirit. It is not something dished out like food in Robert the Omelet King's cafeteria line. Education is hard work. The ballroom that is Kalamazoo College in which you, and only you, must take responsibility for building your own undergraduate experience has been carefully, laboriously, and yes lovingly honed over the past many generations since the College was founded in 1833. Think of those who make your education here possible. Think of your families and their personal and financial sacrifices on your behalf. Think of your elementary and secondary teachers. Think of all those who have preceded you as students in this place, leaving legacies of excellence for you to emulate. Think of all those donors who have given money to this College, with no chance whatsoever of ever knowing themselves those future students, just like you today, who would most benefit from their philanthropic generosity. Think of the enormous labors of the faculty and staff on no one's behalf but yours and your fellow students in this place. But only you can decide what you are going to take from this College. Anna Quindlen once more: "But *you* will be the *only* person

who has *sole* custody of *your* life.” Robert the Omelet King once more: “Bring *your* plate to the food.”

As Henry the VIII must surely have said to each of his wives: “This will *not* take very long.” Your four years now stretch out in front of you. Before you realize what has happened, you too will be like the student following Commencement several years back, seriously saying to yourself, if not writing on the side of this rostrum, “Don’t make me leave.”

But there are those here with you this very moment who must soon take *their* leave of you, your mothers and fathers. I have had, for a very long time now, my own personal tradition at the end of the many convocation addresses I have been privileged to give here and elsewhere. More than twenty years ago, before you were even conceived, a senior wrote the following lines in his journal at the end of our senior seminar together:

“Come to the edge,” he said.
 But they said, “We are afraid.”
 “Come to the edge,” he said.
 They came, he pushed them, and they flew.

In just a few moments, your parents are going to be pushing you through the boundary of your very own blue haze into the “bright and splendid” ballroom of your undergraduate lives, hoping that they have done their best by you, hoping that you will not let them or yourselves down by your own actions and words. Your parents are themselves in something of a blue haze right now, wondering where on earth could the past eighteen years have conceivably fled, how could you possibly be old enough to go off to College when only the day or so before they had you by the hand as they tried to teach you how to cross the street with the light, asking themselves if they have prepared you as best they could for a future they, and we, can see only dimly. Stop for a moment and say “thank you” to them before they leave campus a few moments from now. Only when you are they, a few decades hence, watching your own child pass through *your* child’s own blue haze will you ever fully understand what *your* parents have done for you and what this very special moment in your life means to them as well.

Welcome to the ballroom that is this wonderful place we call ‘K’ and best wishes to you for your time here, on your journey towards the rest of your lives.