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St. John's College Commencement Speech
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Good morning.

I'd like to offer these remarks in memory of Bert Thoms, an inspiring St. John's tutor, who led, alongside Mera Flaumenhaft, my freshman seminar here more than 35 years ago.

Thank you, President and Mrs. Nelson for your generous welcome this weekend. Thanks mostly to the students of St. John's College and the Graduate Institute for inviting me to join you today – even if I weren't a Jonnie *manqué*, having dropped out after my freshman year, your invitation would have been a privilege and an honor, in my own case leavened only by an added dollop of envy.

I have chosen as my topic today the genre of the commencement address, a genre I find well worn, hackneyed, and obvious. Commencement speeches are designed to reduce even the most well-meaning speaker to platitude and cliché, because the genre itself must by its very nature reduce all possible truths it could utter to meaningless and useless formulae, always to be spoken from a place of numbly ironic but still all-too-false humility, framed with a large heaping of self-serving autobiographical anecdote dressed up as hard-earned advice; and all of it bathed in the kind of optimism that can only be voiced by those who have no credit card or student loan debt left on their books.

Please don't blame the commencement speaker, though, for this state of affairs—the speaker's main fault lies in accepting the challenge of filling the final moments that bridge the gap between your education and the so-called real world that awaits you with words that could somehow serve as both apologia for the accumulation of that student debt, and as cheerleading for the happy and useful industry that will enable you eventually to pay that debt off some day in the, we hope, not-too-distant future. To put it another way, specific to the St. John's brand of liberal arts education, you've spent these past many semesters engaged with *logos* – with words, reason, reckoning – and now, the last thing standing between you and your degree, that baton made of paper that, the moment it touches your hands, is meant to push you forward into the world of *praxis*, of free, right action, well, that last impediment is the medium-sized bag of moist air emitting words that will addressing you for the next ten minutes—in other words, me.

I've already, in these first moments, invoked a lot of concepts Johnnies are intimately familiar with—logos, apo-logos, liberal arts, truth, reason, usefulness, free, praxis, and bag. Why do I think that none of these concepts are adequate to filling the gap between you and your degrees? Why does the genre of commencement betray them to the point of triviality? The only way I can prove this point is, of course, by embodying it; I shall now commence my proof. I will do so by dispensing absolutely

true advice, by proffering airtight reassurances as to the value of a liberal arts education, and by embodying in my person and speech the workings of the logos. My goal in these next few minutes will be to inspire you and your families and friends with the same spirit of meaninglessness and uselessness that has animated every precious minute of the vast expanse of wasted time you devoted to the achievement of your St. John's degree.

First, let's dispense with some advice. In order to make this part of my commencement speech the best it could be, I've asked some St. John's students I had dinner with last night to volunteer examples of the truest and best advice they've ever been given. I have collated this advice, and will now read it out loud. Because this advice is preapproved, it's even more helpful than stuff I could make up myself.

So here's the advice for today:

Receive all with open arms.

Do not be afraid to be wrong, as long as you are always willing to learn.

Talk to yourself. This is quite sane.

Exercise your imagination: envision the life you wish to live.

Now, there's only one problem with all this great advice: it's absolutely true. But because it is being conveyed in the form of a commencement speech, it's *opposite* is also absolutely true. I can, for example, easily give a speech based on the following, quite different, precepts:

Whatever you do, don't simply receive all with open arms: your mission is not simply to accept the world, but to *change* the world. Otherwise your life is not worth living.

Or:

You've had the luxury, as students, of often being wrong, and thus of learning from your mistakes. Now, whether you become an airline pilot, a nuclear engineer, or a parent, you have one obligation: don't mess up, as it really won't matter to the people whose lives you've destroyed whether you have learnt from your failures. Fear is thus a measure of real responsibility.

Or:

Yes, in our narcissistic and solipsistic culture, it's all about talking to ourselves, knowing ourselves, and listening to ourselves. But remember, when you talk to yourself, you're replacing the interlocutor who could challenge you with the listener who never can.

Or:

A life wasted is one spent dreaming of the life you could have, rather than the life you can make for yourself today.

You get the idea.

The same holds for *all* advice. It turns out that all truth in the form of advice is meaningful and useful only to the extent that it comes in a form that renders its opposite equally true, meaningful and useful. In short, the commencement speech renders X as equal to not-X, and that's quite a trick, isn't it?

Thus concludes the advice section of today's commencement speech. I hope you've been inspired.

Let's move on to the reassuring *apologia* section. For surely, if commencement speakers reduce truths to trivia—to objects peculiarly resistant to capture by knowledge or wisdom—surely your massive labors as St. John's students and the dialogic forms of inquiry you have practiced and mastered here can do us better.

But here we come up against a peculiar *topos* most often mobilized in defense of the generalist education you've just received: while you are supposed now to know *about* a lot of things, you're also oddly supposed to at least pretend, *a la* Socrates, that you really don't know much at all -- that what you know is, literally, a formality: you know how to question, how to listen, how to talk, and by talk we mean to dialogue, to follow the argument, to engage in the work of *logos* as part of a community of learners. (And I love that at St. John's that community specifically includes the people who are perhaps the most discriminated against in our society—I mean, of course, *dead people*.) As a result of this, there is really only one thing you and your families know substantively after these many years: talk ain't cheap. Otherwise, you know nothing.

This is clearly only half a truth, at best. But it's one that is ritualistically invoked to reassure you and your families that the investment in a St. John's education was worth it. For what do employers look for in college graduates? Well, when we check that series of interconnected tubes known as the internet, we find all kinds of top ten and top five lists of sought-after qualities in college grads, qualities like these, from the website of something called the National Association of Colleges and Employers:

1. Ability to work in a team
2. Verbal communication skills
3. Ability to make decisions and problem solve
4. Ability to obtain and process information
5. Ability to plan, organize, and prioritize work

Do these sound like the abilities of anyone you know?

So, yes, I suppose, be reassured.

But… there's a problem with this defense of the liberal arts—its oddly dissonant, more-than-vaguely self-defensive *instrumentality*. Did you really come to St. John's because, ironically, it was the best *vocational* school you could find? Was that what your time here was really about? Are you and your parents really reassured by the fact that you have been well molded and polished to fit smoothly as an entry-level cog

into the globally competitive neoliberal behemoth that awaits you and your remaining productive waking hours?

There's more. This truth—and it is a truth—about the instrumental value of your education bears an uneasy relationship to some of the other reassuring truths my commencement speech is supposed to underscore. For example, you are now, it seems, liberally educated, and *liberal,* we are all told, has something to do with *liberty*, and therefore you are said to be more *free* than you might otherwise have been had you not been here these past many semesters. This reassurance, like many reassurances, again, may be true, but there's a slight penumbra of anxiety that resonates around it. You are free, yes, but free to do *what*?

You can feel this anxious undercurrent in the ritual exchanges surrounding today's commencement, for example when your well-meaning but slightly insufferable Uncle Jack asks you: what are your plans? What are you going to do? Now the perfect Johnnie reply is of course the following: Well, what are *you* going to do? What are *we*, in fact, to do? Dialogue, if not hilarity, may or may not ensue.

But that artful dodge gets you only so far. For the question begs an assumption that itself needs interrogation. Yes, you've been talking—and, just as importantly, listening—these past many semesters, and now, it appears, people, and you yourself, expect, well, *action*. The assumption is that talking and acting are two different things, and that one should somehow figure out the correct relation between right talk and right action, and that your education has something to do with the building and maintaining of such a correct relation between these two very different things. And this relation between talk and action itself appears to be at the heart of the liberality of the liberal arts, the production of you as a free person with at least a *potential* to act freely.

And, as the St. John's website tells us, all these things—reason, logos, freedom, liberal artistry—are central to the democratic project our culture has embarked on. Thus—and here again comes another purposefully instrumental defense of your education—you are now qualified to be useful to that democratic project. Your freedom—or at least one version of your freedom, as a subject capable of reasoned inquiry—is to *do* democracy.

Unfortunately, you're smart and observant enough to note a few problems with this particular reassurance. Many of you having commenced, and now ended, your studies at St. John's in the presence of a certain Socrates, you know full well, as Socrates learned the hard way, that the love of wisdom and the arts of democracy are not always aligned, and that their misalignment is often fatal. Still, more liberally educated voters in a democracy are better than none, right? – and yes, that is again indeed a truth. But it is also true that this truth applies to *any* system of governance—we would certainly prefer our tyrants, oligarchs, military junta members, despots, and multi-national corporate overseers to be *reason*-able St. John's grads also, wouldn't we? In other words, what seemed like a necessary and unique truth—the

link between liberty and the liberal—appears to be a merely sufficient, and none-too-special one.

And yet still this idea of freedom, as an abstract potential, and as something informed by a kind of content, persists—it has something to do with you and St. John's, and you and St. John's have something to do with it, but it's hard, isn't it, even on this day of your commencing, to figure out what that something might be. Let's keep trying—although by now, I know many of you are praying I *stop* trying, as matters seem to be getting worse in direct proportion to the effort I'm applying here. But I digress.

Freedom, in the way of thinking that marks the standard—and remember, *true*—defense of your education, has something to do with filling with reasoned dialogue and inquiry—indeed, using reasoned dialogue and inquiry as a kind of wedge to create and sustain—a kind of gap or space, a gap between, on the one hand, the reception of stimuli and information, and, on the other, the pursuit of action. This gap has to be big or long enough to accommodate reasoned speech and reflection, and it has to be structured and maintained to allow for that accommodation.

For if you're just out there blindly and instinctively reacting to stuff, you're definitely *not* free; you're an automaton or a mere animal. In this Kantian paradigm, being "natural" means simply being subject to the laws of nature, in all their regularity and predictability—and there's no freedom there. Freedom, thus, means accessing and following your peculiarly human capacity for Reason, for this uniquely human capacity is what in fact allows us to *act*, not simply to be *acted upon* by forces and laws, including those that govern our animal instincts—forces and laws that are outside of our control. And so St. John's graduates are free because they, above others, have been trained in, and are inclined to fill that gap with, the practice of reason, informed by the words, the logos, the reasoning of thinkers who have exercised this freedom in exemplary and liberating ways before them.

Now this sounds like a truth that is not merely unassailable, but actually meaningful. *Except*….doesn't this way of thinking, while seeming to exalt reason, actually quarantine it from the very life which is supposed to live it? Reason, in this account, exists in a kind of abyss between sensation and action, as if the world were required to stop in order for our human freedom to have chance enough and time to instantiate itself in our own lives. Isn't, after all, the exercise of reason a kind of action itself? And besides, in this account, reason would have a hard time determining how long or how big a gap between thought and action we would need in any given situation in order to exercise and experience our freedom. Isn't it always the case, with this kind of thinking, that we might spend too much time reasoning, by the end of which the moment to act freely would have long since disappeared?

By now you must be saying, c'mon Schamus, give us one small ray of hope as you wind down; after all, just during these ten minutes the collective interest on the student debt acquired by currently living St. John's graduates has probably compounded to the tune of hundreds of dollars. Give us something we can hold onto.

So, all right, I'll give it one last try – but I forewarn you, the results may not be pretty.

For if there is a way to save ourselves from all these untrue truths, these practical but useless reassurances, these defenses that give away more than they protect, it may be by following a path laid out by thinkers such as Kierkegaard and Bergson and others who followed Kant. They pointed out, in various ways, that human reason itself, as the vehicle that delivers the possibility of freedom, is what introduces into the world the very gap or abyss we were just talking about—the gap between the predictable, pre-determinable, causal chain of events to which we would otherwise be enslaved, and the event or moment of truly free action. Reason thus brings with it something unpredictable, unmeasurable, non-predetermined – that is, everything that, from a *rational* point of view, is irrational and essentially un-reasonable. The freedom that comes with reason opens the door for that which can never be captured or cognized by reason. The freedom it creates is thus always the freedom it can never fully account for, because it must be an action, a free and unpredictable intervention in the world.

St. John's students—more than any others—understand that paradox because they have lived the exhilaration of actual, experienced *logos*—reason in its broadest sense—not as a technical skill that can be marketed or put to good use (what Aristotle might call *eupraxia)*, not as an object that can be known, not as a truth that can be summed up in a sentence like a well-worn piece of advice, not even as a formal method of inquiry. Indeed, if the Gospel of the namesake of St. John's College begins with "In the beginning was the Word…," "En arche en ho *logos*…", Johnnies know that, however one traces its etymology, logos is not just in or at the commencement, it *is* the commencement, the commencement of a life lived so fully that the difference between thought and action can never be stable or defining. And Johnnies know too that logos is and always will be *dia*-logos, that reason is always speech *and* act, that right words work through the acts of an engaged and ethically attuned community of speakers and listeners—a community you leave today but one you will carry with you forever. While a great deal in this world can be true, meaningful, known, and useful, what is most special about St. John's—and particularly about St. John's graduates—is thus their uniquely un-true, meaningless, ignorant, and useless character.

And that's why to you, of all people, I could never proffer any speech that could properly fill the gap between your thinking and your acting. I can thus leave you with no parting words of advice or reassurance. Indeed, the world may not always find use for you; many of you, at times, will even be painfully ill used by the world. But that doesn't mean I can't fall, in conclusion, to the temptation to tell you one, simply, really true thing: whether or not the world will be able always to make use of you, the world *needs* you – thinker-doers, and doer-thinkers, genuinely free human beings. And even if it weren't Mother's Day, I'd still be as proud as your moms when I greet you, as I do now, as the St. John's graduating class of 2013. Congratulations!