

Water Water Everywhere
Convocation Address
January 2006
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Welcome to the newest members of the class of 2009 and to the families and friends of each. To the rest of the college community, welcome back.

Something funny happened to me on my way to convocation, and I hope you will forgive me if I relate to you just what it was.

Some days ago, I went to bed wondering what I might say today in my remarks, unable to find a beginning. In my sleep, I had this dream.

I was terribly thirsty, my tongue thick with longing, and across the plane of my vision came a glass of water filled with ice cubes. It lifted itself off this very podium I am now standing behind and moved from west to east across the blank slate of my mind. I followed this glass of water and came to a well. And with me, I had ten camels. Rebekah was there with her jug, drawing water from the well, and I asked if I might have a sip. She said, "Drink," and I drank. Then she said, "For your camels, too, I shall draw water until they drink their fill." [Some of you may have heard that each camel can drink up to 50 gallons of water after a desert trek, so this was a lot of water, and Rebekah was quite a woman.]

And in my dream I became the camels and drank all the water. I reflected upon my master, Abraham, happy that he had been a digger of wells, that he had chosen the desert for his home and had worked hard and dug deep, for now we just might have wells enough to satisfy my thirst.

And my mind drifted to Noah, and I wondered whether we'd have had no flood if he had only taken a few more camels with him on the ark. And I became Noah and turned my head up to the heavens when it started to pour rain, and I opened my mouth and drank for forty days and forty nights. And still I was thirsty, yet the earth was covered with water. And I remembered the beginning:

"When God began to create heaven and earth, and the earth was water and waste and darkness over the deep and God's breath hovering over the waters, God said, 'Let there be light.'"

And I knew then that there was water and thirst before there was light. [Yes, I actually dreamed all this.]

And I became Job and cried out to the Lord, "What have I done to deserve this thirst? Why do you not answer me?" And the Lord answered me from the storm:

"Who dares speak darkly words with no sense? Where were you when I founded the earth? . . . Who barred the sea behind double gates as it was gushing out of the womb? . . . Who . . . clove the path for the thundershower . . . to feed a wasteland, fill a desolation, make it flower, sprout grass?"

And I saw that I spoke with no wisdom of things beyond me that I did not know.

And I came upon a wedding and saw that Jesus had turned water into wine and thought that if he could do that he could also turn wine into water.

And I came to the Red Sea and raised my staff and the waters parted. And I walked into the midst of the sea and called upon the waters to return and I had water all about me.

And my staff became a sword and the river rose up and I fought with many men and with the river itself, and the river god called out to me saying, "Achilles, stop this terrible slaughter while you can still drink from my stream, before it turns red with blood."

And I was Odysseus, crossing the wine dark sea, washed up on the shores of my native Ithaca, and then Aeneas, braving storms to found Rome.

I became a great white whale and consumed volumes upon volumes of water with my fish.

And I swam to the mouth of the Mississippi River, and saw that I had become Huckleberry Finn, sitting on a raft, unable to drink from the muddy water; so I paddled upstream to drink at the headwaters where the river became a stream of clear water, sparkling in the sun.

And there I pondered what it took to become a navigable waterway of the United States so that it would be covered by the commerce clause of the U.S. Constitution. There I heard the voice of Justice Somebody-or-Other pronouncing that "a navigable waterway is a body of water large enough to float a Supreme Court opinion in." And I opened my mouth to drink, and with the water came page upon page of Supreme Court opinions. These were followed by all of the books on the St. John's College program and I became a freshman, a sophomore, a junior and a senior, and I drank the books in as they floated down the stream: Homer and Aeschylus, Herodotus and Thucydides, Plato and Aristotle, Euclid and Ptolemy, and all the books in chronological order thereafter. Even a thin blue paperback of Freud *On Dreams* floated toward me, but I said I was having none of that today, thank you very much.

And I rolled over in my bed, swinging my arm in a great arc when my hand actually grasped a real bottle of mineral water. It seemed that while I was struggling with the forces of nature and all the books on the program, my wife Joyce, my very own Rebekah, had gotten up in the night and had walked the length of the house to get us both some water.

And I woke and I drank and drank, all that I could. And I wondered whether my convocation address had written itself.

After all, you would not be here today if you did not have such an unquenchable thirst as I had experienced in my dream. You would not be here if you did not want to drink in all these books for the nourishment of your minds and souls. I only hope for your sake that you make better sense of your education than I seem to have done in my dream state.

And yet, just think. You can come to St. John's College and acquire the imagination to be in attendance at the creation and at a certain wedding in Cana of Galilee; you can become Noah, Moses, a servant to Abraham, Job, Achilles, Odysseus, Aeneas, Huckleberry Finn, a commercial lawyer, ten camels and a whale, while going through the entire program of instruction in one night, and wake up in the morning president of the college.

If you are lucky, however, coming to this college for most of you will be like awakening from a dream, for the education you can make for yourselves from these books and with your classmates can actually bring a kind of clarity to your lives — certainly a lot more clarity than one can achieve by dreaming alone.

The clarity you can gain here in your waking state comes from your fully-engaged participation in the program. It requires that you learn to learn for its own sake, for the sake of coming to know, not for the approval of your tutors or the grades they give. It requires that you let the questions asked in and out of class slip past the barriers of your unexamined opinions and prejudices, that you give these questions your full attention, and that you put the knowledge you think you are bringing with you to the real test of examination — examination by you and with the help of your tutors and classmates.

Clarity comes from knowing the difference between what you have been told and what you have come to know for yourself is true. Clarity comes from taking what you read and hear and think out of your own personal dustbin and into the clear light of reason for a good, hard examination. Clarity comes from making your education your own, not the one given to you by another, no matter how thoughtful, highly educated or well intentioned that other teacher might be.

You have come to a college that believes in the power of your intellect and the strength of your character to do all of this, and that wants to be in attendance as you start to make this education a thing of your own, taking in those things that pass the test of your own examination, and rejecting or shelving for later examination what does not pass this test of yours. We hope you will take advantage of the freedom that this will give you, and that you will ask us, your tutors, colleagues and classmates, for whatever help you may need along the way in your search for answers. You will have four years here to acquire the tools you will need to help you in an educational project that will, if you are lucky, consume the rest of your lives.

I share in your excitement over your new undertaking and hope that some of your dreams will be fulfilled during your waking hours here. I don't wish on you the jumble that sprang from my head that night a short while ago, but I wish you many nights and days of thirst and countless occasions for drinking deeply at the well.

May you come to know the satisfaction that accompanies your education on such occasions, and may you yet never quite quench your thirst.

Thank you.

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I declare the college in session for this January class this 11th day of January 2006.

Convocatum Est!