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Thank you, Mr. Nelson, for your generous introduction; and thank you, seniors. I wonder if you can know how much your invitation to speak to you means to me. I have felt close to many of you individually and to you as a class; I have been privileged to work with you in the classroom and in many other contexts, and have appreciated your seriousness about this college – a seriousness marked, among other things, by your willingness to point out my errors to me and to do so in the best possible spirit.

Today I feel one more bond with you: my own commencement ceremony here was held indoors. While I am sorry about the rain, and for the inconvenience this causes your families, I can tell you that neither the weather nor any of the other inevitable annoyances of a great day enter into my graduation memories. Commencement is a sun-filled event, regardless of the sky.

The significance of this day is much stated, but truly, it would be difficult to overstate. On this day you leave the small, close community of your graduate or undergraduate days and join a variety of other communities, including the larger, looser community of graduates of this college. I have been thinking for the past few months about what I want to say to you as you take your leave and make your beginnings – an exercise a little like thinking about the *one* book on which to write a senior essay. The significance of this moment is, I know, very much with you, perhaps overwhelmingly so. As I listened to and joined in the toasts of the seniors on Friday night I heard many expressions of what you will be leaving behind and what you hope to take with you –

the focus, indeed, of this and many other commencement addresses. Among the things toasted were courage and strangeness, the very topics which had eventually emerged as central to what I will say this morning. I found that reassuring.

We ask a lot of our students here. In your first semester at St. John's, there were no introductory courses: you read Homer himself, Euclid, Plato, Thucydides, and Aristotle themselves. (Mollin and Williamson themselves.) Think back to your first seminar. For all undergraduates, the reading is Homer, but the experience of the first seminar tends to be much the same, whatever the reading. After about two hours of a heated, clamorous, sometimes vainglorious experience we called "conversation," you had dispatched the first six books of the *Iliad*. You had probably never so much as seen a trireme or a greave; if you had, you learned that it was not relevant to the discussion. After three more such conversations, the *Iliad* was behind you, and you marched forth through the *Odyssey*, the *Oresteia*, and a succession of dialogues, histories, plays, and treatises both physical and metaphysical. This was just in seminar. Things move fast, and students quickly begin to collect a list of small failings that plague them through their years here, a bit like the chain that Jacob Marley forged in life. Perhaps, in that first reading, you did not quite finish the latterly significant catalogue of ships. Can you give a clear and distinct account of compound ratio? Of the circumstantial use of the Greek participle? Of the proofs of the existence of God or of the antinomies of reason? Of relativistic time dilation? I hope you have been able to answer "no" to at least one of these questions.

This morning, however, I would like to urge you to attend to some things that you have diligent about, often without noticing, since you commenced your work here. No

single book, theorem, or paradigm of semesters past is essential to living the life that the founders of this program of study hoped to encourage in its students. What is essential is a disposition to discover and to live that life, to inquire into and pursue what is good, what is right, what is beautiful -- and this disposition you have cultivated in your time here. I confess I have in mind not one, but an ill-defined cluster, or perhaps swarm, of dispositions. I will point to one or two, primarily through reflecting on the courage that is required to cultivate them. You have participated in a course of study at a college with an academic program and practices that are distinctive in a number of ways.

One distinction, for which we are either famous or infamous, is the fact that the authors of the works we study are all dead. Whether this is essential or accidental is open to question. Another distinctive feature of the College is absolutely essential: we learn here in and through conversation with our companions and guides in this land of the dead, who are our living classmates and colleagues. Courage is a virtue you have practiced by necessity here as you pursued a course of study requiring you to learn both from the living and from the dead.

Without discussion of the kinds or parts of courage, it is safe to say that you are more courageous now than you were when you matriculated. If virtue is cultivated by practice, this must of necessity be true. Embarking on the program of study here requires both audacity and humility. It takes audacity to think that it will be fun to tackle in two or four years this list of books, any one of which can support a lifetime of study. It takes humility to submit yourself to each book in turn with a readiness to

learn from it. Audacity may be sufficient for embarkation, but it will not carry you far; along the way, informed by humility, you must acquire some courage.

Perhaps the most consistent way in which your courage has been called upon has been the ceaseless demand to examine, revise, and at times abandon your opinions. We talk so frequently about examining our opinions and preconceptions that we can forget how truly difficult this is. Nonetheless it is this practice, more than any particular discipline, that is at the center of what is liberal and liberating in this endeavor.

Unexamined opinions enslave human thought and the human spirit, and at this college we have woven traditions and practices into our daily life that help us protect ourselves against this real evil. A tradition observed with vitality conveys the germ of an institution from the hands of one generation to those of another. We have, for example, a tradition of requiring anyone who lectures here to engage in a question period (it appears from this tradition that a commencement address is not a lecture).

While it would not do us any harm to allow the occasional guest lecturer to escape unscathed by our questions, if we were to allow ourselves to deliver up our opinions to one another without expecting that those opinions will be examined thoroughly, we would eviscerate the College. The tradition of question periods is one vital reminder of this.

Most of the time we subject our opinions to this scrutiny with real enjoyment. That is another measure of the vitality of the College and its traditions. I am sorry to say that no permanent shield from attachment to old opinions can be conferred upon you with your degree. There is a proclivity in most of us to love our opinions from which lifelong vigilance is the only protection. What is good is difficult, and questioning the

opinions we cherish is among the most difficult things to do. It requires courage, and when you leave this college it will require more courage, for you will often be without communal encouragement to it. But you will carry with you a disposition to seek out this and other forms of what is good, and this is a resource.

In addition to a disposition to consider and seek what is good, you take with you a disposition to ask what is right. That this involves courage need hardly be said; like any question worth asking, the inward examination required entails courage. In addition, the question of what is right is very often connected to a practical matter; your judgment as to what is right must frequently be the basis of action, and action, unlike opinion, cannot be revised. We can repent, recant, apologize, but we cannot undo. Nor is it comforting to reflect that it is in these very matters that certainty is farthest from our reach, or that while we may reflect at leisure and in private on our opinions, most actions are in some degree public.

You have had considerable practice in this sort of courage; the community you have been a part of insists upon it. As a student here you bore significant responsibility not only for your own learning but for that of others. In a class of fifteen or twenty people each member's decisions, small and large, have public effects. Over the course of semesters and years the sphere of their publicity is enlarged.

You have significant experience, both within and outside the classroom, of what it is to make the best judgment you are capable of in the circumstance and to act on it, knowing that you may be wrong. Within this community the severity of high standards is tempered by a spirit of generosity. A place here is hard won but the

strength of the community is available to each of its members: Who has not benefitted from it? This strength comes in part from numbers – in this instance, from small numbers. It is easier to find one’s place and understand one’s effect in a small community and this greatly enhances the communal endeavor to common ends. There is encouragement to look into and reach for what is right. All of us live in a multiplicity of communities, over time and contemporaneously. Most of those you will join are likely to be larger than the one you leave today. Your disposition to ask what is right and act according to it will help you to discern your place in any community, and to recognize, on occasion, those in which you have no place.

You have practiced courage through the constant practice of making mistakes of various kinds, both publicly and in the presence of an ever-sharper inner witness. You know that learning requires this kind of courage, which is a form of generosity. This is what Socrates is asking for when he urges Theaetetus to be *gennaios* -- to say what he thinks so that the question of what knowledge is can be pursued. While learning is ultimately private – no one but Meno’s young slave himself can know whether he is in fact learning from the questions Socrates asks him – its conditions are very often public and therefore require this generous courage.

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I will find my way to a conclusion by returning to Homer. In the *Odyssey*, he tells the story of Odysseus’ travels to the Land of the Dead as Odysseus himself relates it to the Phaiakaian people, onto whose shores he has washed. I have called your time here a

journey through this land, and while there may be some strain to this comparison, the differences as well as the similarities can bear a moment's reflection.

Odysseus' sojourn with the dead is a preparatory journey; he has made several attempts to embark on his journey home from Troy after the Greek victory over that city. At his last stop, on Circe's island, he has been told that he cannot begin that journey aright without first visiting the dead. Although most of you have paid your visit to the dead at an earlier juncture in your lives, yours, too, has been a preparatory visit.

One great difference between your travels and Odysseus' is that while Odysseus' shipmates make the journey to Persephone's land with him, it is Odysseus alone who speaks with the shades there. He alone conducts the elaborate ceremony of sacrifice that gives him access to the dead, and learns to make the dead speak to him by allowing them to drink the blood of the sacrificial animals. He is alone when the shades of the dead swarm around and threaten to overwhelm him with what he calls a "green fear."

You, on the other hand, have been in the company of your shipmates throughout your journey; while you were tested, we hope that you were not often overcome with such 'green fear' as Odysseus describes. Still, you encountered much that is strange in the company of the dead, and much that is wonderful as you learned to make them speak, and the strange and the wonderful awaken the spirit of inquiry and revive a tired traveler.

Some of the strangeness you have encountered is more or less accidental to time and place; some goes deeper. Freshmen learn how very strange those who burn their dead seem to those who eat their dead – and freshmen generally find both customs strange. It may seem or be strange that the Trojan horse-breakers were willing to endure more than ten years of siege by the strong-greaved Achaians rather than sacrifice the honor of a vain and petulant prince. Perhaps even stranger is the notion that Homer's poem, and all other forms of imitation, might be dangerous.

Some strangeness is mitigated by looking deeper, and so may be dismissed as superficial. Beneath some of the most disturbing differences we find commonalities, and we tend to think of these as the things that matter most. The discovery of common desires and questions through the understanding of difference is part of the wonder of persuading the dead to speak. But not all surface is mere surface. Sound may be inseparable from sense, skin as revealing as skeleton; strangeness is sometimes the surface of a strangeness profound. Our connections with other human beings bridge distance that is in some respects absolute. The dead are emblematic of this: for all our communion – our common origin, our common fate – our power to penetrate their world is strictly bounded.

Odysseus has been instructed to make his journey in order to consult with the shade of Teiresias, the dead seer who retains his powers in the underworld and can tell him what sort of homecoming and life lie ahead for him. But he encounters many other shades as well. The first is that of Elpenor, a companion who fell to his death only recently after drinking a vast quantity of wine. Another is the shade of Antikleia, his mother. Odysseus only learns that his mother is dead when he sees her shade among the others.

When she speaks she tells him that she died from grief over his absence, and he learns then that the living can neither touch nor be touched by the dead: he cannot embrace his mother's shade. After hearing the prophecy of Teiresias and speaking with his mother, Odysseus encounters the shades of many daughters and wives of heroes, sent to him by Persephone. At length, he interrupts his recital of the catalogue of these shades, and says to his Phaiakaian listeners that he "could not tell over the whole number of them nor name all / the women ... / for before that the divine night would give out."

His listeners do not allow him to cut short the story, but persuade him with gifts and the promise of safe transport to expand the boundaries of its telling. Alkinoös, the Phaiakaian king, declares the length of the night to be *athésphatos*, which means here something like, "beyond the power of a god to express." (In an earlier context this adjective modifies the quantity of wine drunk by Elpenor before he fell from Circe's roof.) Confronted with such powerful persuasion, Odysseus obliges them and finishes his tale. He describes his encounters with the shades of his comrades in the war. It is a muster increasingly sad and remote: Achilles, who would be happier plowing another man's fields than ruling in Hades, speaks little, the great warrior Aias not at all. Last, the Phaiakaians hear of the mythic figures of the long dead, who suffer eternal punishments for their misdeeds in life.

The books you have studied are the shades of their authors. Some are quite remote and reluctant to speak, but you have learned to discern the spark of life in many of them and have heard them speak. Reading these authors' works, and taking seriously the notion that there is something to learn by doing so, requires, in addition to an act of

faith, a continual shuttling between who we are and who they are. Without a sense of who we are, we cannot know what our questions are. Without continual efforts to understand who they are, we take away from our encounter only what we brought to it in the first place. This recasting of the ideas we encounter in our own terms is fruitless. Those we attempt to contend with in their terms are the ones we may persuade to speak. Although in a complete sense this is as impossible for us as it was for Odysseus to embrace the shade of his mother, for us, patient approach brings us nearer, and illumines the world we inhabit.

The illumination and enrichment of your life through your efforts to coax the dead into a living conversation will be different for each of you. Some of you may have heard here what sort of life lies ahead for you, many of you are, just now, overwhelmed by the welter of possibilities. All of you have the disposition to enter into the experience of another as far as possible while remaining the author of your own opinions.

Knowing better who you are, you know what it is to have the “courage to use your own understanding.”

It is a great joke here that the origin of the word *school* is a Greek word meaning *leisure*, but you will know it to be true when you leave behind the daily leisure to extend a conversation beyond the ringing of a bell. You will, however, take with you an understanding of how and when to extend the boundaries of the night, to give it length beyond the power of a god to express, when there is a fine story to be heard or told.