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Convocation Address

Prof Steve Wagner, August 29, 2012

Thank you, Vice Provost DesJardins.

Good morning to you all.

First, on behalf of all of us here today, I would like to welcome President Hemesath to St. John's and say that we're looking forward to working with you in the years ahead.

And on behalf of the faculty, staff and administration, I'd like to welcome the incoming students to the School of Theology, the incoming undergraduate students to St. John's and St. Ben's, and all the students who are returning to our schools.

It's an honor for me to have the opportunity to speak to you today.

Since I'm a philosopher who has been at it for a while now, I initially thought that what I should do this morning is enlighten all of you with some of the deep metaphysical truths which I've discovered so far.

But then, fortunately for all of us I think, I remembered the cartoon which we have on the wall in the philosophy department office, right above our coffee pot.

It's a picture of an aging sage, dressed in the appropriate toga, sweating profusely because he is walking very rapidly in the direction of an arrow behind him pointing toward "Truth."

But if you look down at the bottom of the picture, you see that he's walking on a treadmill, so he's not making any progress at all.

Seeing this cartoon every morning keeps us in the philosophy department humble; and pretty depressed.

But in fact philosophers **do** try to stay **a bit visibly depressed** so that people can tell we're struggling with some **very difficult** issues.

In any case, the humility inspired by this cartoon convinced me that it would be better for me to just offer you some thoughts from **my own personal** treadmill.

So I'm going to talk about some things I've learned along the way—in particular some things I've learned but **wish I would have known sooner**—when **I** began college or when **I** first came to St. John's and St. Ben's, like many of you today.

Perhaps offering these thoughts can be helpful to you as you begin or continue your work here.

The first thing I wish I had **known** sooner is best expressed in a line from a novel I wish I had **read** sooner.

In his novel *The Stranger*, Albert Camus has his main character say at one point, "If something is going to happen to me, I want to be there."

It may seem odd to imagine that something **can** happen to you without your being there.

But Camus knew, as perhaps you do too, that it is possible to experience something physically, but to not be present to it emotionally or psychologically.

Camus beautifully calls the attitude of being fully present to our experiences "lucidity"--and he encourages us to live each moment with that kind of attention and care.

In fact, I learned early on and very effectively how to **not** be present to many of my experiences—to keep them at a distance--especially if they were a bit uncomfortable.

So when I was **GRADUATING** college, I remember thinking that it would be wonderful if I could start over again, since I felt I had missed so much by often not being present to my experiences during those four years.

I hope you won't make that mistake, and that you'll heed Camus' advice to be present to **all** of your experiences here.

On behalf of my faculty colleagues, I **especially** hope that you will be lucid—that is, fully attentive--in your classes.

And I actually have a helpful hint for you about that, since I've discovered a previously unknown property of baseball caps—so this may be especially helpful to the Johnnies here.

I've discovered that, when they're worn backwards, baseball caps have the power to prevent their wearer from being lucid.

Just something to keep in mind. You heard it here first.

In fact, we just had an opportunity to practice Camus' lucidity a few moments ago, when we were asked to pledge our support for each other in our work here.

It was easy to say the words we were asked to repeat, but it's not so easy to be present to the significance of the commitment we made—our activity in the future will show if we spoke those words lucidly.

This pledge to support one another leads me to a second “thing I wish I had known sooner.”

And it gives me the opportunity to tell a story that I've wanted to tell for a long time.

When I first came to teach here, I drove from New York City, which was my home town, in a car which was pretty old--but it got me here fine.

I needed to find a place to live, so I looked in the newspaper and found an ad for a furnished basement apartment in Sauk Rapids—sounded OK.

I made an appointment to see the apartment, but the day I was supposed to go out there, my car broke down.

Since I really didn't know anyone well, I called the person who had hired me, the chair of the philosophy department, Fr. Rene McGraw, to see if he would give me a ride.

He kindly said he would—a first moment of support.

When we got there, we saw this outdoor staircase leading from the driveway down to a terrace **right on** the Mississippi river—the basement apartment had this **fantastic** view.

And I thought it would just be great to live there.

So I rang the bell, an older woman came to the door, and when I introduced my companion as **FATHER** Rene McGraw, I saw her eyes light up and I knew that the apartment was mine.

So, without even saying a word, a Benedictine member of our community helped a Jewish kid from the Bronx settle into his new life in Minnesota.

Since then, Rene has said a lot of words.

And I have cherished them all—because they have been words filled with kindness, support and humor; he has become one of my dearest friends.

What I wish I had learned sooner from that light-hearted moment at my new apartment is that, in our community, it's OK to ask for help in other ways as well.

It is one of the wonders of our schools that, if you ask the person sitting next to you for help, you can rely on him or her to **try** to give you the support you need.

It's not just "Minnesota nice," it's something the spirit of our schools cultivates, as shown by the pledge we just made.

But it took me a while to believe that it was safe to admit **my** needs and insecurities.

I spent a lot of time worrying that my colleagues and students would think less of me if they found out that I didn't know everything there is to know about philosophy.

Or I worried that they would think less of me if they knew that I get pretty nervous when I have to give a talk like this.

I hope you will allow yourself to ask for help when you need it, without those kinds of worries.

I surely think that the main reason our sage found himself on a treadmill making no progress was that he was trying to go it alone.

By supporting each other and working together lucidly we **can** make progress toward our goal.

And I have a final story and suggestion **about the goal** we are after here.

Some of you have heard this story—I hope it’s worth hearing again.

Originally it was about the goal of studying philosophy—but I think it also applies to the goal of studying the liberal arts in general, which is the work we value here **most highly**; that tradition was also the topic which the faculty discussed at our workshop last week.

My story is simply this: During a philosophy lecture I attended in graduate school, our professor stopped, turned to us and said, “There’s really only one philosophical question. You get up in the morning, sit down with a cup of coffee and ask yourself, ‘What should I do today?’ That’s **the** philosophical question.”

What he meant was that if we ask our philosophical questions sincerely—take them inside us, so to speak—our search for the answers will shed light on how we should live our lives—which is “no small thing,” as Plato put it.

I think **that** question, “What should I do today?”—is also the basic question we are trying to answer by studying the liberal arts, if we approach our study with that same spirit of sincerity.

I wish I had known **that** during **my** college career.

Instead I thought that my central goal was to pursue my major, to prepare for graduate school or a job.

That **surely** was important for me, as it is for all of you--but I now know that I spent my time focused too narrowly.

In order to **also** answer the **most important question** about how we ought to live from day to day, we need to explore **all** the wisdom in **all** the disciplines that we can get our hands, hearts and minds on.

I missed out on the opportunity in college—it was only when I came here that I was inspired to study in that **broad way**.

I hope you will be inspired to do that here as well.

If we do it together, I'm sure we **can** find answers to our most important questions.

I welcome you to that search and to an exciting year here at St. John's and St. Ben's.