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“Peter and the Truth”
Saint John’s University Convocation Address
August 29, 2007

A long time ago, I was teaching a first year honors philosophy class to, among others, a young man named Peter. Peter was bright. His career path was certain in his own mind from the day he arrived — medicine. He had excellent scores both in his ACT and his SAT. He was a good athlete. Secretly he played the violin — he didn’t want his classmates, especially his male classmates, to know that he loved doing something that didn’t seem too manly. The year went on. At the end of the year, Peter came to the class with his violin and played for his classmates, no longer embarrassed by his love of classical music and the violin. He talked about his college experience:

When I came here, I thought I just needed to tidy up a few facts in chemistry and biology, but essentially I thought my education was pretty complete. I was on my way to medical school and a secure and enjoyable future. But a funny thing happened on the way to the forum. As I went through my first year, what I thought I knew in chemistry and biology did not prove wrong, but the world just opened up more and more. Chemistry led me to the history of science, and then from there I got fascinated by history itself. I began to wonder whether the kind of mathematical organization so important and powerful in the sciences was the only way to organize the world.

When my first year writing prof demanded that I read some novels, that led me to wondering about the psychology of *Madame Bovary* and that raised the question of ethics — was Emma just weak or was she wrong? How do you decide what is right and what is wrong? What of sin and failure in human life? Where does God fit into my life, and what responsibility do I have for other people? What about America’s wealth and other countries’ poverty? Are they connected? And on and on. I feel now as though I just have too short a life to understand anything completely, to reach the full truth. And all of that came from just seeking to tidy up my chemistry and biology. It’s exciting, but very frustrating.

I have been reading a book by Michael Dillon, entitled the *Politics of Security*. Since his primary field is international relations, he begins with the way that international relations has long been understood as nations struggling for security. So much of the interactions between one nation and another are tied to the search for security. Look at what we say about our invasion of Iraq. Or think about the invasion of Afghanistan. We want to be secure from attacks. And other countries that fight us want to be secure. A country wants economic security and therefore needs to assure its privileged place in the world of trade. So it goes to war or uses other methods to secure its place. The World Trade Center gets struck on 9/11 and the whole nation rises in support of finding a way to make the country secure, so that nothing like this will ever happen again. People worry about their jobs and so they want to be secure from immigrants, even though they don't want to take the jobs that the immigrants take. Nations build bigger and bigger weapons, and then find out that they are not secure anyway, because little countries defeat big and important countries. Where has all the security gone? Or are nations searching for something that they cannot find? Is the search for security an impossible search?

But as Dillon looks at international relations, he wants to say that the search for security has become the pot of gold at the end of every rainbow — it is not just international relations that is guided by the search for security; it's education and business and housing and religion and philosophy — indeed it's all our lives. We go to first grade, and we work hard to secure the approval of the teacher and our parents. Life is secure. We know the answers. When we go out on the playground, and if we are a bit shy and non-athletic, teased about being a sissy, then we work very hard to make our life secure with some friends who like us no matter what. We go on to high school where sports is king and all-demanding, and we find ourselves embarrassed, if we are males who are also interested in theater or music or art. We want to nail down our friendships, make them secure. And when we are in the classroom, we seek just to get the facts right. College arrives and we look to get a good education, at least enough to secure a good job afterwards, so that we will have job security. And then we worry in that job whether we are making enough money to secure a good life. And maybe sometimes we even wonder whether we are securing a place in heaven by the way that we live.

And yet we are never secure. I love the story in the Gospels where Jesus talks about the man who decides to build new barns to take care of all of his abundant harvest every year. And he finishes and says to himself: "Soul, take your rest. You have provided all good things for the future." But Jesus says to him, "You fool, this very night your life will be taken from you." Death is our ultimate insecurity.

But if education, if international relations, if life itself is not about learning how to gain security, then what is it about? Why are we all here? Let me take another example of another student, this time a more recent student. A fine student of economics, Brandon finished his career here, and most people expected that he would go on to graduate school in economics, probably get a doctorate, and either go into teaching or government work or economic planning. But somehow, he didn't feel that his education was yet complete enough. The truth was still too elusive. And so he decided to spend a year studying theology in the graduate school here just to explore how economics and theology were interconnected and how they touched his life, something he had seen in Dr. Dan Finn. And now he is planning on interning, maybe at the Denver Rescue Mission or with the people who have suffered from Katrina. Truth, for Brandon, is now tied to practice, as Karl Marx saw.

Education made Brandon and Peter want to reach to a fuller truth. Not security, but truth. But, like Pilate, we might ask, well, what is truth? Truth, as the great moral thinker and leader, Mahatma Gandhi, put it, is the goal of life. It's like a tree with thousands and thousands of leaves. We pick up a leaf here and there, and we gradually begin to see how one leaf is connected to a branch and how a branch is connected to the whole tree, and the whole tree is fed by the roots and the soil and the sun. Maybe in our lifetime, we begin to pick up a hundred or two hundred leaves. But 10,000 more remain that shall not be gathered up in this life. And the soil, the sun, all that still remains elusive. Truth never quite arrives fully.

Let me use a different image that the philosopher Martin Heidegger uses again and again. Truth is about uncovering. What Peter and Brandon discovered is that what was once hidden becomes a little more uncovered. It's like being in the Little Theatre at St. Ben's. There is no curtain, and so in darkness the actors come out. And then the lights begin to come on. And what was hidden in darkness comes into the light a bit more. But if you are sitting on the right, you don't see everything on the left. If you hear very well what is being said closest to you, maybe when you get old, you will not hear so well what is being said on the left. Never, even with attending repeated performances, will you get the whole play. Never will we get the whole truth. We shall always be insecure.

The fullness of truth would be the uncovering that comes when all is revealed. Then we might not like what we see, but we would be secure. But that shall never happen this side of eternity. Only 100 or maybe even 1,000 of those leaves will be uncovered during our lifetime. Another 10,000 remain. But it is exciting when we uncover one more connection, when we see how math and physics and technology and war and peace and justice and literature are beginning to connect. When biology and poetry

and anthropology and philosophy all touch each other, the exhilaration we experience is the very heart of the liberal education. Don't spend all your time just taking more and more courses in your major. Let people like Peter and Brandon open a road for you to truth and insecurity.

Rene McGraw, OSB, is an Associate Professor of Philosophy and Peace Studies. He delivered the convocation address as 2007 winner of the Robert L. Spaeth Teacher of Distinction Award at Saint John's University.