

Convocation Address

St. John's University

August 29, 2016

ENCOUNTERING THE CYCLOPS

by

Scott Richardson

Good morning and welcome to a new year. For many of us gathered here—students, professors, administrators, staff members—today marks the beginning of yet another academic year at our fair campuses, and to you I say welcome back and may you make this your best year yet. It is the newcomers, however, especially our students just now coming to college and to the Graduate School of Theology, to whom I extend a special welcome. You have good reason to enjoy the thrill of embarking on a new stage of your lives, but you're no doubt also experiencing the estrangement that accompanies any displacement. Beautiful though our setting is, surrounded by forest and lakes, they're not yet your forest and lakes. Many of your fellow students will become life-long friends, but right now they're little more than a sea of new faces. And unbelievably brilliant though your professors surely are, at this point we're still strangers to you. Before long you'll feel at home at our two campuses, you'll develop important relationships, and you'll realize that your professors aren't so scary after all. But for a little while you're in that transitional stage, away from your familiar routine and not yet settled in this new world.

In a way, all the years of college and graduate school are by nature transitional stages in our lives, a period when we carve out time to explore the marvels of the world, to develop our talents, to figure out what makes ourselves tick. Those of you who've just graduated from high school will emerge from college as full-fledged adults after four years away from the world of your childhood. This is a magical time in your lives, even if right now it might seem a bit unnerving.

When I left home for college I saw myself as an adventurer, and since I tend to aggrandize the events of my life, my role model was the Greek hero Odysseus. The *Odyssey* was my favorite book and is still something of an obsession. At the end of the Trojan War, Odysseus set sail, was thrown off course, and took ten years to get back to his homeland. Coincidentally, it took me ten years to get through college and graduate school, after which I moved back to my home state of Minnesota. The adventures I encountered during that transitional stage of my life might, with only a bit of a stretch, metaphorically resemble those Odysseus faced during his voyage home, much as I'd anticipated. But what I had not counted on was that college and graduate school would resemble the hero's nightmare adventure with the Cyclops. I would like to suggest to you that, if you go about it properly, the transition you newcomers are embarking on will be very much like Odysseus's famous run-in with the Cyclops.

Let me remind you of the details. Odysseus and his crew land on a luxuriant and tranquil island, but the hero, a restless seeker of knowledge, decides to disrupt their peaceful idleness and check out the mainland nearby. The men find an ominously large cave that should tip them off as to the nature of the inhabitant, but Odysseus has them help themselves to some cheese and await their host. He regrets it when the cave-dweller

arrives, a fierce giant with one eye in the middle of his forehead and a frightening tone when he asks them who they are, invading his home and eating up his cheese. The clever Odysseus, anticipating trouble, gives himself a false name. He says that he is called Nobody. The Cyclops proceeds to eat up several of the crewmembers until Odysseus tempts him with strong wine that knocks him out. Their instinct is to kill him, but Odysseus, always looking ahead, realizes that they'll need the giant to remove the huge boulder blocking the doorway. So instead, they gouge out his eye. When the blind monster screams in pain, his neighbors in the Cyclops community come running to the cave and ask if someone is hurting him. He replies that Nobody is trying to kill him, thereby vindicating Odysseus's crafty choice of pseudonym. The men manage to make a clever escape the next day and sail back to the cozy island they'd left behind.

College, I assert, is a visit to the cave of the Cyclops. I hasten to reassure you that very few of your professors will actually be one-eyed cannibal giants. The resemblance is largely metaphorical. Let me explain.

When Odysseus makes the ingenious ploy of calling himself Nobody, he is being more truthful than he is aware. Right now he's sailed very far from Troy, where he'd been fighting for ten years. The war might not have been pleasant, but at least he knew what to do. He had a routine. And he had a great reputation—people knew who he was and looked up to him as someone special. In the Trojan War he really was Somebody. Now he's just some vulnerable guy in an unknown part of the world up against an uncivilized brute eager to eat him up. No one knows where he is, and even he doesn't know where he is or how to return to the world he knows. He is in fact Nobody.

Just a few days ago those of you new to college left the everyday world that has been your life for eighteen years, a school where people knew your name, a home where you were important and loved, a familiar way of life. You knew what to do. There you were Somebody. Now you're in an unfamiliar world, living in a new dwelling with someone you don't know, eating meals made by someone you're not related to, about to take classes with teachers and classmates you've never seen before, and nameless to most of the people you encounter. When I was at that stage of my life, this novelty was both very exhilarating and chillingly unsettling. I used to be Somebody. What was I now?

It didn't take long for me to start feeling comfortable in my new world, and the uneasy sensation of being a Nobody faded after two or three weeks. Still, in a sense my entire experience in college was a time when I could explore the nature of my own identity and play around with various selves that would eventually define my life when I emerged from the Cyclops cave of college. Graduate school was in a way simply an advanced version of the same experience. The real virtue of being Nobody for a while is the opportunity to fashion your identity in a way that seemed impossible and even unnecessary before going off to college. You can yourself determine what kind of Somebody you're going to be.

There's more to the Nobody trick, a play on words that I find uplifting. The usual Greek word for "not" is "ou," and the word for "somebody" is "tis," so "outis" means "not anybody, nobody," and that's the name Odysseus gives the Cyclops. But another Greek word for "not" is "mē," so "mētis" also means "nobody," and this form is also used at key points in the story. But "mētis" also happens to be the Greek word for cleverness, intelligence, craftiness, and Odysseus is the most intelligent of all the Greeks.

So when he says that he is Nobody, he is also saying, in an unintended and indirect way, that he is Intelligence, and it is this intelligence that keeps getting him out of jams such as this. Again, Odysseus has accidentally named himself accurately. During this time when he has left one way of life, one identity, and has not yet found his next one, the self that he hopes to become, he might well feel like a Nobody, but this is also a time when he's using his great ingenuity to figure out how to handle himself and how to adjust to the next stage of his life.

Nobody wants to be a Nobody. This uncertainty of identity is, nevertheless, a necessary stage for meaningful growth and development, a time to make good use of all your cleverness. Those like you who are brave enough to risk leaving the luxuriant island of your familiar world will gain great rewards that those apprehensive of sweeping changes in their lives can never obtain. In a few weeks you will again feel like Somebody, and in a few years you will in a meaningful way be Somebody Else, somebody even more capable than you are today of appreciating the wonders of the world and figuring out how to live your life richly. Welcome to graduate school and welcome to college.