

Dancing with Aquinas

Senior Convocation Address, 2013 by Associate Professor of English, Andrew Moran

President Keefe, Provost Berry, Dean Eaker, my colleagues, and members of the class of 2013,

“He goes in search of liberty,” Virgil says about Dante to Cato, when they arrive on Purgatory’s shores,

“liberty, which is so precious,
as he well knows who gives his life for it.
You know this well, since death in Utica
did not seem bitter, there where you left
the garment that will shine on that great day.”

Cato of Utica, the guardian of Purgatory, you may remember from freshman year, is the one suicide whom Dante does not consign to hell, who will get back his garment on the great day, who will experience the resurrection of the body and enjoy the beatific vision, because Dante so admired the Roman hero’s devotion to liberty. Cato was so devoted to freedom and so hated tyranny that after he stabbed himself in the belly to avoid being taken prisoner by Julius Caesar and somehow missed all his vital organs, he then yanked at his exposed entrails to make sure that he’d finished the job. You may be saying to yourself right now, I wasn’t expecting to hear about the yanking of entrails in a convocation address. And you also may be saying to yourself, he’s not going to lecture on Dante, is he? Yes, yes I am. And you have no one to blame but yourselves. My conversation is limited to baseball, hockey, and literary texts, and since

convocation is not the venue to talk sports, it has to be Dante. I want to call your attention to some important matters in the *Commedia*, first, the significance of Dante's garment imagery. We have Cato, who will receive his garment on judgment day, and then Beatrice, the blessed lady, who first appears to Dante "olive-crowned above a veil of white," her long dress beneath a green mantle "the color of living flame." La Pia, in Purgatory among the late repentant, as she is not yet fully permeated with the glory of God, wears a skirt not as long and flowing though still tasteful and modest. But the real contrast is between these two holy women and the damned soul Francesca, guilty of lust, whose wickedness is there for all to see as she is blown about eternally with her lover Paolo by the hurricane winds in the second circle of Hell, her leggings clinging obscenely to the contours of her derriere.

The great leggings kerfuffle of 2013 is one of many happy memories from your class. I will remember the best *University News* in my time at UD, ably copyedited, interesting, thoughtful, funny, and occasionally bold, with the effect that it's been a great advertisement for the University. I will remember teaching Lit. Trad. IV for the first time and finding that Melville and Dostoyevsky are easy to teach, if you've got a room full of lively and smart sophomores. I will remember some of the best performances I've ever seen in the Margo Jonsson Theatre, in plays such as *Twelfth Night* and *Arcadia*. I will try not to remember the havoc done to my left knee during Charity Week (Nick Harmon), but I will remember dinner parties that went late into the night hosted by Daniel Orazio and Elizabeth Lynch. It is an honor for me to address you today, and I thank you, and I wish you well.

And I fully expect you to do well. Be optimistic. There is unfortunately a false sense of crisis about the job prospects of UD alumni which sometimes makes graduates apprehensive. It's based on a sliver of truth. Liberal arts graduates, especially UD types, often need a few years out

in the world to explore and discern and only then do they hit their stride; it's just the nature of the beast. After the high of undergraduate life, these years can be disappointing—to be frank, it can be painful how much you'll miss your friends and the life of this place—but real good can come of them as through struggle one learns much about oneself and grows resourceful. I'm a UD graduate and can tell you that at age 23 none of my friends were making more than chump change and only one of us had anything like a “career roadmap.” A couple of years ago we vacationed together, and as we shot pool at a bar, it occurred to me: the philosophy major, the other English major, the economics major, the biology major, the Classics major, the history major—everyone now is making a six figure salary ... except me. If you've been seriously thinking about and planning for your career while a student, that likely will help, but if not, don't worry. If you've been spending your summers making music and learning to moderate your moonshine and Bojangles consumption, you can still be a professional success. From many years at this university, I can say that decades of alumni who as students gave themselves wholeheartedly, without distraction, to philosophy, the sciences, the arts, have done well for themselves. If you have spent four years with your heart set on what is truly good, not merely useful, four years of discovering and enjoying good things, you have had the best training for a lifetime of discovering and enjoying good things. I am obviously not speaking for anyone but myself, but I was pleased to learn that one of you has already proclaimed his commitment to truly good things, the student who responded to last year's mandate, that the submission of a résumé is a requirement for the conferral of the bachelor of arts and bachelor of science degrees, by submitting one stating the following objectives: “To go to heaven (see the beatific vision). To be very strong (muscularly). To avoid sin. To become a very good musician. To read many good books. To see many good movies. To ramble. If I perhaps find a beautiful woman, and it is

indeed my vocation to marry her, to sweep her off her darn feet.” I understand that this last objective has already been met; this is a young man with the right priorities. But now this senior and all of you must leave this four year oasis of practical impracticality and turn to useful things so that you can enjoy and serve and love good things. Love calls us to the things of this world. And out in the world, maybe after some initial struggles, you should expect to do very well; and now is the time to start making that happen.

But while there is no reason to despair if your path is not clear at 23, if at 26 it's still murky, you need to get a move on; and if at 35, in the middle of the journey of our lives, you have lost the path and are in a dark wood, impeded by a leopard, a lion, and a she-wolf ... I did say that this would be a lecture on Dante. The Pilgrim “goes in search of liberty,” and the whole poem represents and explores how one achieves it. Dante's final guide is St. Bernard of Clairvaux, the Cistercian theologian who identified that the way in which the human person is made in the image and likeness of God is in the freedom of the will, our liberty. “How are we to be free?” is a question that your authors the last four years have had you consider and which you must think about for the rest of your lives. The curriculum Louise and Donald Cowan instituted fifty years ago aims to cultivate nobility of soul, for which liberty is almost synonymous. In a few minutes I can't say anything substantial, but I will offer a few thoughts on threats to liberty that your generation faces and on how to respond, short of yanking out your entrails. As Americans we should be grateful that we have never had to worry about the midnight knock on the door by men in trench coats. But there are softer, unrecognized threats to the liberty of the mind to pursue truth, the liberty of the soul to unite itself to the good. Here I'll sound like a fuddy-duddy, but the new technologies need to be used cautiously, if only because they're so addictive; the smart phone for many is a compulsion. When I see students walking down the

Mall fixated on the tiny screen or made deaf to the laughter of friends by their earbuds, it makes me sad. It also makes me sad to hear of people racking up credit card debt. Do remember that in *The Merchant of Venice* Antonio makes his *bond* with Shylock because his friend Bassanio has been spending money wildly. Ours is a culture that does not encourage thrift, but to not be *bound* to the credit card companies learn to say no to unnecessary expenses.

The following is admittedly one of my hobby-horses, the hobby-horse too of my favorite novelist, Evelyn Waugh, and my favorite historian, John Lukacs: the threat to liberty from the modern bureaucraticization of life. Lukacs argues that the United States has passed from a democracy to a bureaucracy, by which he does not mean something as simple as that we have to deal with Patti and Selma at the department of motor vehicles. Rather, he speaks of this as a regime that both shapes and manifests our souls; just as Socrates in *The Republic* speaks of the souls of democratic youth and aristocratic youth, so too are there bureaucratic youth. They grow up with play dates and never ride their bikes to the far side of town. The bureaucratic youth is formed in a world where everything must be planned and scripted and controlled, outcomes measured and assessed, where image and publicity are to be obsessed over and things themselves matter not, where thought is constrained by artificial categories and activity restricted by managerial command. The bureaucratic spirit in part arises from a spiritual problem, a lack of faith in “the unbought grace of life.” It also follows from a failure to distinguish essential from inessential things. On the institutional level that failure leads to bloat, most obviously seen in the perpetual expansion of government, with the resulting likelihood of unnecessary intrusions into people’s lives. The philosopher of history Oswald Spengler argues that the rapid expansion of the bureaucracy is historically a sign that a culture is dying. But the government is not the only institution overwhelmed by bureaucratic growth and the bureaucratic spirit. The movie “Office

Space” with its TPS reports and red staplers has given us a defining image of the modern corporation. So too in academia, where the alma mater has become the helicopter mater, where the compassionate desire to offer students more and more services has the result of their being shackled with greater and greater student loan debt. Mission creep and handholding are expensive. Institutions are souls writ large, and both need to cultivate the virtue of restraint.

Let me finally address threats to liberty of the intellect. Our politics are obviously simplistic and one has to avoid partisan thinking. UD graduates are unlikely to be ensnared by reductionistic materialism, but religious believers should be vigilant against fideism, the reliance on faith alone to the point of dismissing reason, and pietism, the exaggerated stress on personal religious experience and feeling. At a time of much hostility to traditional religious belief and practice, for Christians these may be seductive retreats, but faith should seek after understanding. One’s faith should be liberating: Chesterton says that being a Catholic “frees a man from the degrading slavery of being a child of his age.” But an unreflecting faith can lead to mind-forged manacles. Finally, remember from freshman Politics De Tocqueville’s concerns about America, a nation which he admired but still criticized, saying that there was “no country with less independence of mind and true freedom of discussion.” Speaking freely contravenes the democratic tendency towards conformity, and is a way of making enemies. No decent person wants to make enemies and lose the good will of people for whom he has good will and respect. But niceness that obscures the truth is ersatz charity. Remember the advice Dante receives from Cacciaguida, his ancestor in Paradise—speak the truth, even if need be harsh truths: “if, at the first taste, your words molest, / they will, when they have been digested, end / as living nourishment.”

To maintain one's liberty involves a commitment to truth. To be free, maintain the truth about your person, your integrity, and continue to pursue truth. I am not saying you must become an academic, far from it. Be like my friends, not me: to quote the esteemed moral philosopher Iago, "put money in thy purse"—and then be generous alumni. But at the same time as you pursue professional success and meet your familial and religious obligations, seek to do what will require discipline and a strong act of the will, continue to search for truth through the life of the mind. When Dante and Beatrice ascend into the sphere of the Sun, they meet those who pursue wisdom, such as Thomas Aquinas, Anselm, and Bonaventure, now bright stars singing and dancing for eternity—in fact, they're likened to women dancing; on the dance floor men can never have that freedom from self-consciousness that women enjoy, unless they're liquored up. It's a perfect image for the joy that comes from seeking after truth for its own sake. Among such souls and with a woman who herself may be read as a symbol of the wisdom Dante has sought, he explains that he has been "delivered from [the] servitude" endured by those whose studies aimed at professional advancement, and instead knows joy and freedom. Tango with Thomas; waltz with Anselm; do the funky chicken with Bonaventure.

My final wish is that you find freedom through bondage, for most of you matrimonial bonds. But another bond of love, less glorious but still dear, I hope for all of you remains a source of freedom, your friendships. The invitation to dinner from Orazio and his friends came with a quotation from one of my favorite poems, "Inviting a Friend to Supper," by Shakespeare's friend Ben Jonson—whom, to be balanced, I should adduce as a warning about speaking your mind too freely since Jonson was twice jailed for cracking jokes in his plays about the courts of Queen Elizabeth and King James. The invitation included a learned allusion to a poem full of learned allusions, by a poet whose formal education ended at age fifteen but who spent the rest of

his life reading the classics, so that he became maybe the most learned man in England. Jonson imitates Latin dinner invitation poems, but he, who after his conversion to Catholicism had been harassed and spied upon by government agents, makes his a celebration of thoughtful conversation and freedom. The invitation I received was an appropriate prelude to an evening in which I felt as free as if I were with old friends:

Nor shall our cups make any guilty men,
But at our parting we will be as when
We innocently met. No simple word
That shall be uttered at our mirthful board
Shall make us sad next morning, or affright
The liberty that we'll enjoy tonight.

Jesus and Mary be with you. Thank you.

