

2015 Cornell College Baccalaureate Sermon

*The Temptation To Be Spectacular*¹

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Perhaps you've heard Frederick Buechner's rule for figuring out your vocation or life calling. First he notes how these terms come from a Latin root and refer to the work God has given you to do with your life. Then he names how so many voices call you to do different things that it's difficult figuring out which is the voice of God, and which is the voice of society or of your own ego. "The kind of work God usually calls you to," says Buechner is "(a) what you need most to do, and (b) what the world most needs to have done. If you really get a kick out of your work," says Buechner, "you've presumably met requirement (a), but if your work is writing TV deodorant commercials, chances are you've missed requirement (b). On the other hand, if your work is being a doctor in a leper colony, you have probably met requirement (b), but if most of the time you're bored and depressed by it, chances are you have not only bypassed (a) but probably aren't helping your patients much either. Neither the hair shirt nor the soft berth will do," says Buechner. "The place God calls you to is the place where your deep gladness and the world's deep hunger meet."¹

On this topic, I'm reminded of something a rabbi said that stuck with me the past 20 years. Though I tell it to students on Ash Wednesday, it seems appropriate to share it with you now as you take leave of this place; as you head out on the journey into the unknown exploring the mystery of your life's purpose, highest good, and that of the world.

This rabbi—she said how on the life journey we need to carry in our pockets two reminder notes. In one pocket the reminder note reads: You, like all beings, are a spark of the Divine. You are made in the image of the Sacred. You are filled with, and reflect Light. In the other pocket the reminder note reads: You are grass. You are dust of the earth. Like flowers of the field, you are here today, and gone tomorrow.

Like Buechner's famed verse regarding our vocations, I think our carrying these two notes in creative tension seems a helpful reminder on how precious life is. How, since we are here for just a spell, to live each day fully. Mindfully. Passionately. To say "I love you" more, not only in words and deeds but in the way you look others in the eye, including strangers passing by. These two notes are also a reminder to not play small. That is, to not give in to ego-mind temptation—especially amid a setback, disappointment, or disadvantage, to think yourself unworthy. Or, as anything less than a beloved expression and reflection of the Divine. On the other hand, to not play small also means checking ego-mind temptations of spending your life trying to prove your relevance; of trying to be someone by chasing after prestige, power, and applause—of striving to be spectacular. Of failing to know equaled splendor shining in and

¹ For sacred texts read by students which connect to this sermon, go to end of this document.

through the flaw. The vulnerable. The ordinary. Those parts of ourselves we try to hide, or are made uncomfortable by when we recognizing these qualities in others. The anxious striving after wind until one day you wake up realizing how what you sought you had all along.

So the focus of what I'd like to say to you today is an invitation to carry these reminders [You are grass. You are filled with, and reflect Light] with you as you figure out where your deep gladness and the world's deep hunger meet. To perhaps help you discern and measure the motivations behind the countless life aims and actions life will present you as you explore the relationship between your highest good and that of the world.

Perhaps you've heard of the great mythology scholar, Joseph Campbell. Campbell looked at different myths or tales from around the world and noticed how, regardless of cultural and historical differences, they share common themes regarding the hero's journey. He also noted how these hero journey tales have everything to do with our own life stories.

Well, long before Campbell wrote books about the hero's journey as paradigm for our own lives, Campbell was, like you, on his own hero journey as a college student. A college student with a reputation he desperately wanted to uphold as a world class runner. Only he lost it. On the day of a major championship race he faced and failed the test. The problem wasn't his inability to cross the finish line first. He said the thing that defeated him was his need to win in order to feel okay about himself. As one of my favorite books, *Running Within: A Guide To Mastering The Body-Mind-Spirit Connection* put it, rather than racing to the best of his ability as one relaxed, calm, and fluid, Campbell's ego or small-mind need to win tightened his being. It created a debilitating anxiety and tension that undermined his performance (79).

Same thing with speed skater, Dan Jensen. He was so attached to the outcome of his performance that he missed the gold in the 500 meter race at three consecutive Olympics. When he decided to show up and simply race the 1,000 meter event relaxed, calm, and fluid—of being like that ancient wisdom of soft as strong, or like the martial art of aikido which emphasizes less forced effort, he not only captured the gold. He set an Olympic record.

Look. I figure I'm not the only recovering over-striver in this sanctuary. Like a marathoner getting tired at mile 21 but pushing through, that grit and persistence of yours will take you far, be it vocationally or getting through a personal or family hardship which we all inevitably face. Combined with the discipline drilled into you by the block plan—well; any grad school or employer will prize you. But! If you need to be and do the spectacular. If you perform actions with attachment to outcomes, then, says age old spiritual wisdom, there is a problem.

At times you may feel the strain of the small-self telling you how you are not enough. Or how you need to win, or have a particular outcome, in order to feel okay. Some of you even experienced the temptation of dropping a class because the outcome just might be, God forbid, a B or a C. The panic mounts. Writer's block kicks in. You're like a runner using too much

forced getting up a hill. Amid the tears, some of you heard me suggest pulling a Dan Jensen. Let go of attachment to outcomes. Then give 80%. I figure your 80 is like some people's 100.

“Under heaven nothing is more soft and yielding than water,” says Lao Tzu in *The Tao Te Ching*. “Yet for attacking the solid and strong—for cutting through rock and shaping canyons, nothing is better (78; 8). The apostle Paul said something similar about whatever compulsion or other thorn in his side he struggled against all his life. Eventually, instead of willfulness, he surrendered into a relinquished willingness which embraced Divine wisdom telling him “My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness.” Becoming like water, Paul declares regarding his hardships, “When I am weak, I am strong (2 Cor. 12:9-11)”.

Beloved Catholic priest Henri Nouwen was a world renowned professor at Harvard. Yet something inside Henri was telling him that his success was putting himself in danger of not only burnout but a spiritual death. Moreover, despite all his achievement and acclaim, he struggled with depression and low self-esteem. It's like the accolades only made the hole inside him bigger. I wonder if that hole was like the Buddhist myth about the Hungry Ghost but on his insides. The Hungry Ghost says “Make me feel better.” “Buy this.” “Eat that.” “Achieve this.” But the more you feed it, the more it wants. Yet as Catherine Cook-Cottone puts it in her work with clients using mindfulness meditation for self-regulation and mental health, “perhaps the Ghost doesn't want to be fed but wants to be seen. And once seen, it can rest.”²

Anyway, after Fr. Henri Nouwen could see his hungry ghost, he heard God say through the words of a friend, “Go live among the poor in spirit, and they will heal you.” It was only after moving from Harvard to be with mentally handicapped people in the community of L'Arche—from living among the best and brightest wanting to rule the world, to being equal with completely unpretentious people whom he could not impress with his books or credentials, that Henri found his soul. In an image I think more than a few of you can resonate with, Nouwen said, “Living in a community with very wounded people, I came to see that I had lived most of my life thinking I was a tightrope artist trying to walk on a high, thin cable from one tower to the other, always waiting for the applause when I had not fallen off and broken my leg.”

“Success or failure: which is more destructive?” asks *The Tao Te Ching*. “Supreme goodness is like water, nourishing all of creation without trying to compete with it. It gathers in the low places unpopular with men (8). Yet no one puts this into practice. Only the one who takes upon him or herself the humility of the people is fit to rule them (78).”

Nouwen went on to write about leadership for clergy, helping us make sure our heads and hearts are screwed on right for the work given us. But I think his insights apply to just about anyone. He spoke of the temptations Jesus faced in the wilderness, which Thomas Cooke read

² Catherine Cook-Cottone, *Mindfulness and Yoga for Self-Regulation: A Primer for Mental Health* Springer Publishing, 2015, p. 51.

earlier. Nouwen noted how Jesus' temptations were like our own temptations of feeling the need to prove our relevance; or to be powerful, or seen as impressive and spectacular. Beyond the wisdom Nouwen gleaned from that Gospel story, I think there is something else here for all of us, whether or not you are a Christian. And that is how Jesus as a hero in a hero's journey story is claimed as Beloved—not after, but before, he ever lifts a finger to heal, help, or lead. He didn't earn Beloved status. Nor do we. You, me, Henri Nouwen and his L'Arche companions—we don't have to earn it, or prove it. You are already a spark and reflection of the Divine. This is your Bigger Self. Your Deepest, Truest self you've had all along which will help you find your way to where your deep joy and the world's great hunger meet. Or as the Bhagavad Gita puts it, "when the mind finds rest, peace, and radiance of Spirit within oneself, one finds liberty (6:18)." Live and lead from there.

Not only Hindu and Christian but also Muslim, Buddhist, and Jewish mystics speak of this shift from the small or shallower self to your Bigger Self. Or what I like to call your Deeper Self. As those of you who've been part of my meditation programs know, the image mystics often used to describe this shift is of you being like a lake. Our small or shallower self with all of its ego-mind fears and grasping, is the surface: Sometimes its smooth, but at other times turbulent and blown about. Then there is the deeper part of the lake—that is also you. Throughout the day, even amid meetings, one practices shifting awareness to this Deeper self—to those still, peaceful waters which are always there regardless of whatever is causing things to be blown about at the surface. One can do that by putting your hand on your heart center and breathing in and out from there in smooth flowing counts of, say, five in, a gentle hold, and five out like the tide on the ocean shore. With practice new neuro-pathways in your brain create a more skillful relationship with fear or sadness the next time the Hungry Ghost rises. Of course, you still get to lose it from time to time. Even the Dali Lama gets to lose it. Jesus lost it on occasion. Maybe that's why he'd disappear from the pressing crowds clamoring for him to heal and do things by heading out in solitude to pray. When he'd said, "go into your closet to pray," he wasn't talking about the kind with knobs. He was speaking about this inner closet; finding peace, strength, and renewal by tuning in to the Deeper Self where the Eternal breathes and abides. Or as our Eastern Orthodox friends would later say, to practice keeping an eye on the shrine of the heart so that with the other one is better able to see and love the world.

On this same theme The Bhagavad Gita speaks. It's among the wisest texts I've ever read concerning the inner life of work, leadership, and service. In it, the young Arjuna's spiritual guide is trying to help free Arjuna from anxiety. As with the running wisdom offered earlier, Krishna tells the young Arjuna to perform his duty without expectation regarding outcomes. "Surrender thoughts of outcome, being content with whatever happens,...success or failure," says Krishna. "...then you will gain peace (4.22; 5:12)." Krishna then offers a second path to freedom: "If you want to be truly free, perform all actions as worship (3:9)" he says. Not only the big leadership stuff. But eating. Breathing. Working. Make each gesture an offering of love, a bhakti, to the Divine or Life Force of which your life is part. Do so knowing you are not the

doer. In breathing, walking, resting, working, loving, let the Eternal Life Force energy or Spirit work in you do the work (4:25). The counsel is kin to something the legendary Trappist monk Thomas Merton said when writing to a 20 year old peacemaker whom I hope many of us also strive to be, given the strife in our nation and world, especially regarding racial and other injustice. To this young peacemaker overwhelmed by all the work needing to be done, Merton said: “Let all you are, and all the good you do, come not from you but from the fact that you’ve allowed yourself to be used by God’s love. Think of this more and gradually you will be free from the need to prove yourself, and you will be more open to the power that will work through you without you knowing it.”ⁱⁱ

Friends this Bigger or Deeper Self inside you is in all beings, linking our lives as one. It is the same spark, Light, and reflection of the Divine or Eternal life force of which one of the notes in your pocket speaks. It’s the Jewish wisdom Genesis speaks of in terms of our being made in the image and reflection of the Divine. It’s the same principle The Rev. Dr. King Jr., who once preached from this very stage, used as the foundational theological underpinning for racial equality as well as non-violent resistance to sway the hearts and minds of this nation. And so it is with the Gita: “See yourself in the heart of all beings and all being in yourself” says Krishna. Rooted in such oneness, love the Divine in whomever and whatever you see (6:29-31). When you see all beings as equal in suffering or in joy because they are like yourself, then you have grown perfect in oneness and peace (6:32).

Class of 2015: With such love in your hearts; as one’s anchored to your Deeper, Truer Selves, go forth to the place where your deep gladness and the world’s deep hunger meet.
[Peace/Namaste].

BACC 2015 SACRED TEXTS

TAO TO CHING 44

Hear these words from The Tao Te Ching:

Fame or integrity: which is more important?

Money or happiness: which is more valuable?

Success or failure: which is more destructive?

If you look to others for fulfillment, you will never truly be fulfilled.

If your happiness depends on money, you will never be happy with yourself.

Be content with what you have.

When you realize there is nothing lacking, the whole world belongs to you.

HADITH FROM THE PROPHET MUHAMMED

In the name of God, Most Gracious and Merciful:

What actions are most excellent?

To gladden the heart of a human being.

To feed the hungry.

To help the afflicted.

To lighten the sorrow of the sorrowful.

To remove the wrongs of the injured.

That person is the most beloved of God who does most good to God's creatures.

BHAGAVAD GITA (Selections from Chapters 3-4, and 6)

Arjuna said...Tell me: what must I do to arrive at the highest good (3:1-2)?

The Blessed Lord replied (3:3a):

...The superior person is the one who...without attachment to results, engages in the yoga of action (3:7).

Do any actions you *must* do, since action is better than inaction (3:8a). [But know that] the whole world becomes a slave to its own activity, Arjuna. If you want to be truly free, perform all actions as worship (3:9).

[Likewise], letting go of concern for results, performing the necessary action, and surrendering all attachments accomplishes life's highest good (3:19).

Though the unwise cling to their actions, watching for results, the wise are free of attachments, and act for the well-being of the whole world (3:25).

Only by selfless action did Janaka and other wise kings govern, and thus assure the well-being of the whole world. Whatever a great person does, ordinary people will do; whatever standard that person sets everyone else will follow (3:20-21).

Mature in yoga, impartial everywhere that he looks, he sees himself in all beings and all beings in himself. ...He who is rooted in oneness realizes that I am in every being; wherever he goes, he remains in me (6:29-32).

Matthew 3:16-4:11 (NRSV)

16 And when Jesus had been baptized, just as he came up from the water, suddenly the heavens were opened to him and he saw the Spirit of God descending like a dove and alighting on him. 17 And a voice from heaven said, "This is my Beloved son with whom I am well pleased." Then Jesus was led up by the Spirit into the wilderness to be tempted by the devil. 2 He fasted forty days and forty nights, and afterwards he was famished. 3 The tempter came and said to him, "If you are the Son of God, command these stones to become loaves of bread." 4 But he answered, "It is written, 'One does not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of God.'" Then the devil took him to the holy city and placed him on the pinnacle of the temple, saying to him, "If you are the Son of God, throw

yourself down; for it is written, 'He will command his angels concerning you,' and 'On their hands they will bear you up, so that you will not dash your foot against a stone.'" Jesus said to him, "Again it is written, 'Do not put the Lord your God to the test.'" Again, the devil took him to a very high mountain and showed him all the kingdoms of the world and their splendor; 9 and he said to him, "All these I will give you, if you will fall down and worship me." Jesus said to him, "Away with you, Satan! for it is written, 'Worship the Lord your God, and serve only him.'" Then the devil left him, and suddenly angels came and waited on him.

ⁱ Buechner, Frederick. Wishful Thinking.

ⁱⁱ Merton, Thomas. *Letter to James Forest, Feb. 21, 1965* in Thomas Merton: Essential Writings. Christine M. Bochen, ed. (NY: Orbis Books) p. 136.