

THOUGHTFUL NEGLIGENCE

by

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Remarks upon the Commencement of the Graduating Class
of the Graduate Institute in Liberal Education

St. John's College – Santa Fe, New Mexico
11 August 1989

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After these things folk might imagine that the St. John's program needs no particular defense. An undergraduate program that has survived for five decades, and a Graduate Institute that has survived for two decades, despite what one Dean of Admissions once quoted as "the irrelevant preciousness of the liberal arts," must sometimes seem as indomitable as the Athens that recovered from the debacle of Syracuse.

We have certainly followed for years those discussions of the differences between a St. John's education and what can be expected almost anywhere else in American education, and which discussions often seem little more than thinly veiled, contemptuous dismissals of the St. John's program. Such dismissals come in many forms, the most ubiquitous of which is perhaps the charge that students are not prepared for active participation in some career or community because they do not study all that is required so to prepare them.

Dean Neidorf once playfully dismissed such cavils with the observation that, "It should be a cause of joy and not of sorrow that there are more things worth studying than there is time in a lifetime to study them." That observation is perhaps a fuller defense than it appears, although it is nonetheless true that it does not convey the sense of a need to defend the program—or more precisely, a sense that the attack on the program has taken any toll.

Attitudes of negligent disregard for defending the program may have been nurtured by the mere fact that the continuation of the program was such an extraordinary accomplishment. Persisting as it did in the face of nearly universal and continuing rejection, the program must surely be graced with a happy constitution. In addition to the fact that most other institutions regarded the program as a precious exoticism, it has always harbored even within its walls some who regarded it as a reform yet to be made rather than a reform already accomplished. And these last are always invited to lay their explosive charges at the foundation itself.

Candidates for the degree of Master of Arts, Friends and Relatives, Fellow Tutors and Guests of St. John's College:

It seems to me that St. John's College and the Graduate Institute fascinate us as much on account of its members' negligent disregard for defending it as on account of the engaging character of its program. Apparently, to matriculate into a shared conversation—as President Weigle described it a decade ago—is still more affecting than to matriculate into a curriculum or specialization. It is the conversation that persists, inside and outside of the College. This phenomenon perhaps accounts for the pervasiveness of talk about reform throughout the life of the College's program and the simultaneous steadiness of the program.

Despite the constant presence of physicians of change and rituals of nostrums and reforms, we depend upon today's graduates to bear the readily identifiable mark of the program. This result impresses a soul sensitive to the instability of human institutions, and still more so in

proportion as members of the program do not seem driven to mount the ramparts. There is an uncanny openness to assault—a nonchalance which belies the full weight of past battles waged and won.

I believe that this requires explanation—this phenomenon, that the program seems always to be defended while no one seems to imagine that it requires a defense. The answer seems to lie in what is actually done here. St. John's is much more of a doing—a certain kind of activity—than a production; a doing that extends meaningfully and necessarily beyond the formal lineaments of the program.

It is more than a little remarkable that Scott Buchanan opened his discussion of the New Program in 1937 with the observation that “we begin with a looser style and an uncertain manner” (as compared with previous understandings of the purpose of education), but closed it with a specific list of the “best hundred books” and a specific curriculum that included even allocations of time through a four year period of study.

The list of books, as the curriculum, was left open to revision, and indeed revisions have been entertained over the course of the years. But the formal lineaments have evolved consistently with the design. Tutor Wilson well described the formal activities for the undergraduate one year ago. I quote:

For four years you have been discussing works of literature and philosophy, writing essays, analyzing plays and poems and arguments. These exercises have developed in you a number of skills that should be prized: the habit of listening carefully, of being attentive to a question and seeking out its sharp edge; the habit of readiness to enter into another person's thoughts, and to assume a new intellectual posture in response to new facts or ideas. Here and there, by bits and pieces, these habits should prove transferable from one context to another.

We might choose to alter this description in small ways to depict the graduate student. In all likelihood, however, we would not depart greatly, and probably not at all from Dean Klein's earlier formulation: “What is achieved is rather an expansion of the intellectual horizon, a fostering of understanding, a demolition of false assumptions. This may not happen at all in any one seminar or even in a series of seminars; but it is likely to happen after a while...”

The accomplishment of so much constitutes just cause for pride—and for many institutions it would form a laudable end in itself. But all this is accomplished here as means to a yet further end. These formal accomplishments are instrumentalities by which St. John's introduces its members into a conversation—a conversation beyond St. John's.

The more our formal practices and accomplishments occupy our attentions, the less will we reflect on the end proper to our program. Have we enough science? Should we introduce contemporary social sciences? Are we sensitive to different media of expression? Should we not strive to introduce members to up-to-the-moment expertise in a disciplined fashion? Do we adhere to ethnocentric standards in establishing our canon? These are the kinds of questions that substitute regard for the means for devotion to the end. They are also the means whereby the program is assailed. The very form in which the questions are posed assumes a good that we lack. And no doubt many, if not all, of these expedients are good and useful.

The good of conversation is a good of a different order, however. This is true if the conversation is “the great conversation”—that self-conscious participation in the wonderings across the ages of the deepest thinkers we know. One may find in a small fable by David Hume (“A Dialogue”), for example, a conversation in which Rousseau, Montesquieu, Fontaine, and Plato and Xenophon (through their Socrateses), besides Hume, are all active participants and not just citations.

That conversation arose from the doubt expressed in Plato's *Phaedo*, that perhaps Socrates had misunderstood the oracle, that told him to make music. Socrates' doubt poised philosophy and fable on a balance (not unlike our *libraque*), respecting the question whether there is any guidance for human beings as to ends. However, the larger conversation sparked by Socrates' doubt offers all who are able to enter it full occasion to resolve that doubt. Accordingly, we may specify the good of "the great conversation" in such a way as to inform our understanding of all other goods.

We would err, though, to believe that the purpose of the formal accomplishments at St. John's is exclusively to replicate or enlarge philosophical queries. The conversation we enter turns no less on appropriate concern to seek guidance as to human ends even when it does not body forth a company from the republic of letters.

I very recently experienced the effect of "the great conversation" in our ordinary life and in such a way as should persuade you that this practice is, indeed, the veritable defense of the program. Within recent months I had occasion to rummage old copies of *The St. John's Review* in search of an essay "Against Time" by Eva Brann. Along the way my eyes paused on a letter from Nicaragua and Guatemala that had been written by an Annapolis junior shortly after the Sandinistas came to power.

I came to know this alumna years after the essay had first appeared. Indeed we became correspondents the last few years. As I re-read the essay, I paused over her observation that, "Although they (Guatemalan guerillas) call themselves Marxists, they are much better at saying what's wrong with the current government and what it stands for than at explaining their ideology." That remark caused me to imagine her holding "seminar" in the jungles, going right to the guerillas to ask them "how do you know?" This humorous reflection, in turn, reminded me of the advice I had given in response to a request from her a year and a half ago.

I immediately penned a note to the author, commenting on her essay and also inquiring how she had fared in the project about which she had written to me (and which involved rejuvenating the Republican Party of San Francisco by fashioning a strong outreach program to neglected communities). I was aware that she had succeeded in shaping a new coalition and leading it to victory in a party election, but I did not know whether they had followed through on their ambition.

Only two weeks ago I received a startling, in person response to my query. We met during a period in which the Commission on Civil Rights was meeting in San Francisco. There she related to me the story that my letter had arrived on the very day she had decided to resign from the central committee post she had won less than a year earlier. She had discovered what the Guatemalan guerillas had not, namely, how difficult a body the body politic can be to move. She experienced frustration dealing with much of the bureaucratic foreplay that often conditions social accomplishment. Accordingly, she decided to quit.

My letter, arriving on that day, like the opening question in a seminar, revived a conversation that was never entirely cold in her soul. She reconsidered her own answer to the question she had posed in the jungles a decade before. The revelation that we shared St. John's had served retrospectively to illuminate and expand the character of our earlier correspondence. As she recounted the effect of this event to me just days ago, she was fast at work, carrying on the mission her intelligence approves.

I believe that this mundane example is no less an example of the great conversation than the Hume dialogue (nor do I believe it had been possible without our mutual participation in such conversations as that imitated by Hume). All that transpired depended no less on a mutual concern to seek guidance for human ends than does the dialogue about philosophy and fable. The

habit of openness to the ideas of another, as Tutor Wilson described it, was as critical here as in Fontaine's reaction to the passage in the *Phaedo*. Not only did his reading inspire the corpus of his fables, it also led him to answer by anticipation Rousseau's complaint that fable's teach deception to the young. The habit of seeking guidance as to human ends, Fontaine maintained, defeats every disguise.

I read the letter from Nicaragua (let alone the initial request to me) no less sympathetically than Fontaine read Plato. That in turn sparked a reciprocally sympathetic response to my inquiries. Indeed, perhaps the author and I had an advantage over Hume. Besides sharing St. John's, we could each respond, not merely by anticipating the challenge (à la Fontaine) but by learning from it as well.

Perhaps one would wish me to say, "because of St. John's." For this is the end of the program—willing conversation about human ends and understandings. We should not fail to observe, moreover, that the pleasure we take in such an accomplishment doubtless explains why the program persists in the face of recurring doubts and reforms. In this twenty-second year of the Graduate Institute, we may augment that pleasure by the reflection that there is ample foundation to accept as a permanent feature of the program an independently established Graduate Institute. You who today complete the program, but enter the permanent conversation, deserve congratulations, not only because you have succeeded in completing the program but still more importantly because you thereby attain title to that same thoughtful negligence which allows one to disregard defense of the program. Just be who you are—or, shall I say, who you have become—and the program will continue to defend itself.