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DOGFISH AND SONNETS
(SOME THOUGHTS ON UNMEDIATED LEARNING)

MATRICULATION CONVOCATION ADDRESS

SEPTEMBER 24, 1998

There are several dozen members of the faculty and staff who know that this is my twentieth matriculation convocation address. One of them, our distinguished faculty marshall Professor Chaney, penned me a note this summer saying that he had just re-read my first, and suggested that I might give it again. At the moment his note arrived, and indeed since, that idea had a certain appeal. Some of those who have been auditors at this occasion over the course of two decades may be of the opinion that many of these addresses ring changes on familiar themes, and hence that I often repeat myself in any case, so why not go all the way and give the same talk again. I do sympathize with their views.

These past few weeks, as I've fiddled and fussed with what to say this morning, I found myself asking "Have I said this before?" to which the answer frequently was "Probably." But I've rejected Professor Chaney's suggestion—perhaps in half an hour or so you'll wish I had taken his advice—and so will plow ahead with some thoughts stimulated by—and, I'll confess, taking liberties with—an essay by novelist Walker Percy entitled "The Loss of the Creature." I'll get to that in a moment.

As we indicated in the welcome to the entering freshmen and transfers last Friday, Lawrence is a venerable institution by American collegiate standards—of the 900 colleges founded before the Civil War, we are one of fewer than 200 still in existence—but our mission is renewed and refreshed each autumn with the influx of new students and faculty and the beginning of a new academic year. A palpable quickening of the pulse and surge of energy and anticipation accompany this moment. As Lawrence senior Tara Shingle wrote in the September 8 issue of *The Christian Science Monitor*, reflecting on her feelings about her experiences here, "I can't wait to go back to school." I do hope those are sentiments that all of you here today would echo.

That being said, it is also true that the beginning of a new academic year these days also brings with it renewed and refreshed scrutiny and criticism of higher education. One familiar refrain focuses on the notion that faculty don't teach, students don't learn, and the whole enterprise is inefficient and too costly. Another variation suggests that colleges and universities are anachronistic entities, soon to be replaced by "virtual" colleges, long-distance learning, and degrees offered through the Internet. Still others lament the deplorable preparation of students for college work, complaining that remediation rather than higher learning has become the dominant mode at most institutions. When Andy Katzenmoyer, the famed Ohio State linebacker, takes summer courses in golf and AIDS Awareness for credit in order to raise his grade point average to the level of eligibility, critics find ample grounds for their negative assessments. And when 59 percent of college graduates fail a state-administered test for teachers in Massachusetts,

the prophets of doom and gloom have a field day, with former Boston University President John Silber calling the level of academic work at schools of education “risible.”

Speaking of risible, yet another jaundiced and humorous view of college life was offered a few years ago by Dave Barry, who wrote that “college is basically a bunch of rooms where you sit for roughly two thousand hours and try to memorize things.” Fundamentally, he went on, you learn two kinds of things in college: things you will need to know in later life (two hours) and things you will not need to know in later life (1,998 hours). “These are the things you learn in classes whose names end in -ology, -osophy, -istry, -ics, and so on. The idea is, you memorize these things, write them down in little exam books, then forget them. If you fail to forget them, you become a professor and have to stay in college for the rest of your life.”

Barry’s advice to college students is to avoid choosing a major that involves Known Facts and Right Answers, hence, to eschew mathematics and the sciences. If, for example, in a chemistry class you write in your exam book “that carbon and hydrogen combine to form oak, your professor will flunk you.” Better, he thinks, to major in “subjects in which nobody really understands what anyone else is talking about, and which involve virtually no actual facts,” like English, philosophy, and psychology. In English, he suggests that the path to success lies in coming up with an interpretation of a text that no one has ever thought of before, like that Moby Dick is not a great white whale but the Republic of Ireland, which will dazzle your professor. Philosophy, he suggests “involves sitting in a room and deciding that there is no such thing as reality, and then going to lunch.” Psychology is for people obsessed with rats and dreams, especially those who dream about rats. I’ll spare you what he had to say about sociology.

On a rather more somber note, a more recent—though hardly novel—trend has been for higher education to be lambasted for not paying sufficient attention to the need to “maximize profitability.” As one author put it, “the groves of academe have become a battleground between the forces of liberal education and the regiments of capitalism.” Thorstein Veblen had a similar view in 1916, when he excoriated those “captains of erudition” who ran our colleges and universities and for whom “learning and university instruction are a species of skilled labor, to be hired at competitive wages and to turn out the largest merchantable output.” In any case, one conclusion about higher education today is that “the regiments of capitalism are winning, and the champions of the life of the mind are in retreat.”

Of all of these assaults—and there are many others I’ve not cited here—perhaps the most damning is the one that sees the student as consumer and the institution as provider, offering what the consumer demands and thus privileging the very notion that colleges ought to be driven by customer needs and satisfaction. There is something simplistically seductive about this notion that the student is the customer who demands goods and services from the institution. In many instances, this attitude takes the form of the proposition that a college education is nothing more than the means to some economic end. A great deal of evidence points to the fact that students—and their parents—see higher education as an investment that ought to pay dividends.

It certainly should not alarm college administrators or faculty that students and parents think this way, and obviously, those of us who believe in Lawrence and its mission have confidence in the long-term worth of the education students seek and secure here. We derive

that confidence from our convictions about the intrinsic and instrumental values and consequences of liberal learning, find it bolstered by the track record of our alumni, and affirmed by the assessments of business and civic leaders who support our purposes. And so while we do not cater to consumerism, we are not at all abashed about asserting that Lawrence graduates have acquired and honed the intellectual skills, work ethic, and habits of mind here that serve them admirably for a lifetime, however they choose to translate their education to their vocation. My purpose this morning is not to reexamine, but simply for now to reassert, these abiding claims.

Sometimes we get so battered and befuddled by these withering assaults that we fail to examine afresh what it is we do here and what aims we have for the educational mission of the college and for each individual student. So as we begin this academic year, I think it worth affirming elements of liberal learning that are often subsumed by or neglected in the daily round of teaching and learning, studying and working, practicing and performing, as we go about our business here. To begin, I would remind all of us, once again, that a defining characteristic of the aims of liberal education at Lawrence, in both college and conservatory, is to place the individual student at the center of the enterprise. Indeed, our purpose, in the end, is to provide opportunities for each individual student to come to understand and value his or her standing as an individual.

But in seeking to achieve that goal, we must also appreciate the structural and even intentional difficulties we face and create, as teachers and learners, in doing so. As I have said before, a great danger faced by students in pursuing an education is that they can become captivated, even mesmerized, by the construct, the routine, and the rhythm of courses, and laboratories, and rehearsals, and assignments, and papers, and recitals, and examinations. These moments and aspects of learning can easily slip into becoming hurdles or obstacles to be cleared or overcome, so that getting from one minute to the next intellectually is viewed merely as passing (in both senses of the term) the expectations of this or that assignment and course. A syllabus is a wonderful thing, and almost all courses will have one, but the downside of the syllabus is that it can lead to the sense that learning is merely packaged and presented in a particular format for a particular course. Read these books, do these experiments, write these papers, take these examinations, and the deed is done. When one has successfully navigated 36 (or more) such courses, one might presume to have achieved an education.

This kind of attitude can easily collapse into consumerism of a somewhat different sort, and here's where Walker Percy enters the picture. Percy was not only an accomplished American writer—his novel *The Moviegoer* won the National Book Award in 1962—but also wrote essays about language, meaning, and existence for relatively little-known magazines and journals. In the introductory essay to his book *The Message in the Bottle*, a collection of these articles, Percy asks a series of questions, which stretch over several pages. Three of them relate to what I'd like us to consider this morning:

1. “Why is it harder to study a dogfish on a dissecting board in a zoological laboratory in college where one has proper instruments and a proper light than it would be if one were marooned on an island and, having come upon a dogfish on the beach and having no better instrument than a pocketknife or bobby pin, one began to explore the dogfish?”

2. “Why is it all but impossible to read Shakespeare in school now but will not be fifty years from now when the Western world has fallen into ruins and a survivor sitting among the vines of the Forty-Second Street Library spies a moldering book and opens it to *The Tempest*?”

3. “Why is it difficult to see a painting in a museum but not if someone should take you by the hand and say, ‘I have something to show you in my house,’ and lead you through a passageway and upstairs into the attic and there show the painting to you?”

Percy’s answers to these questions are complex, informed as they are by philosophy, psychology, and linguistics, and while I may offer a rather simple-minded rendition, I hope I can apply his arguments to my purposes. His basic point in terms of his three questions is predicated on the notion that much of what we experience comes to us trammelled by what he calls a “performed symbolic complex.” That is, admittedly, a fancy phrase, but by it Percy means that in the modern world, experts—whom he also refers to as planners, theorists, and educators—“present the experience to the consumer” so that we confront a thing—an object, an idea, a place, a text—mediated by what these experts have already determined it to be or mean.

Percy illustrates this notion thusly: Garcia Lopez de Cardenas discovered the Grand Canyon and was amazed at the sight. He traveled across miles of desert and suddenly there it was, at his feet. Centuries later, the government designates the Grand Canyon as a national park, and millions of sightseers come to see this geological marvel. But do they see the Grand Canyon as Cardenas did? Percy argues they do not, that they see a thing already formulated for them—by picture postcards, geography books, tourist folders, indeed by the very name *Grand Canyon*. Instead of seeing and understanding the place afresh, the tourist’s experience is dictated by his or her wish to have the place conform to the prior and prevailing understanding of it. “Why it is every bit as pretty as a picture postcard!” the tourist might exclaim. In short, the tourist wants the Grand Canyon to look like the Grand Canyon.

And Percy concludes: “The highest point, the term of the sightseer’s satisfaction, is not the sovereign discovery of the thing before him; it is rather the measuring up of the thing to the criterion of the performed symbolic complex.” The sightseer who seeks to experience such sovereign discovery might, Percy argues, leave the beaten track, wander off away from the official viewing vistas to find a new and private place from which to see the canyon, a strategy that would be immediately frustrated if the National Park Service posted notices saying “*Consult ranger for information on getting off the beaten track.*” Then we’re right back where we started.

Percy then carries this concept to a consideration of what we typically think of as education, and here we get to dogfish and sonnets. He writes: “A young Falkland Islander walking along a beach and spying a dead dogfish and going to work on it with his jackknife has, in a fashion wholly unprovided in modern educational theory, a great advantage over the pupil who find the dogfish on his laboratory desk. Similarly the citizen of Huxley’s *Brave New World* who stumbles across a volume of Shakespeare in some vine-grown ruins and squats on a potsherd to read it is in a fairer way of getting at a sonnet than the sophomore taking English Poetry II.”

Why? Percy's answer comes down to a fundamental difference in the student's placement in the world: in the first instance, the individual is a sovereign entity confronting a thing directly, while in the second instance, the individual comes upon the thing in an educational package. The pupil "sees himself placed as a consumer receiving an experience-package; but the Falkland Islander exploring his dogfish is a person exercising the sovereign right of a person in his lordship and mastery of creation." For the pupil, Percy argues, "the modern laboratory could not have been more effectively designed to conceal the dogfish forever." The student enters the lab and finds a manual, a dissecting board, and a list:

Exercise 22

Materials: 1 dissecting board

1 scalpel

1 forceps

1 probe

1 bottle India ink and syringe

1 specimen of *Squalus acanthias*

The clue to the problem lies in the last item on the list: 1 specimen of *Squalus acanthias*. "The phrase, *specimen of*, example of, instance of" devalues the object in question, in this case the individual dogfish, leaving it "disposed of by theory" so that the student never sees or discovers or wonders about the thing itself.

So too the sonnet. Presented in a textbook, an anthology, or a handout, read in a classroom, illuminated by professorial and scholarly explanations and exegeses, the poem is obscured by the various media through which it is transmitted. Percy makes similar observations about seeing a painting in a curated exhibit, noting that the individual will need "to enter into a struggle to recover a sight from a museum."

I suspect that these experiences ring true for all of us, and I certainly claim no exemption from the situations Percy describes. I too have been to the Grand Canyon, awakened to watch the sunrise at a particular lookout, and, like Percy's tourist, taken a photograph of the sight. The image of the Grand Canyon was first in my mind and then in my photograph album, but did I see the Grand Canyon? Like you, I wander the Lawrence campus, and find signs giving the names of various trees, but I don't really see the tree as tree. Or I read a book review before I read the book. Or, heaven forbid, I read Cliff's Notes. Or I sit in the Chapel, as I did some years ago, and hear a member of a string quartet tell me that the music about to be performed is amusing, and instead of listening to the piece on my own terms, I sit waiting to be amused. Or I take the audio tour of the Monet Exhibit and listen to some expert tell me what I'm seeing and what art historians have determined to be its import. During the summer after my junior year in college, I had the opportunity to travel Europe, and at the Louvre saw three women pass by the "Mona Lisa," hardly breaking stride, but simply confirming to one another that, yes indeed, that was the "Mona Lisa" all right, just like it was supposed to look.

Percy invokes a number of strategies to combat this situation, though he acknowledges that most of them are not pedagogically feasible. Hence he proposes the following education technique—which is probably not feasible either—namely "that English poetry and biology should be taught as usual, but that at irregular intervals, poetry students should find dogfishes on their desks and biology students should find Shakespeare sonnets on their dissecting boards. I

am serious in declaring,” Percy goes on, that an “English major who began poking about in a dogfish with a bobby pin would learn more in thirty minutes than a biology major in a whole semester; and that the latter upon reading on her dissecting board

That time of year Thou may’st in me behold
When yellow leaves, or none, or few, do hang
Upon those boughs which shake against the cold—
Bare ruin’d choirs where late the sweet birds sang.
might catch fire at the beauty of it.”

I want to assure students majoring in and faculty teaching in English and biology that I am not about to propose adoption of Percy’s scheme. But I do think that all of us, as we enter a new year of teaching and learning, can derive some valuable lessons from it. What Percy is arguing for in part, at least, is that we take serious action to overcome the predicament of modern technical society, in which the division between expert and layman, planner and consumer—including as well, perhaps, between teacher and student—is such that experts and planners and teachers inform us and hence control our experiences and our understanding of them, indeed, he might allege, in some ways deny us our experiences.

One way in which we can overcome is to be open to, indeed to seek out and relish, new experiences and private moments where we seek to assert our own fresh confrontation with and appreciation of objects, and places, and texts, and ideas. Some of this behavior will be in some sense contrived, I recognize. To attend a performance by the symphony or choir or any other ensemble is a deliberate act, but it can be a liberating act if attending such a performance is precisely the thing you are least likely to do. To read a book not assigned in a class, privately and for your own sake—not for the extrinsic sake of having something profound to say in class—is to break through the so-called “educational package” and to put oneself, albeit modestly, perhaps, in the place of the citizen of Huxley’s *Brave New World*. No one may take you by the hand and invite you to look at a picture in the attic, but you can go to the art center and look, look, at a painting or print *before* reading its inscription or the gallery notes about it.

Harold Taylor, who argued that education is achieved by indirect means, like “a book picked up in someone’s room,” put it this way: “There is only one way to read a book, to give yourself up to it, alone, without instruction as to what you should be finding in it, without the necessity of making it into a series of points, but enjoying it, coming to know in personal terms what is in the mind of the writer.” That sounds like learning is serendipitous, and while it is not in all cases—or Lawrence would have little reason to exist—I suggest that each of us deliberately behave as if it is so at least some of the time, and put ourselves in the way of serendipity. We need to be open to the chance encounter.

I realize that no college, at least no college of my imagining, can conduct its educational purposes on Percy’s basis. We do not, after all, simply leave things—books, objects, paintings—lying about for students to stumble upon, though I suppose one could see the library as performing something of that function. Faculty will, after all, teach, and there will be more than a few occasions when that teaching will indeed convey theories and explanations and interpretations that have come to be accepted in their respective fields. Carbon and hydrogen do not combine to form oak. There is, of course and necessarily, an “educational package” at

Lawrence, and it would be fruitless and silly to pretend otherwise. But one of the aims of the educational package should be for the student to transcend it, rather than merely to consume it. Dudley Bahlman, one of my college professors, had another take on this notion. He once remarked that “the best curriculum is the one that interferes least with the student’s education.” So one aim of education is to get beyond the curriculum, to be surprised by a thing discovered and confronted on one’s own.

We need to give greater prominence and attention, as teachers and learners, to the ways in which we already seek to realize that aim. In Freshman Studies, students read works in their entirety, not excerpted selections or second-hand versions of them. And while faculty lecture on these works, students are nonetheless encouraged to confront them directly. Indeed, faculty themselves model this behavior by confronting works outside their disciplines and beyond their expertise and thus they too engage such texts afresh and directly as well. A comparable strategy is one increasingly employed by faculty in the sciences—to have students learn science by doing it, by conducting experiments that are not cook-booked for them, in permitting students to make false starts and mistakes. This approach too moves in some measure toward giving the student a sense of discovery, accomplishment, independence, and perhaps mastery. Perhaps the chief example of the effort to enable students to transcend the educational package is found in tutorials, independent studies, and research projects, all of which both encourage and demand that students take greater responsibility for what might be called unmediated learning.

If students should seek to extricate themselves from the “educational package” as a means to develop more fully their own individual confrontation with and understanding of things—dogfish, sonnets, paintings, whatever—teachers can play a useful role in promoting such independence. One thing the professor can do is to avoid what Paolo Freire calls “the banking concept of education,” in which the teacher “makes deposits [of information] which the students patiently receive, memorize and repeat.” That approach, Freire argues, turns students “into ‘containers,’ into ‘receptacles’ to be ‘filled’ by the teacher. The more completely he fills the receptacles, the better teacher he is. The more meekly the receptacles permit themselves to be filled, the better students they are.” This way of teaching prevents the student from becoming truly human. “Knowledge emerges,” Freire writes, “only through invention and reinvention, through the restless, impatient, continuing, hopeful inquiry men [and women] pursue in the world, with the world, and with each other.”

Another variation on this theme is to say further that the a key obligation of the faculty member is not to create disciples, not to teach and mentor in such a way as to try to make one’s students clones of oneself. Rather, as former Lawrence president Nathan Pusey posited, “The teacher’s task is not to implant facts but to place the subject to be learned in front of the learner and, through sympathy, emotion, imagination, and patience, to awaken in the learner the restless drive for answers and insights which enlarge the personal life and give it meaning.” We must find and perform ways, by subterfuge if need be, to enable students to read the *Iliad* and have themselves revealed to themselves, to help them read books, as T.S. Eliot put it, so that they experience “that intense excitement and sense of enlargement and liberation which comes from a discovery which is also a discovery of oneself.”

Former Yale president Whitney Griswold once said that his ambition was to have a Socrates in every classroom, and that's not a bad way to think about this issue. Again, and finally, Walker Percy: "The highest role of the educator," he wrote, "is the maieutic role of Socrates: to help the student come to himself not as a consumer of experience but as a sovereign individual." Faculty should embrace that role, and students should struggle—for it is a struggle—to achieve that sovereignty. We frequently profess—perhaps too glibly at times—that the purpose of liberal education is for the student to learn how to learn, to develop those intellectual skills that will promote lifelong learning. What does that mean? It certainly should not mean that the purpose of liberal education is to condition the student to remain a consumer of educational packages, to remain, in Freire's terms, a depository of the teacher's instruction. It surely cannot mean that the student becomes a perpetual layman, who can do no other than—who in fact wishes to do no other than—listen to what the experts and planners and theorists have to say and to behave and think accordingly.

What we *do* mean is that students should work steadily and persistently to achieve an independent mind and that faculty should encourage and promote such independence. So I encourage you to seek sovereignty. Do not accept the notion that the role of consumer is the highest estate to which you can aspire. Spend time this year and beyond looking for dogfish and sonnets. Lawrence will have served you well if and as you discover and confront them.