

**THE LIBERAL ARTS:  
To Lead out of the Darkness, To Equip Citizens for Success in the  
Circumstances of Their Times**

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On the occasion of the Sesquicentennial Celebration of Catawba College

President Corriher, Members of the Board of Trustees, distinguished members of the faculty and staff, and the energetic, inquisitive, wonderful members of the student body here today, thank you for the warm welcome back to Catawba College. What a proud occasion for celebration!

I note for you that this alumna has been affiliated with some seven national institutions of higher education since my tenure as a Catawba student. Some of these institutions bear the most prestigious names in our country, but I say with the authority of experience, none can diminish or thoroughly overshadow the quality and the culmination of 150 years of educational achievement that I found here at Catawba College.

For me, this is life's highest honor - to return to the place that was a particular destination in my "life journey", and view it from the perspective of that journey 35 years hence. "...to arrive where we started and know the place for the first time (*T.S. Eliot*)."

I stand before you as a product of the transformative experience offered by Catawba College – a liberal arts education deeply rooted in values that bring a unique clarity to academic rigor, values that allow us to take our learning not only to head, but also to heart.

I am here to say "thank you," to say thank you by painting just one illustration – that of my own journey – from the thousands that are intricately woven into the tapestry of Catawba's history. When viewed as a collective whole, these paintings – these "peoplescapes" – of faculty and students, alumni, and administration, friends, parents and a host of others, fill the frame, and tell a profound story of a belief in higher education as a necessity for social and human progress. It was a Catawba experience that assured us we would realize the unique potential of body, mind and spirit that is the heart of the liberal arts tradition.

"Education" itself, as many in this illustrious audience will already know, comes from the root word in the Latin - "educare." It's strict meaning: "*to lead out of the darkness.*" To

lead a learner to new understandings...to journey to a new plane of experience....to shine a light on dark corners of ignorance.

I believe God at root is an educator. You will well remember: *In the beginning, darkness was upon the face of the earth and God said: let there be light. And there was light. And, God saw the light and it was good.* New understandings, the formation of new questions, experiences that are profound teachers in their own right, the summation of what we once found unthinkable – unreachable – now deemed a common part of our being...of who we are – this is the good light of a good education.

Make an imaginary circle in your mind of everything there is to know in the universe. Mark off in that circle a portion that represents what you know. Now, shade-in that part that you know you don't know. Do you have something left? Did you remember to leave untouched – but clearly considered – that part of the universe that you don't know you don't know?

Let me submit to you that a formal education sets up the individual for the life time process of “shining light” into those areas you know you don't know – and occasionally, if you are lucky, into those areas that you don't know you don't know. Here is where the individual learns not *what* to think, but *how* to think. It is the process of not just asking questions...it is about identifying the right questions.

In the 5<sup>th</sup> Century BC – yes, I said before Christ – the Sophists said: “A liberal education is the process that produces citizens equipped to succeed in the circumstances of their society.” Interesting pragmatism, isn't it? Circumstances change. What society knows as the collective changes. At the beginning of the day, an institution of higher education is simply about the imparting of knowledge. But at the end of the day, it must also be about the inspiration of the individual to use the knowledge in the ever-changing environment...inspiring, if not creating, a transformation...an empowerment of the human spirit.

From the 5<sup>th</sup> Century educators, to those founding Catawba, let's compare. It is 1851: thirty-two men (of course they were all men and most were preparing to be ministers) arrived at Catawba. They already “knew what they knew,” but they would be challenged to add more...to view Latin, Greek or Biblical Studies as an enlightenment of ideas never before considered. Catawba was to liberate them from parochialism and prepare them for the circumstances of their time.

In 1851, there couldn't have been two more critical issues that demanded “citizens equipped to succeed in the circumstances of their society” than those that dominated the social and political landscape: slavery and the country's westward expansion. In 1851, the first serial installments of *Uncle Tom's Cabin* were written. Believe it or not however, both prohibition and women's rights were in the national debate, but only in a few places “up north”.

These were the ultimate inflammatory, consuming issues, tearing at the spiritual and social fabric of society. If education was indeed to be a “coming out of the darkness,” a journey of ideas that liberate, empower and transform the learner to use knowledge well, this was THE time for informed men of God to lead the citizenry, to “succeed in the circumstances of their society.”

Now, turn the page. It is 1890. Catawba admitted its first female student that year, well ahead of the curve. Ahead of the curve perhaps because the enlightenment at the root of the liberal arts would not sustain the absence of feminine perspective and the opportunity for inclusion. If the liberal arts are to liberate from ignorance, then the participation of the feminine voice had to be present to strengthen and broaden the discourse.

I followed those first female students some seventy years later, matriculating at Catawba in 1962. Surely I was as much in my own “darkness” as those thirty-two men in 1851, but certainly was to benefit from the decades of female students who preceded me and were now definitively a part of the College’s heritage.

Catawba in the 1960’s was a societal “learning environment” of the kind not seen, perhaps, since the early days of the College. The Civil War was 100 years old but Civil Rights remained the dominant issue. Women voted, but not so African American citizens. We were deep in the Cold War, and we were making nuclear weapons as fast as we could. These were the circumstances of my society that I would need to understand in order to be “equipped to succeed,” to be liberated from the darkness of what I didn’t know I didn’t know.

In the fall of my freshman year, President John Kennedy stood down Nikita Khrushchev over nuclear missiles in Cuba. My classmates and I were afraid and talked of nothing else. In the fall of my sophomore year, on my 19th birthday, my idealism was shattered by the assassination of that same President. The March on Selma, Alabama occurred during my junior year, and it to this day brings more questions than answers to my mind.

The chaos of those days, and the power and provocative nature of the questions at hand, in many ways were not new. But they demanded examination...they consumed attention. The rising elements of fear and distrust exacerbated a pursuit for “truth”...the need to be “led out of the darkness” was paramount.

My saving grace, my assurance that values and ideas, and the potential of the human spirit would win at the end of the day, was found in professors of extraordinary gifts who stayed the course, and accepted the challenge to lead a new learner to an understanding of his or her own making.

Thank you faculty for liberating me: Mr. Gibbons for teaching me to think using differential equations. Ms. Scranton for grounding me in the great history of western civilization. Dr. Jenkins for awakening my spirit to literature and the complexities of Tess of the D’urbervilles. Dr. Powers for launching my continuing love affair with geology. Dr. West for liberating me from the chains of superstition associated with

restrictive patterns of religious tradition. The professorial names are different in 2001--- but what you as faculty do has not changed...you guide by mentoring; you raise questions and issues; you don't "explain" your vision, you invite your students to stand with you and discover for themselves.

Much has changed at Catawba since 1962. Allow me to tease the student body with just a few notes on the differences:

We used slide rules to do calculations. A few airplanes were jets, but no one in my acquaintance had ever ridden in one. McDonald's hamburgers were 10 cents and home-grown North Carolina cigarettes were a penny a piece. Don't ask me how I know that! The first airplane I was on in 1963 handed out four-packs of cigarettes as you boarded. Prohibition had come and gone; it was certainly gone in Claremont Hall where I lived! As Catawba women, we had curfews in the residence halls as a way to control the guys – 10:30 on weeknights; midnight on weekends. The college cafeteria where I ate every day served nothing but carbohydrates, many of which I carry around with me today. We went to Chapel on Wednesday and were inspired by the same pastor who, on Saturday, belted "Give 'em hell, Catawba!"

There is some kind of gratifying comfort in the quaint view of the "past." We are speeding into an uncertain future at a rate of change never before experienced by our society – with a demand for social progress that commands that we meet problems head-on or lose the competitive battles. Robert F. Kennedy said, "Progress is a nice word, but change is its motivator and change has its enemies."

Was I prepared for the changes to come after Catawba? It has proven to be quite a time. Some of my classmates died in the Vietnam War. Martin Luther King was killed; Bobby Kennedy was killed. The PC and Internet were introduced and have systemically changed the communications landscape. The human genome was mapped and we have begun the ethical debate not just of *what* man can create, but how *far* he can go with his creations. The Berlin Wall disappeared and with it, the "enemy" of my youth, the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics. People received new hearts from other people. Babies are now conceived without sex. The contemporary arts have exploded in a renaissance of painting, sculpture, and performance.

Did we know what was coming? Of course not. Do you know what is coming. Of course not. Was I equipped for the circumstances of my time? Most of the time – and when I wasn't, (and here is the lesson) it was because I failed to remember the lessons from my studies of Shakespeare at Catawba and instead fell into self-righteousness. *King Lear*, for example: in the play's opening scenes, King Lear is convinced of the rightness of his method to divide the kingdom, and all goes horribly wrong. Lear can't admit his error, can't comprehend another view, and keeps compounding the disaster to the overwhelming tragic conclusion of the story. He shows great self-pride, coupled with the foolish and impetuous behavior of not listening – and he loses all.

Humbling isn't it? That part of the pie that I don't know I don't know is very large: I sometimes wonder if I ever truly learned that lesson.

So, today is 2001. The fiction is *Harry Potter*. Carbohydrates have fallen out of favor. The Cold War has come and gone. We are decommissioning those same nuclear weapons of my Catawba years. Smoking is banned on airplanes. And, four of those jets are hijacked by terrorists and used as a new kind of weapon to destroy symbols of America's power, and thousands of innocent people. The tragedy of John Kennedy and Catawba are forever linked for me. The tragedy of September 11, 2001 and Catawba will be forever linked for you as students.

So, what we now take for granted was once inconceivable, even in our lifetimes. What is coming next as we chip away at that enormous circle of "all there is to know"? We have only an inkling: babies without sex are nothing compared with the issues surrounding human cloning. Yesterday's New York Times magazine had an article titled "2011; ten years from now, historians will look back and see the events of Sep 11 as mere ripples in a tidal wave of terrorism and political fragmentation" We only know there remains a vast space of knowledge that we don't know we don't know.

So what are we to do: Stay focused in two ways:

First, remember the lesson of King Lear. We are among the privileged – well prepared in the liberal arts to question, to analyze and review, to know there is more to know. Let's remember to start with ourselves.

We are on a new road to a future of unending questions and powerful change forces. But we know the guides, for they are forged in the best traditions of education and have been proven here for 150 years. We must listen—really listen—to each other. To the voices raised in anger today, to those who we have not heard speak before, to those who say they are lost.

We must shine the light on the truth – on the flaws in ourselves and in our institutions. It is deemed acceptable to go first to those persons and institutions in other countries, for the fault of their "foreignness" is what rings somehow as the problem. I challenge you, however. Is the self righteousness of some of the muslim world, as manifest in its treatment of women, worse than our own as we consume energy and contribute to global warming in quantities far beyond our share of the world's population. Probably, but I am not so sure.

As those privileged with a formal education, we must shine a light on these questions and have the debate. Our liberal arts education is the pivotal force that can coalesce to understanding the global social, religious, economic and cultural differences that threaten our future today.

Secondly, keep working to educate everyone, everywhere. H. G. Wells said to us: "Human history becomes more and more a race between education and catastrophe."

That distinction stared us right in the face as we watched live the collapse of the World Trade Center, knowing that at least 5,000 people were inside.

When humankind acts on fear, humanity's distinction from the animal kind begins to blur, too. Our capacity to be different from the animals is not defined by walking erect or even our ability to think. That distinction comes because we can USE our ability to think to resist behaving like a beast – to THINK to resist behaving like a beast. We do that through education.

The greatest tribute we can pay to those who in recent months lost their lives to such capricious violence is to redouble our efforts to eradicate the ignorance that creates fear, that disables our peace. At this liberal arts college, at my public research university in Kansas City, we must teach, we must learn, we must serve, we must question in the most appropriate of ways, we must create. We must do everything we can to take each and every one of us far away from the darkness that misguided such malevolent individuals to engage in the awful acts that have left us with such a sense of loss and remorse. It has never been more important.

Thank you Catawba – faculty, trustees, supporters – for preparing me; for grounding me in the philosophers, the history, the music, the theater, the science, and the literature; for challenging me to keep after my own ignorance and set an example through my own leadership as a continuing legacy for this institution.

I join you in rededicating myself to the liberal arts tradition: to learn through discovery; to guide by mentoring, to ask questions, and raise issues, not to espouse dogma. To listen, always listen. Education is "winning the race." It's up to us to keep it that way.

Thank you for the great honor of sharing this occasion and this great college with you.