

When CDA opened its doors ten years ago, Jonathan Rogers was among the first 57 students, entering then Flower Mound Classical Christian School as an eighth grader. Prior to that he had been home schooled. Jonathan played varsity soccer as well as baseball for Coram Deo and had a great passion for debating history and theology. Co-salutatorian of the CDA class of 2004, he also received the Distinguished Student and *Artes Elegantes* awards.

Jonathan's great interest in military and intellectual history led him to pursue that discipline in his undergraduate studies at the University of Dallas. His senior thesis focused on the institutional theory of early Byzantine operational doctrine. After graduating with honors from UD in 2008, he interned at the National Right to Life headquarters in Washington, DC. He is currently the Field Coordinator for NRL where he assists with the development and support of regional pro-life chapters. Jonathan intends to begin graduate studies at the Institute for World Politics in Washington when his NRL travel schedule permits.

Coram Deo Academy Commencement Address

May 15, 2009

Greetings to you all today. To the faculty and staff—many of whom I remember from my own days as a student, to the parents and families, for whom this day is as much for you as it is the graduates, and to the graduates themselves. I will slightly abuse my short hold upon the podium to acknowledge my own sister, Marian, who sits among the select group preparing to walk across this stage soon. To all of you, teachers, parents, students, you have come far to reach this day, and as my own small contribution to honor your achievement, I would like to consider briefly, just how far you have come, and perhaps how far you have yet to go.

I should deliver at least some of the bad news first. Of the reaction you will receive in the outside world, two things are reasonably certain. One, people will ask you numerous times in the coming years where you went to school, followed by, "Wait, you didn't have classes five days a week?" The annoying thing is that they just won't understand why it's not as awesome as it sounds. Also and more ominously, you will likely encounter a prevailing attitude of incomprehension and incredulity that you have intensely devoted much time and effort to, in the Berkeley vernacular, the words of a "bunch of dead white guys." On the other hand, I am happy to report to you that the myth of the starving liberal arts student struggling in noble poverty isn't, entirely, true.

The completion of any prolonged endeavor can be accompanied with both triumph, and not a little trepidation. I remember my own graduation from this institution. And while elated with what I had accomplished and knowing where I would go next, there was a lingering uncertainty and sense of loneliness. After all, I had been at Coram Deo Academy for five years; it had, in a very real sense, defined most my life for that time. As one of my teachers once remarked, graduation is a little like finding yourself instantly unemployed. To have been inculcated in an environment of intimate contact with some of the greatest minds in history can leave you sitting atop over three thousand years of human achievement and feeling entirely inadequate for the challenges of adulthood ahead when you realize that you are most decidedly not a match for Aristotle, Dante, or Adam Smith.

Now this sense of unease may not manifest itself in you the same way it did in me. I rationalized it within a long string of causation which I suddenly found broken. Instead of this psychological defense mechanism, you might simply put it in the common sense terms that you are leaving that which with you have been familiar and intimate.

Your friends, family, the environment which you have called home for so long is now, suddenly and perhaps without your consent, pulled out from under you. I suspect that you could do with a bit of hope, and I'm going to do my best to give you a little by the time I'm finished.

I could recite the list of practical benefits that you have received at Coram Deo Academy. But I suspect that you've already heard it. Yes, you will be comparatively good writers; you will have been trained not so much what to think but how to think; and this will help you, as it helped me, grapple with the new challenges you will face in the years ahead. But the practical consequences of your education here are only side benefits, and were I to focus on them exclusively I would be doing a disservice to your teachers, parents, and the great thinkers who have gone before you.

This question could be approached from any number of ways, and these thoughts could be just as meaningful coming from a proper chemist, philosopher, biologist, or philologist. I myself have always been partial to the field of history, so to all of you who ever considered the subject boring or pointless, I am here to exact my revenge.

I would like to begin with Helen of Troy. I am not omitting Moses and the Old Testament; I would simply like to bring them in a little later. As a starting point, Helen's tale has all the elements of a good story: war, love, heroism, tragedy, family. That her face launched a thousand ships is well known. That her face also set the pen in motion is less immediately evident. After all, Helen's tale was first remembered by bards, not recorded by scribes. But over many centuries her story, along with that of a crafty traveler's long search to find his home and Penelope once more, became formative myths for the people of Ancient Greece. As time progressed and the arts improved, they were written down and beside them a human faculty previously undiscovered sprung to life, different from the everyday crafts of fishing, farming, or pottery making.

You students gathered here may well look askance if I tell you that the Greeks embarked upon learning for fun, but they did. The Greek word "schola" from which we get our modern equivalent, served to describe both a place of learning and a pastime to be enjoyed. Aristotle noted that humans innately enjoy a challenge; we like to figure things out. And if it is something we naturally enjoy, there must be good in it and it must be good for us. Why else would Plato ponder a set of forms that were effectively worthless if considered as mere means to a needed end such as bread on the table? The form of bread may be more "real" than its physical reflection, but you can't eat a form.

We have here a notion of ends, purpose in human existence, which help define all human action. The Greeks were the first people to systematically make inquiries of the world around them and they posited that it was part of what Aristotle called man's "final causality," the purpose for which he was created. It was his arresting notion that man's true nature, and by extension his happiness, lay chiefly in pursuing wisdom. Wisdom was to be found at the end of any endeavor when an understanding of the true nature of the craft had been discovered. For example, to take a definition of Aristotle's, "Rhetoric is the faculty of knowing, in every particular case, what are the available means of persuasion." The craft of Rhetoric is not *acting* persuasively; it is knowing what *is* persuasive. This notion was so strong that, when Alexander the Great marched off

and conquered the world, his former tutor wrote him off as a failure for not staying home and becoming a philosopher. This was an esoteric, almost ethereal view of learning, but when wedded with earthy Roman virtue and civic conduct, you are starting to get something that we here today might recognize.

Of course in time the ancient world fell, and with its fall, the collected body of Ancient wisdom found itself in grave danger of eradication. Time and again the historians tell us of pillaging barbarians throwing books to the fire for no other reason than to revel in their own love of destruction. But a new force is at work. When the light and love of learning grew dim in the West, a peculiar group of Christian monks fled to Ireland and set themselves at work copying and preserving everything they could get their hands on.

If you pause to think about it for a moment, this seems like a rather silly thing to do. While the rest of the world is falling apart around you and for most people the immediate task at hand is finding food and staying alive, the last thing you ought to be thinking about are the words of dead pagans. Yet we find that in every location where the stubborn version of the ancient nerd refused to focus only on the practical things in life, human society far outstripped its neighbors. Charlemagne at least did his best to read and write, and his court developed a reputation for both the greatest warriors and the greatest scholars in Western Europe. Alfred the Great seemed to think that translating Boethius was just as important as praying day and night while keeping Wessex alive and the Northman out. And far to the East, the imperial successors to Rome now under the golden domes of Constantinople, upheld the scholastic arts just as they held the Saracen invader at bay. As Medieval Europe took shape, so too did education.

And what, has it come to mean, today? Cardinal John Henry Newman offers an exquisite metaphor. Imagine a stained glass window. Each colored pane of glass is individually beautiful and part of the larger whole. Consider each individual pane as representing a field or discipline of study: biology, literature, chemistry, physics, philosophy, language, all those and more are present. As we become knowledgeable in one area, the windowpane becomes clearer. But as our proficiency deepens, we realize that there is an underlying relationship between each field of study. If you want to understand physics, you must ultimately learn metaphysics. If you want to study Dante the poet, you also will have to know 13th century Florence. We find that you cannot truly understand any one field of knowledge without also knowing something of several other overlapping disciplines. As you come to learn more about each discipline, each pane of glass, the larger picture begins to reveal itself. Eventually, you discover that the stained glass window is a picture of reality itself, the entire created order. In the multiplicity of truths revealed in every window pane, a single, universal truth is revealed. In the Latin, *uni veritas*. A university. One Truth.

The liberal arts are sometimes described as a pursuit of knowledge “for the sake of knowledge,” but this is only partly true. To know or learn something is, of course, intrinsically good. But it is good because it is part of the world and helps us see the world in its entirety, the whole of the stained glass window. And it is in this half truth, that modern education has, quite literally, gone to pieces.

Think of the Enlightenment. Along with the *philosophes* of the French salon and their faith in runaway rationalism and the perfectibility of man, we see a curious new kind of book. Diderot was most famous for it, producing the first encyclopedia. Encyclopedias certainly have their usefulness as a repository of information and a resource for consultation, but a curious passion arose amongst some 18th and 19th century thinkers, in all seriousness, to memorize the encyclopedia. There is a profound danger here of missing the forest for the trees, when you begin to consider the acquisition of facts (as if the mind were a computer hard drive) as an end in and of itself, without thought to the ultimate meaning behind, underlying (the thing *standing under* or in Latin, *substantio*) the facts. As that most profound of men—both in terms of insight and rotundity—G.K. Chesterton noted, “the poet seeks to get his head into the heavens. The logician seeks to get the heavens into his head, and it is his head that splits.”

The attempt to fully map out every scrap and fact of the universe is ultimately an exercise in hubris, and the project will fall apart, the stain glass window will fracture and you are left with shattered pieces. We see the broken remnants today. The synthesis has broken in two directions. One, an unrestrained push for ever more specialization and compartmentalization of knowledge. It is not uncommon to find learned men in academia today who are masters of such miniscule subjects as DNA in cancerous mice, or Jewish Ukrainian poetry amongst 19th century women. When hope for underlying meaning in education fades before the compartmentalization of knowledge, it is only natural that education will seek another justification, and what we have today is a curious backlash, an idea of education as a primarily pragmatic thing, the second half of the split.

The overruling conception of most students in colleges across the country is that their schooling is principally a ticket to a diploma, which itself the necessary requirement for a good job. I cannot seriously fault them for this; material stability is a thing not to be disparaged lightly. The idea that attempting to order the mind through the liberal arts is connected very much to man’s intrinsic nature and final happiness is, for the most part, completely foreign in modern society.

Can this problem be fixed? Is there an effective antidote? I know I promised a bit of hope for you and you’re probably wondering where it is. I suppose we could collectively lobby to have Mrs. Marshall put in charge of curriculum development in the Department of Education, but at best that might help your younger siblings and not you graduates. You are about to have adulthood thrust upon you whether you like it or not, and while I think you have been given some of the best schooling available today, I will be very blunt when I say that you are going to be unprepared for the challenges ahead, because by their very nature they are new to you. But I really am going to try to get to that hope theme.

I deliberately started my narrative with Helen of Troy. The important thing to remember about Helen and Odysseus is the tragedy associated with them. Helen is taken back to Menelaus and Troy is razed to the ground. Odysseus returns home, but never loses his restlessness. At root, these two great epics are a commentary on the human condition and our continual failure to achieve contentment and that exact final causality in man’s nature that they Greeks also discovered. Hovering over the ancient Greeks, they were a powerful reminder of the fallen state of man, visible in the tragedies of Aeschylus and Sophocles. The resolution of the conflict is not particularly joyful, but it is just. When a Roman general paraded in triumph, a slave stood in his chariot

whispering “remember that thou art mortal.” Unlike our modern intellectuals, ancient pagans tended to understand their own frailties, and Socrates was counted the wisest man alive precisely because he knew his own limitations. But I doubt we are all stoic pagans. If we are to reconstruct Cardinal Newman’s stained glass window, we might take a step back and look at our surroundings. For where do you find stained glass windows? In Churches.

I suspect that it is not an accident that our word *Trivium* seems oddly familiar next to the *Trinity*. Grammar is the foundational building block of language and learning, as God the Father is the author and orderer of the Universe. The Gospel of John says that the Son really is the *logos*, the written and spoken word. And as the formal rules of logic teach us to make connections between seemingly disconnected bits of reality, so too does the incarnation demonstrate, it proves, the connection between man and his creator. As Rhetoric teaches us that in order to persuade someone you must fully understand him and his position—that you must acquire empathy—we might very well say that the Holy Spirit is the Rhetorician of the universe, eternally persuading with grace. The pursuit of the liberal arts and its quest to construct a well ordered mind is the attempt to perceive reality as a reflection of God, as it truly is, as God sees it. This requires that we see ourselves as God sees us, and that we remain painfully aware that our own lack of perfection precludes perfection in any endeavor. It is inherent in the nature of man to want to know God as he has revealed himself, and if you are going to look at that stained glass window clearly, you’re going to need to know where you stand. In short, if you want that hope I promised, you’re going to have to be humble.

If you want to know exactly where you stand and how you ought to act, you might consider who put you here, and by that I mean your family. For a Roman, virtue was often rooted in family lineage, for it taught him where he had come from. The Greek *polis* was viewed as the ideal human society because the *polis* was itself a reflection of the family unit. It is you, the parents, who deserve the chief honor for raising these students, and you should not question whether you have done enough, or have erred along the way. You would not be here today unless you cared enough to go through Coram Deo Academy with these students, and that in itself is a dedication which speaks volumes. The family unit is what ties the individual into a particular location; it tells you where you stand in reality and provides the moral compass which will direct your actions. And though you are leaving behind everything you have held familiar, you are carrying with you the lessons you have been given. When a Greek colony was founded, fire was carried from the central hearth of the parent city to the new, to symbolize the connection between the two communities.

And so you are preparing to leave, something of an Odysseus yourself. And though you are leaving one community, you carry with you all the tools necessary to build a new one. You do not have to go out there and change the world. At first, you will likely find just getting by difficult enough. But do not despair. You will never have cause to despair. You are not being sundered from your foundation; your foundation goes with you. Trust in the tools you have been given, and remember that the happiest people you will ever meet will also be the most humble. Thank you, and I wish you the very best of luck.