

## **It's Your Call**

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Dean's Breakfast Address  
Graduation Weekend  
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Welcome Wabash men of the class of 2010 to the Dean's Breakfast on this the formal—and, for some no doubt, painfully early—start of your graduation weekend. I'm delighted to see you here along with many of the faculty and staff who have played an integral role in your life these past four years. Having faculty and staff around you to celebrate the occasion is as it should be. Your Wabash education is not something you could have navigated on your own, by your lonesome, as a solitary high plains drifter apart from classmates or wider community. The myth of rugged individualism, the story we Americans are nursed on from infancy to adulthood – namely that we succeed by the sweat of our individual brows; that we pull ourselves up by our own bootstraps – only discloses part of the reality. The fact is your success today is owing to a something more than you. I hope you will not soon forget that you have arrived at breakfast this morning through the labor and commitment of others: a parent, grandparent, scholarship donor, alumnus, high school guidance counselor, admissions counselor, coach, faculty member, fraternity brother, and those many unnamed persons who have worked behind the scenes tirelessly, day in and day out, to prepare your meals, repair your living units, clean your classrooms, remove your trash, shovel your snow, reimage your computers, order your course books, care for your health, and watch over your safety. You have these unnamed persons to thank as much as the faculty whom you have come to know on a first-name

basis. So, to that end, I'd like to invite the Bon Appetit staff to step out from behind the curtain and ask the graduating seniors to acknowledge Mary Joe, Keesha, and their outstanding staff, along with the Sodexo campus services staff, who have prepared for your meal today.

Thank you.

The Dean's breakfast for seniors on commencement weekend is, as you may know, a Wabash College tradition extending over many decades and deans. Deans Byron Trippet, Ben Rogge, Butch Shearer, Dick Traina, Vic Powell, Paul McKinney, Don Herring, Mauri Ditzler, and Raymond Williams before me have used this occasion to address seniors about something of importance to the liberal arts and to the Wabash men of their day. If I may, I wish to bend your ears for a few minutes this morning to consider what it means to be *called for* something, and, in particular, to reflect on the ways a Wabash Liberal Arts education has prepared you to be summoned to a vocation, which depends upon cultivating the art of careful listening.

The word *vocation* derives etymologically from the Latin word *vocare*, meaning “to call, summon, to invoke, to invite.” You find this Latin root in many common English words like *invite*, *invoke*, *advocacy*, *advocate*; *voice*, and other words that incorporate the stem *vox*, such as *evoke*, *evocative*, *provocation*, and *avocation*. Prior to the 16<sup>th</sup> century, Christians spoke in religious terms of vocation as God’s call, God’s voice, to the individual or the calling of humankind to salvation, more particularly to the vocation of

the priesthood. For protesters like Martin Luther and John Calvin, the divine voice could also be heard calling men and women to secular occupations, or to what today we might call ordinary jobs. From this latter perspective calling takes a range of forms with sacred vocation enjoying no pride of place over the secular job. While there are distinctions to be drawn between *vocation* and *job* – for example, the one boasts a Latin lineage, the other Middle English rootage – the two are far more connected than not. We would do well to avoid putting too much stock in privileging one kind of calling over another, to steer clear of the name calling about being called, to eschew drawing hard and fast lines between vocation and job, the sheep and the goats, the saved and the damned, the sacred and the secular.

You find a version of the sheep-versus-the-goats privileging in discussions about the role of liberal arts education in training students for jobs. Some prefer to count liberal arts education on the side of the angels by contrasting it sharply with forms of more worldly schooling, like the technical training you find in community colleges or nonliberal arts curricula where the unapologetic aim is to land people jobs. Liberal arts learning, this view insists, is essentially disinterested, nonutilitarian, the very antithesis of the professional job-oriented training that an ITT Technical Institute offers. I find this is an unhelpful dichotomy, not only because it privileges so-called impractical over practical work, but also because it obscures something fundamental about the historical origin and nature of liberal learning. Eighteenth and 19<sup>th</sup> century liberal arts colleges in America were the training grounds for young men to become teachers and preachers. Wabash College, for one, was founded explicitly to educate men to meet the practical

needs of the nation; that is to produce preachers and teachers, which explains why the College was incorporated in 1834 as the **Wabash Manual Labor College and Teacher's Seminary**. Very much practical job training, I would say.

After the teachers and the preachers came the doctors and lawyers, thanks to Charles Eliot, the entrepreneurial president of Harvard University, who was single-handedly responsible for establishing the liberal arts BA degree as an admissions prerequisite to Harvard's professional programs in the 1890s. He shrewdly engineered that move because in post-Civil War America, liberal arts colleges were losing educational market share in the rapidly expanding, and increasingly professionalized middle class. Long story short, liberal arts colleges became the preprofessional training grounds, the minor leagues as it were for the major league graduate, law, and medical schools. From the start the liberal arts were in the career-shaping, workforce-building, job-preparing business equipping graduates to make a living. Our Wabash career services office is dedicated to that end, but so too, we need to be reminded, are the Pre-health, Pre-Engineering, Pre-law, and Graduate Fellowships Committees.

If we admit that the liberal arts are in the everyday job preparation business that enables you to make a living, we also must ask is that the sum total of the mission? What distinguishes a Wabash College education over against that of the technical schools and conservatories? What justifies spending time and treasure pursuing a Wabash degree when you could land a job elsewhere and far more cheaply? – Are you aware that the credit hour cost at Ivy Tech is 1/8<sup>th</sup> that of Wabash? -- Is the principle difference that

instead of learning how to swap out a transmission or drop in a circuit board Wabash has trained you to parse verbs, decline nouns, or repair your split infinitives?

There is indeed something more, and it has to do with the way Wabash and other liberal arts institutions deliberately invite, provoke, summon, and train the ear to attend to a diversity of sounds – the voices of faculty, coaches, and students; the sounds of ancient and modern artists and artifact; the reverberations of distant cultures and languages; the resonances of the physical and social worlds that speak in material ways. Wabash provokes you out of yourself, gets you out of your orbit, pulls you out of your reverie or stupor, out of thinking first and foremost about yourself, out of an assuming and into a critiquing mode, out of an answering into a questioning mode about not one thing but everything. By training your ear to discern the scales and modulations of the world around you, by helping you tune in and attune to different issues and questions as they have been voiced over the ages, Wabash seeks to alter your hearing and change your life. It's what President White has in mind when he speaks about the grand conversation and listening carefully to all around you before speaking and acting, which is not at all easy, especially when people are inclined at times to talk over one another and to be hard of hearing. In addition to making a living, which everyone needs to do to pay the bills, a Wabash liberal arts education helps you to fashion a life, to make you lifelong, evocative listeners.

Where and how does such acoustic training happen? All of the hard work imposed upon you to learn to speak, to write, and to calculate coherently contributes to a

constant unsettling, of working to make you better, stronger, of setting the academic bar higher and nearly out of your reach, of getting you out of your orbit, to stretch and test your capacities, to take you beyond where you are, provoking you to do and be more. This is exorbitant, excessive work, which fits the ethos of this College where there is always more to do and to become and hardly ever enough time to finish what has been started. The liberal arts provocation is dislocating, and by design. Faculty intend to disorient you by having you encounter foreign worlds—yes the distant ones of China and Spain and Peru, but so too the closer-to-home ones of Latin grammar, biological systems, Islamic rituals, Mathematical theorems, and macroeconomic modeling. The disorientation reorients you to see and hear the familiar as strange and the strange as possible, to alter your experience (hopefully without drugs), and to discover that this world is massively thicker, weirder, more painful, beautiful, and evocative, more eerie, than you could ever imagine. This work is intended to attune your ear to the questions, and to accountability and responsibility through the Gentleman’s Rule, to think carefully and with empathy.

Your Wabash liberal arts education specializes in calling you and calling you out: to audition for a play at Ball Theater, to the Glee Club in Slater Hall, to Thursday Chapel by Sphinx Club Rhynees, to Chapel Sing where past tradition calls out to you in the present, to student clubs like the International Medical Relief for Children, to service in Crawfordsville, and the list goes on. From my office in the corner of Center Hall I hear voices all the time reaching across the mall to one another, for one another, at one another. It’s this loud, persistent, sometimes cacophonous vocalizing that helps make Wabash a distinctive and effective, and at times frustrating and loud place to be, a human

place, a liberal arts place. For all the valuable work that Technical training programs perform, they are designed primarily to get you expeditiously out the door and into the labor force; more than that, a liberal arts education gets you out of yourself and hopefully into the habit of discerning fundamental issues and questions. Technical training focuses on making the student an effective problem solver; more than that, the liberal arts seek to leave you disaffected, with your ear cocked and straining to hear the problems that defy solution, developing an ear for the unanswerable. In the words of a famous Buddhist koan, a Wabash liberal arts education trains your ear to discern the sound of one hand clapping.

Lest we quickly adopt a holier-than-thou attitude toward our community college and trades school cousins, we must recognize that ear training also happens elsewhere too. It happens wherever good faculty care enough about students to engage them in careful listening, to demand attention to detail, to insisting on high achievement, to invite themselves into the lives of students up to the elbows. Wabash always provokes. It does this in large measure because the structure of the curriculum and of our common life together extends the conversations so as to amplify the sounds of the big questions—the big questions like Who am I? and How shall we live?, articulated famously by Tolstoy in his Confessions, questions that in one form or another have lived through C&T and will now resound in the new All-College Course designed to train the next generation of Wabash students in the art of careful listening. You may have started off at Wabash wanting a job in medicine, law, teaching, or business, and you may indeed end up in one or another of these professions. The College will have done its best to equip you for job

and vocation, however, if it has kept you from narrowing your vision and limiting your hearing too soon. One way we have done that is by not letting you declare a major until your sophomore year. Another is by compelling you to study in all three divisions of the curriculum, and all college courses, and to engage in language studies and gain foreign language proficiency; another by calling you to figure out how to live as Gentlemen with one another. Liberal learning stretches time and everyone's patience by insisting that you take on the responsibility and time to learn how to read a text carefully, write an essay convincingly, voice an argument persuasively, and compute data effectively. The medium of the liberal arts is time, and there is never enough of it to be sure, to be engaged with a community that makes the familiar strange and helps you lose the tin ear that deafens you to the call to step forward to meet the needs of one another, the nation, and the world, to have a job and live a vocation.

Since your arrival at Wabash you have been invited to audition for different parts, fine tuning your tympan, stretching both membrane and brain in order to hear clearly, taking time to get out of yourself, and along the way having your hearing tested beginning that first Freshman Tutorial presentation four years ago through to your oral comps for months ago, the culmination of your liberal arts training. Can you hear me now? Can you hear me now?

And there is evidence you are listening. You have studied feminist philosophy, African literature, and Chinese economic systems, you have gone on immersion trips to Washington, DC and studied abroad in Lima; rebuilt homes in New Orleans or built one from scratch right here in Crawfordsville; you have taught needy children after school in the MXI, traveled during spring break to South America to inoculate children against



disease, and flown to South Africa to bear witness to your faith; you've planted a community garden to feed the Wabash community and volunteered to teach local school children; you have worked in Hays and Baxter science labs with faculty, or in an internship in the IMA in Indianapolis; and you have wailed at the loss of the Bell, close friends, and beloved faculty; and you have stood silent as faculty mentors have given you an ear full urging you to clean the wax out of your ears ... and the list goes on in a thousand ways. You are a talented bunch, and your hearing is improving.

Ralph Waldo Emerson, American essayist, philosopher and poet, once wrote: "Each man has his own vocation; his talent is his call. There is one direction in which all space is open to him." I ask you today to listen and to think about what is the one direction where space is now open to you? What talent calls you? Like much about Wabash that leaves the responsibility to decide on student shoulders, this is your question to answer. No one will do it for you. It may require more listening and careful discernment than you had first thought, especially if that initial job hasn't materialized or your admission to law school has been denied. Will you continue to prick those ears to listen for the vocal cue that leads you in a new direction? Will you remain open to an uncertain voice? Will you attend? Can you hear me now? Can you hear me now?

Vocation is as inseparable from a job as hearing is from the ear. The one echoes through, resounds in the other. A job is what you do to make a living; and a vocation is what calls you to make a life. A job is what you do to bring home the bacon (unless, of course, you are a vegetarian); and a vocation, in the words of Parker Palmer, is "where

your deep gladness and the world's deep hunger meet." Let me repeat that: "vocation is where your deep gladness and the world's deep hunger meet." My fifth grade English teacher Ms. Miller's words ring in my ears this very moment admonishing me never to define a word by using a phrase that begins with "where." Well, it may be poor grammar, but to me and to Parker Palmer it makes good sense.

In his Fire in the Belly: On Being A Man noted American author Sam Keen says about the inseparability of vocation and job: "There is no easy formula for determining right and wrong livelihood, but it is essential to keep the question alive. ....we have to stop pretending that we can make a living at something that is trivial or destructive and still have a sense of legitimate self-worth. A society in which vocation and job are separated for most people gradually creates an economy that is often devoid of spirit, one that frequently fills our pocketbooks at the cost of emptying our souls."

This morning you've filled your bellies with breakfast while I've given you an ear full about listening. Tomorrow afternoon Dean Olsen will call you by name to step forward to receive your diploma. Hear this as a summation of all that Wabash has done to provoke you, to evoke your best, to invite you into this community, to train your ear.

And hear your Wabash education as a summons. Listen intently for the peal of Caleb Mills' bell as President White rings you out, the sound that called you into the College four years ago and now beckons you away as Wabash graduates not just to a career of meaningful work but also to a vocation of greater responsibility.

Wabash has prepared you to read, so now let your life be read by others. Wabash has taught you quantitative reasoning, so now let your life add up to something more than yourself. Wabash has proudly taught you to be articulate, so let your life speak. Wabash has taught you to listen, so let your liberal arts living speak. Can you hear me now? Can you hear me now?

Gentlemen, what you do next is your call.