

The Liberal Arts and Six Degrees of Separation
Dean's Address to Graduating Seniors
May 10, 2008

Gary A. Phillips

[Music plays on entrance]

Welcome soon-to-be-graduated Wabash men of the class of 2008. It's good to see you this morning. The Dean's breakfast for seniors on commencement weekend has been a Wabash College tradition extending over many decades and deanships. Deans Trippet, Rogge, Shearer, Traina, Powell, McKinney, Herring, Ditzler, and Williams before me have used this occasion to speak with graduating seniors about a range of topics connecting the liberal arts to the Wabash and world of their day. Such moments of reflection are Janus-like, a looking backward into Wabash's past and forward to an indeterminate future; they are efforts to make connections with your experience past and future. The contradictory, two-faced Janus was the celebrated Roman god of gates, doors, doorways, beginnings, and endings. How fitting, then, that on a weekend of endings and beginnings we invoke this ancient god's name. Where but on a liberal arts college campus, at Wabash College, would you find a dean speaking with students at an ungodly hour on a Saturday morning about a classical deity? How unconventional? How Liberal arts! How Wabash!

Now you may be wondering why the musical overture? What does Queen's 1977 hit "We Will Rock You" have to do with beginnings and endings, the liberal arts and Wabash? Six degrees of separation is my answer, as I hope to explain. But first a

definition. “Six degrees of separation” is the concept that anyone on the planet can be connected to any other person by means of a chain of acquaintances through no more than five intermediaries. Some attribute the notion to Hungarian short story writer Frigyes Karinthy; others to radio pioneer Marconi who sought to calculate the number of radio relay stations needed to blanket the globe. (He came up with an average of 5.83. I don’t know if he could have anticipated the number of rock and roll stations that now populate the airwaves!). But it was the American playwright John Guare who would eventually popularize the expression by rounding up Marconi’s 5.83 to 6.¹ For my purposes this morning, I want to use the notion to suggest something important about the liberal arts by tying together a series of ideas that connect you to Wabash to the liberal arts to the past to the present. An important outcome of liberal arts education is to foster serendipitous connections among ideas and people. Let’s see if we can follow that path.

We begin with Janus, the ancient god of beginnings and ends. The conventional assumption that Dean’s before me have operated with and one I share is that the Wabash liberal arts education you have received equips you for lives of promise: in graduate school or medical school, business or finance or non-profits, the military or the ministry, the classroom or the courtroom, as parents or politicians. Four years of engagement and hard work will open doors to a career or to some other challenge, equip you to make a living, a life, perhaps a name for yourself; your time spent at Wabash equally serves as a gateway to something more, something better, a life of service and fidelity to community and country. This was in part the dream that inspired Wabash’s founders when they invoked the name of the Christian God Jehovah as they knelt in snow to pray on that

auspicious November day 175 years ago. As the founding documents state, their goal was to erect a classical English school rising up to become a college in response to the needs of the nation, to educate a cohort of preachers and teachers to serve the nation. Religion was never very far from their mind.

The College's founders saw no contradiction in rightly praying to the god of Christian faith and tradition and rigorously studying the classical gods of the Roman and Greek pantheons. For the founders, the study of the liberal arts did not pit faith against knowledge, Christianity against the classics; the relationship was not dichotomous or competitive with winner take all. On the contrary. They were two sides of a common curricular coin. In his inaugural address on July 13, 1836, Elihu Baldwin, Wabash's first president—you may have seen his portrait hanging in President White's office—commented upon the disparaging attitude some had taken toward classical studies, which included substituting Scripture for the study of what today we call secular classical texts:

We are told that many things embraced in the ordinary course are of little or no value to the student. The Greek and Latin languages in particular have fallen under the ban of proscription as not only useless but positively destructive to the principles and morals of youth. And some who do not go the entire length of discarding the study of these languages prefer teaching it principally with the inferior aid of Christian authors. In the mean time a sufficient substitute, it is supposed, has been found in the inspired scriptures considered as a classic....We are not so well persuaded that it comports with their character and high design to

use them [Christian Scriptures] merely as a classic; and still less as a substitute for the elegant composition of Greek and Roman authors.”²

In other words, Wabash’s founders did not confuse or substitute sacred for secular texts; to believe in Jehovah was not at odds with being informed about Janus. We might extrapolate that for Christians—the default religious perspective of President Baldwin’s day—it is vital to learn about religions and cultures other than your own, to make connections between diverse worldviews and experiences, and to grasp the fluid domains of the sacred and the secular. In a world of religious prejudice and hostility, Wabash’s prescient founders imagined that to be a liberally educated Christian there can be no alternative to a critical engagement with religion. It is the liberal arts way, the Wabash way. From Janus to Jehovah, one degree of separation.

The importance of critical thinking has not slackened at all in the 175 years since our College’s founding. You know well our one-sentence creedal statement: “Wabash College educates men to think critically, act responsibly, lead effectively, and live humanely.” “To think critically” is the first in the holy quadrinity of verbs—to think, act, lead, and live. It’s not just any kind of thinking, but a thinking characterized as “critical.” The etymology of the adjective “critical” is instructive. Derived from the Greek verb “krinein,” meaning to divide, separate, take apart, discern, or judge, “critical” today often connotes something negative, as in “he’s critical of my musical tastes.” Perhaps you don’t care for Queen or rock and roll. That’s fine. But not liking is not the same as having a critical take on music or anything else. The root sense of critical conveys the

quintessential characteristic of the Wabash teaching and learning experience: to take an argument or position apart, to discern what the evidence for and against it is, to judge what holds together well or not. From the College's beginning to today we find an enduring commitment to a thinking that exercises judgment. In the beginning of the mission statement, at the heart of what we do here, was the verb, to judge. From Janus to Jehovah to judging, two degrees of separation.

“In the beginning of the mission statement was the verb.” You may hear echoes of another beginning, a Gospel beginning: “In the beginning was the word,” or so goes the opening lines of John's Gospel. For those of you who have studied John's text critically, you will know that the Fourth Evangelist renders a story about Jesus' cosmic beginning which he lifts from the opening lines of the Jewish scripture's first book, Genesis, and weaves together with the poetic elements of a Gnostic hymn of creation. Looking Janus-like back to the beginning of time and forward to the world's ending, the Fourth Evangelist offers a medley of metaphors that for two millennia have become the standard poetic fare for characterizing Jesus. You may recognize some of these: he is the way, the truth, the life, the vine, the bread, the shepherd, the good life, the door. Jesus is the door (Jn 10:7). It is a quick metaphorical slide from Jesus, God as door to Janus, god of doors. The metaphor of the door enables us to forge a connection then between Genesis and John, Judaism and Gnosticism, words and worlds; it swings gate-like, backward and forward, opening and closing, inviting and challenging connections. A good liberal arts education equips you to think metaphorically, to connect one thing with another, to discover likenesses and differences, to discern degrees of separation, to link disparate

ideas and parts, to see connections where none existed before, to give sight to the blind, to put it in miracle terms. Much hinges, however, upon the critical capacity to understand language and texts and cultures. That understanding does not come simply from grammatical or historical analysis but with a living with language and texts. President Baldwin knew this when he advocated Latin and Greek language and theological study. From Janus to Jehovah to judgment to John's gospel, three degrees of separation. I know you are still wondering about Queen and how that connects to anything. Be patient. We will soon be coming to that.

The Fourth Evangel invites me to think back to the four-fold mission statement. Critical thinking leads the list of verbs; it enjoys top billing. It is of the first order as it is the first in order. But I want to make a slightly biblical turn and make the first last and the last first by focusing upon "living humanely," the final element of the statement, which I now want to consider as the opener. Even at unconventional Wabash, one of our culturally conventional ways of understanding "humane living" is to think about living, about life, as something we possess, exercise control over, and seek to modify in various ways, as if it were a natural resource to be exploited. In grammatical terms we tend to treat "living humanely" more as a noun than to honor its verbal nature and form as a gerund. This is not peculiar to Wabash. In the West generally we are habituated to view life as a thing we fabricate or fashion. You hear echoes of this deep bias in the various things we say we make: grades, a team, a name for ourselves; a life for ourselves, a career, partner, friends, money, sense (the non-monetary kind), even love. This attitude

pervades our truisms and common sense: For example, “in this world, life is what you make of it.” Or: “One makes one’s bed and lies in it”.

Lying beneath such phrases and idiomatic expressions is a particular way of understanding the human self in the world as an independent agent who charts a path, as if life were a vehicle that transports us or an object we direct or manipulate, and we were its driver. But some of our most central, mundane, quotidian experiences suggest a different way to grasp our selves in the world in which where we are not first and foremost directing the show of life. From this perspective, the world is not just something we *make* but is what we *receive*. Think for a moment about language and your capacity to speak and think your native language. When did you decide as an infant to learn English or Spanish or Chinese? Can you pinpoint that moment? Hardly. You didn’t choose English; it was given to you to learn. To put it even more oddly, you might say it chose you. You were chosen. Just as you were chosen to come to Wabash. I can hear some objecting that indeed we do chose to learn another language. The is true, but true in a misleading sense. As the Mission Statement reveals in the very way it is put together, we are habituated to think that thinking comes first: I chose to be a Spanish major; I made it happen. And living in the language follows as a consequence. We are reminded of important philosophers who have guided us to think in these terms. Descartes for one and his trinitarian dictum "Cogito, ergo sum" ("**I think, therefore I am**"). Before the thinking, before the verb, the “I” enjoys a privileged place, both in Descartes sentence structure and in his sense of living humanely in the world. But in reality your first language was given to you to speak; you didn’t think to choose it. The thinking didn’t

lead, the living did. The same applies, of course, to other realities: your family, you, your religion, your cultural values.

Instead of reading the mission sentence left to right we should in good Jewish fashion read it right to left: **living humanely a leading effectively the responsible action of thinking critically.** Not as elegant as the accustomed reverse order. But attempting to rephrase it this way may help us see that life is not what you have or what you think it to be but who you are and how you live. It is not reducible to what you make of it but is what comes to expression through your actions, including your thinking to be sure; but your thinking is only one aspect and not always the most determining feature of liberal arts living. The author and activist Parker Palmer has written a little book about vocation or calling with the slightly odd sounding title, "Let your Life speak." Palmer employs this Quaker expression to make the point, in our terms, that living humanely leads the way. Life is a listening and a calling, once again those gerunds. Those of you familiar with Quaker practice and thought will appreciate the importance of listening before speaking, of living in silence together before thinking an answer to a question. At Wabash we pride ourselves in the emphasis we place upon reading and writing, computing and speaking effectively, and rightly so. These are vitally important liberal arts thinking skills. But they are more than skills or techniques; they are living practices that speak our humanity. Hear me right. I am not suggesting for a second that thinking is secondary; I'm arguing for letting the living have its due, equal billing for a change, to find the degrees of separation that tie thinking and living, to read the mission statement all the way through from beginning to end, backwards and forward, Janus-like,

as a single, coherent statement, palindromically. So once again here is my way of doing that, reading right to left, connecting the first with the last, the living with the thinking:

Wabash educates men about living humanely a leading effectively the responsible action of thinking critically.

A mouthful and a mindful!

And in terms of those liberal critical skills now reframed not as assertions, but as imperatives:

Wabash has prepared you to read, so now let your life be read by others;

Wabash has taught you quantitative reasoning, so now to let your life add up to something more than yourself;

Wabash has proudly taught you how to be articulate, so let your life speak.

Let your liberal arts living speak.

The last will be first. From Janus to Jehovah to judgment to John to the Quakers, four degrees of separation

Parker Palmer's brief reflection vocation calls to mind Herman Hesse's lyrical description of the life experience of Siddhartha. If you have not read Hesse's novel you

should; it is a text well worth exploring. Born into the Hindu priestly caste, dissatisfied with what he knows about life, and impatient to learn more, Siddhartha leaves home and a life of comfort to seek personal transformation by attaining Nirvana or enlightenment. Through a series of interactions with ascetic monks who show him life lived with less, a courtesan who teaches him the arts of love, a business man who educates him in the practices of money and career making, and a ferryman who employs him as an apprentice to transport people across a vast river, Siddhartha comes increasing to understand truth is not first about words or concepts but about lived experience, that enlightenment constitutes going beyond words and ideas. Living leads the way. Along the way Siddhartha and his boyhood companion Govinda encounter Gotama Buddha, who exemplifies the life lived free of the entanglements of ideas, of pleasure, of pain of sorrow. Govinda is called to follow the Buddha while Siddhartha continues to press forward on his own terms for answers. Siddhartha eventually discovers he has fathered a son who rejects him just as he has rejected the ways of his own father. Despairing of life, Siddhartha sets about to kill himself along the river's edge only to awaken from the failed attempt to discover before him the face of his beloved Govinda. In that moment Siddhartha grasps the potency of love, of fraternity, of the connectedness of all things, of the inadequacy of concepts—of thinking—to communicate what is of first importance. He realizes the continuity and connection between all of living, the six degrees of separation that binds all of existence together. Govinda, however, has not reached this conclusion. He says:

“Siddhartha, we are now old men. We may never see each other in this life. I can see, my dear friend that you have found peace. I realize that I have not found it. Tell me one word, my esteemed friend, tell me something that I can conceive, something I can understand! Give me something to help me on my way, Siddhartha. My path is hard and dark.”....

Smiling the smile of unity of the Buddha himself, Siddhartha comforts his friend by inviting him to kiss him. “Bend near to me,” Siddhartha says. “Kiss me on the forehead, Govinda.”

Although surprised, Govinda was compelled to a great love and presentiment to obey him; he leaned close to him and touched his forehead with his lips. As he did this, something wonderful happened to him. While he was still dwelling on Siddhartha’s strange words, while he strove in vain to dispel the conception of time, to imagine Nirvana and Samsara as one... this happened to him.

He no longer saw the face of his friend Siddhartha. Instead he saw other faces, many other faces, a long series, a continuous stream of faces—hundreds, thousands, which all came and disappeared and yet all seemed to be there at the same time, which all continually changed and renewed themselves and which were yet all Siddhartha. He saw the face of a fish, of a carp with tremendous painfully open mouth, a dying fish with dimmed eyes, He saw the face of a newly born child, red and full of wrinkles, ready to cry. He saw the face of a murderer.

...He saw the naked bodies of men and women in the postures and transports of passionate love...He saw the heads of dead animals.... He saw Krishna and Agni. He saw all these forms and faces in a thousand relationships to each other, all helping each other, loving, hating and destroying each other and become newly born. Each one was mortal, a passionate, painful example of all that is transitory. Yet none of them died, they only changed, were always reborn, continually had a new face.³

Siddhartha's life spoke to Govinda. Govinda understood his calling, delivered through a kiss. In the unity of one thing with another, life with death, love with hate, pain with pleasure, child with adult, the gods with humanity, the river with the land, Govinda understood his mission in life, living humanely in a Buddhist way meant. This kiss, this love, this way, this truth, this life sends us back once more to the gospel story, although John's gospel, unlike his fraternity brothers Matthew, Mark and Luke, lacks the Judas kiss that preceded Jesus's death at the hands of Roman soldiers. Roman Janus to Christian Jehovah to good judgment to John's Gospel to Quaker practice to Siddhartha's Buddha-like kiss, five degrees of separation.

The liberal arts, the living humanely arts, the living free arts call for each of us to make connections, to discover the unity and coherence of life, to construct meaning where none may be apparent, to bring your Wabash education to bear upon the world and make sense of it, and to make it better, and equally to remain open to being presented with sense, the presentiment of the face of another. Liberal arts living calls for you to

forge the connections that tie together novel and gospel, grammar and theology, religion and rivers, classics and critical thinking, calling and thinking, listening and lyrics, music and metaphor. Liberal arts living calls for you to be surprised by sense that comes to you out of the blue like a gift, like the presence of your Wabash brothers, your teachers who have held you to standards, your family who have sacrificed for you to be here. President Baldwin may have not known Marconi or Hesse or Parker or Queen or much about Hinduism or Buddhism or Quakerism but he surely understood the power of liberal arts living and what a Wabash education could do to teach young men to think critically, act responsibly, lead effectively and live humanely. In my mind's eye, I imagine a Siddhartha-like smile on his face as he contemplates what you have done and what you Wabash men are called to do.

And finally, as promised, the connection to Queen. Written by Brian May and first released in 1977 as single—"We Will Rock You." was the A side to "We are the Champions," its B side. I remember first hearing this song as a graduate student at Vanderbilt. It started off with a slower tempo than what we heard this morning and moved after about a minute though a crescendo to a guitar explosion. Freddie Mercury then recited about a 20 second passage from Hesse's Siddhartha, followed thereupon by the fast version of the opening track that lasted nearly three minutes. I don't know if May or Mercury intended this song to be a musical meditation on Siddhartha's journey, but I have come to understand it as such. The connection is reinforced whenever I hear the music played (ironically, I might add) at sporting events, a synapse firing that I can't control, a world of the past forever linked to my present wherever I find myself, and now

a connection to you. Maybe for you, too, it will be the case that Queen and Siddhartha will be remembered together. Listen to May's lyrics with Hesse's character in mind:

**Buddy you're a boy make a big noise
Playing in the street gonna be a big man some day
You got mud on your face
You big disgrace
Kicking your can all over the place**

We will rock you

**Buddy you're a young man, hard man
Shouting in the street gonna take on the world some day
Blood on your face
Big disgrace
Waving your banner all over the place
Sing it**

We will, we will, rock

**Buddy you're an old man, poor man
Pleading with your eyes gonna make you some peace some day
Mud on your face
Big disgrace
Somebody better put you back into your place**

We will, we will, rock

Oh, rock you

Do you hear in your minds eye a world in which boys grow up to become men, a path that takes them from mud to blood to mud, the life circle from dust to dust; a living that begins with playing proceeds to shouting that leads to pleading, a path from childhood to adulthood through to old age, an ethics of a world of violence that leads to peace, of finding your place? Is your understanding rock solid, or has your perception, like Govinda's, been rocked by the presentiment of fate, of a musical and literary connection that invites seeing and living differently? Now you know why I forever associate Siddhartha with Queen.

From classical god to classic rock. From Janus to Jehovah to judgment to John to the Quakers to Siddhartha to Queen, six degrees of liberal arts separation.

Thank you, Seniors. Congratulations. Live humanely..

["We Will Rock You" plays on exit]

¹ For a broader historical description see http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Six_degrees_of_separation.

² These Fleeting Years. Wabash College 1832-1982. Ed. Robert Harvey, pp. 23-24.

³ Hermann Hesse, Siddhartha, trans. Hilda Rosner (New York: Bantam, 1971).