



MARK ROOSEVELT

COMMENCEMENT ADDRESS  
ST. JOHN'S COLLEGE

May 2024





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... AFTER LOVE,





First of all, well done. Really. By completing the Program, you have done something significant. We trust you know that. We trust your families and friends know that. Certainly, all of us who work at St. John's know that, and we honor you for your achievement.

But my job today is not to praise you but rather to say something that might be helpful.

My goal today is to say something simple and true.

My simple truth is this: that after love, humility is the next most important thing in life. And embracing humility as a core value will help you greatly as you try to make sense of the world and your place in it.

For most people, embracing humility takes time, considerable life experience, and a fair amount of pain. That was the case



## IT IS ONLY HUMILITY, EXTREME

for me. I wish I had embraced humility earlier in my life. The younger you are able to, the better, and that is my hope for you.

Embracing humility means that our first resolve when considering what to do should be — do no harm.

Embracing humility means that the right default position is *I am not sure. I do not know.*

Embracing humility also means adopting a healthy skepticism towards other people's sureness, especially those who pretend to have all the answers and those who portray themselves as paragons of virtue and call for the oppression of others.

And healthy skepticism should extend to anyone who claims to speak for God.

For me it has gotten to the point that I do not even like author's photos on book jackets that convey a feeling of authority, that somehow visually, presumptuously declare — "I have figured it out."

## HUMILITY, THAT WILL START TO TURN THINGS AROUND.

Because they have not. None of us has.

A quote attributed to the great American skeptic Mark Twain: “It ain’t what you don’t know that gets you into trouble. It’s what you know for sure that just ain’t so.”

Embracing humility does not mean that there are not some important things we can be sure of.

One thing that I am confident I know is that it is arrogance, hubris, that has gotten us into the mess we are in today. Since we decided that we are the most important thing in the world and that, regardless of the effects on other creatures or on our planetary home, it is our comfort and convenience that matter most, we have been doing enormous damage.

It is only humility, extreme humility, that will start to turn things around.

As you move out into the world from St. John’s, even if you have involved parents and mentors, it’s ultimately up to you to find your own way. The rest of life has no all-required program; just a lot of choices and competing demands.

To navigate successfully, you will need to develop a personal philosophy, a way of understanding the world, that helps you through.

You will need this philosophy as you weather the pressures of earning a living and the many pressures to conform.

As the pressures to conform mount, and they will, please keep in mind that end-of-life caregivers tell us that the largest regret dying people have is that they never explored their own path, but instead, followed other people's expectations.

And, in developing your world-view, I hope that humility will be at the core.

Humility means accepting, as many successful people do not, the role that luck plays in life – the circumstances of your birth, your parents, and the advantages you got along the way. Accepting the role of luck will help you be more generous to other people in their struggles and to yourself when you falter.

Humility means accepting, as many educated people do not,





## WE SEARCH FOR THE BEST WAY TO LIVE.

that what we know is dwarfed by what we do not know — that we know so little about the biggest things. Why are we here? What happens next, if anything? Is the world a cosmic accident or is it the embodiment of some mysterious cosmic intention?

Humility also means accepting that we are all groping around in the dark, trying to find our way. We are all searchers. I think you know that. I suspect that is why you came to St. John's.

And it is important to embrace that the search is a central part of our lives.

We search for the best way to live.

“The only true science,” Tolstoy maintained, “is the science of Socrates, the Buddha, and Jesus — the science of how to live.”

Reading an obituary of Harry Lorayne, a magician and memory expert, I was taken by this reflection: “We are all, each and every one of us, completely and irrevocably alone.” For Lorayne, the key to relieving that loneliness just a bit “was to look outward, with a wide-open mind: ‘I have never yet met anyone, from any walk of life, from whom I haven't learned something,’ he explained. “This could not happen if I weren't listening — I mean really listening — to them.”

Listening. Really listening to people from all kinds of different

## HUMILITY DOES NOT ASK US TO ACCEPT NONSENSE

personal circumstances and knowing that they have something to offer. It is part of developing your way of looking at the world, and it is part of embracing humility.

And really listening is a skill that we hope you learned at St. John's.

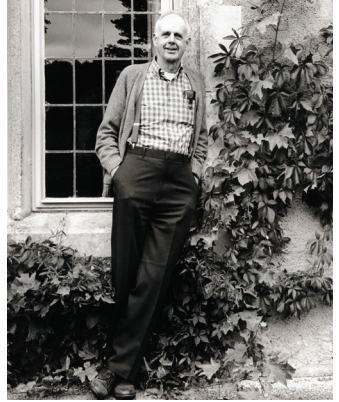
A personal philosophy with humility at its center begins with a deep respect for the natural world and gratefulness for the many wonders it bestows.

British commentator Leo Reich says: "There was a period when I was 9 to 15 where I was a really obsessive bird watcher. Not to get religious about this, but sometimes in our lives we have to sit back and be in awe of the majesty of nature. It also makes you think, God, I really know nothing about the universe because this little guy is dressed in bright, bright blue, and there is no possible explanation for that that I could possibly make sense of."

Farmer, novelist and philosopher Wendell Berry writes:

*When despair for the world grows in me  
and I wake in the night at the least sound  
in fear of what my life and my children's lives may be,  
I go and lie down where the wood drake  
rests in his beauty on the water and the great heron feeds...*

AND SLOPPY THINKING.



Wendell Berry

*For a time*

*I rest in the grace of the world and am free.*

Some truths are not revealed by study or analysis. That is true of love for the natural world. And it is also true of the spiritual. We may immerse ourselves in theology. We may study the scriptures with great care. But it is still likely as the musician David Crosby says: “A child laughing in the sun knows more about God” than we do.

Although humility should guide us to respect all we do not know, humility is not anti-intellectual. Humility does not ask us to accept nonsense and sloppy thinking.

And there is an enormous amount of both.

Even among many who shape our public policies, clear, forward-looking thinking is sadly absent.

Emerson was astounded at “the estrangement of thinking from the totality of human life.”

There is a deep strain of anti-intellectualism in our culture, and our public dialogue is remarkably shallow. The religious scholar and poet Christian Wiman writes: “One grows so tired, in American public life, of the certitudes and platitudes, the megaphone mouths and stadium praise, influencers and effluencers and the whole tsunami of slop that comes pouring into our lives like toxic sludge.”

Humility also does not ask us to stay on the sidelines. It is essential to believe in things that matter and to take a stand when taking a stand is called for. The world can be a devastating place, and injustice is all around us. It is important to see the world as it is and play your part in making it better.



## WE MUST SET NEW GOAL POSTS FOR WHAT CONSTITUTES PROGRESS.

To do that, the skills you have learned at St. John's, thinking clearly and respecting the words that we use and the meaning we ascribe to them, should be of great help.

I hope most especially that you will help redefine what we call "progress."

For example, we must stop equating all growth with progress. We should rethink using Gross Domestic Product (GDP) as a key measurement. GDP sees all economic activity, even destructive economic activity, as a plus. GDP does not account for externalities, such as pollution or exhausting commutes. To GDP, family time is a negative. GDP accounting does not differentiate between wealth growth that is limited to the already wealthy and gains that are spread more equally across all income groups.

We must set new goal posts for what constitutes progress. And learn how to measure them.

For the same reason that we should question what we call progress, we also need to question the multiple invasions of

## WE NEED CONTRARIANS.

technology. Currently, instead of asking if a new technology is good for us, we only ask if it will sell, if there is a market for it.

Philosopher Jonathan Haidt writes: “I’ve been struggling to figure out what is happening to us. How is technology changing us?” His best answer: “The phone-based life produces spiritual degradation, not just in adolescents, but in all of us.”

We have almost no idea what the explosion of artificial intelligence will mean. But we do know it will bring dramatic change, and an alarm rings loudly for me when the Amazon CEO says that “the benefits will astound us all.” Unfortunately, as with all technological innovations, we have only the most ineffectual mechanisms for controlling its negative effects. Rightly or wrongly, it is all up to individual choice. I trust that you will make yours with great care.

We need people who will ask naïve questions, who will be skeptical of accepted wisdom. Who will poke and provoke.

We need contrarians.



It is only a new-found humility about our place in the world that can guide us towards a huge and much-needed paradigm shift.

Wendell Berry writes: “We have lived our lives by the assumption that what is good for us is good for the world. We have been wrong. We must change so that we can live with the contrary assumption that what is good for the world is good for us. And that means we must make the effort to know the world and learn what is good for it.”

You have studied paradigm shifts which were catalyzed by revolutionary insights or the discovery of scientific truths that upended old ways of thinking. This shift will be different. It must come from an acceptance of our immense limitations and from a more humble understanding of our place among other creatures and our relationship to our planet.

## IT HELPS ME TO THINK OF OUR TIME ON EARTH AS

Wendell Berry again — “From a human point of view, the difference between the mind of a human and that of a mountain goat is wonderful; from the point of view of the infinite ignorance that surrounds us, the difference is not impressive. Indeed, from that point of view, the goat may have the better mind, for he is more congenially adapted to his place, and he would not endanger his species or his planet for the sake of an idea.”

It is only with humility and reverence before the world that we will be able to achieve a healthier balance for the planet, other creatures, and for ourselves.

I trust that your St. John’s education has helped you learn what is worth wanting. To grasp what matters and not be distracted by glitter, gimmicks, or shallow freedoms.

If you have learned that — you have learned something truly valuable.

Happiness depends in great part on the harmony between what you do — the life you lead — and who you are.



## WRITING OUR OWN SONG.

It helps me to think of our time on earth as writing our own song.

That song is something you spend a lifetime trying to get right and then, when you do, you realize that, like your physical self, it will soon fade away.

But it is what we have. Our songs matter. As do the songs of those who have come before us.

The critic A. O. Scott writes: “We are, as a species, ridiculous: vain, ugly, selfish and self-deluding. But somehow, some of our attempts to take stock of this condition — our songs and stories and moving pictures, old and new — manage to be beautiful, even sublime.”





I wish you great good luck in finding a place where you belong and can make a difference. I believe that what you take away from your years at St. John's will help you in that journey. And I trust that, as you write your own song, you will help bring gentleness and humility to a world greatly in need of both.







MARK ROOSEVELT & COLLEAGUES ~ 2023