

**“Fit for the World”**  
**Commencement Address, May 2017**  
**St. John’s College in Santa Fe**  
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My congratulations to all of you seniors and students in the Graduate Institute, and congratulations to your families and loved ones, who have seen you through these years of joy and challenge.

Thank you for the honor of the invitation to address you today. Once again a beautiful day in Santa Fe! I have often spoken to my friends of the wonder of this College, which enjoys 365 days of perfect weather; Santa Fe has 363 of them, and Annapolis has all the rest.

I love returning to my second home here on this campus, where I walked across the platform to receive my diploma some 47 years ago, back in the days before Weigle Hall was built, when Camino Cruz Blanca was a dirt road, and when the Graduate Institute was born. But it was in the year of my graduation when a book was published that ended on a note that has troubled me for all these years. It is time I came to terms with it.

I am speaking of a comment made by Scott Buchanan in a series of interviews he had with his old friend Harris Wofford that were collected in a book entitled *Embers of the World: Conversations with Scott Buchanan*. Most of you know that Buchanan was the principal architect of the New Program of study brought to St. John's College in 1937. We are talking pre-history for us on the Western Campus of the College. That New Program, back when Buchanan was dean, was in large measure much like the program we enjoy today on both of our campuses.

The book closes with a comment by Buchanan that has bothered me since I first read it some 45 years ago. It was this: "We used to say at St. John's that we were preparing people to be misfits, and we meant that in a very broad sense. Perhaps misfits in the universe for the time being."

I can imagine that if I were to affirm that statement without explanation and close these remarks now, some of you would demand a refund of your tuition. So, you can understand why I have been restless for all these years, wondering at Buchanan’s remark while serving as one of this College’s presidents. At long last, I thought I ought at least to make an effort to understand why Buchanan said this, what he meant by it, and whether I thought it was true, for your sake as well as my own.

**The Case for the Misfit**

Why might it be a positive good that the College should be preparing you to be “misfits” in the world?

Consider, for example, the place of a misfit in a world characterized by conflict, where change is sought through violence alone, where rhetorical force is laced with fear-mongering or hatred. Such a misfit might bring reason to bear on the rancor, and imagination to the resolution of conflict.

Or consider a world that is so conventional that people rarely contribute anything original or inventive .... where so little of our natural human capacity, and none of our imagination, is exercised! What kind of world would it be if everyone acted as though they had the answers to life and no one had any questions of it?

What is the place of a misfit in a world that is out of joint? Or a world that has reduced all value to an economic metaphor? Where everything has a price and nothing is priceless? Where the end of life is service to the global economy? And the end of education is simply to fit one for the marketplace!

What is the place of a misfit in a world governed by one rule only: that it's what we can get for ourselves that counts, a world that does not accept that it is in our nature to do good for one another?

Many of you will recognize those worlds or will imagine that all of these descriptions characterize aspects of the world we live in. The world is hardly perfect; a misfit may be what it needs from time to time to get it on a better path. Perhaps when Buchanan spoke of preparing "misfits in the universe **for the time being**," he meant that misfits entering the world today could help shape the world of tomorrow, one that would be a better fit for the imaginative, reform-minded individual.

Question: Why is Socrates so beloved of many of us at St. John's? Is it because he was a misfit in the world of Athens? Recall his argument for the defense in Plato's *Apology*:

"I was attached to this city by the god – though it seems a ridiculous thing to say – as upon a great and noble horse which was somewhat sluggish because of its size and needed to be stirred by a kind of gadfly. It is to fulfill some such function that I believe the god has placed me in the city. I never cease to rouse each and every one of you, to persuade and reproach you all day long and everywhere I find myself in your company."

Socrates even likened himself to Achilles, who despised death rather than shirk his responsibility to avenge his friend and live the life of a coward ever after. If Socrates is a kind of hero to many of us, dare we ask whether we are prepared to be the gadfly he claimed to be and run the risks he ran? It is a lot of trouble to speak truth to power, and it takes courage.

Recall Antigone, a heroine to many! Are we prepared to make the sacrifice she made for her defense of community mores that were out of favor in a kingdom itself out of joint?

Are these the kinds of misfits Buchanan was talking about? Are these sacrifices to be expected of you? You want to be a doctor or lawyer, a soldier or farmer, a writer or painter, a scientist or engineer, a teacher or librarian. You are attracted to politics, or investment banking, or the revolution in technology. These are all *fitting* occupations in our world, all useful to it. Was Buchanan speaking of you when he said what he did? What should distinguish you from others in the worlds you are entering when you leave here?

When Buchanan made his remark about misfits in the universe, he seemed to have used it as a punctuation to his reflection on the fate of tragic heroes. He understood that people generally identify tragedy with calamity or death, but he thought that these were merely accidental to the real point: that tragedy is about blindness and recognition, what the hero or heroine has learned from some misfortune, like Oedipus recognizing who he is - his father's killer, his mother's husband, and his children's brother - and then destroying his offending eyes that were useless to his recognition of himself as the source of the pollution in Thebes!

This may be why we sometimes call such a protagonist a "tragic hero," someone "willing to pay the price for a certain kind of integrity and rationality and honesty..." Buchanan would say. He even went so far as to say that "happiness would be the life of a hero...who's willing to pay the price" for that integrity for he will have "maintained his soul." Such happiness can extract a high price, sometimes beyond the breaking point, he acknowledged. (Of course, the tragic hero may also come to recognize his blindness without enjoying the happiness that might have followed. Recall Othello, confronting his green-eyed monster; or Lear, his blindness to a daughter's love.)

Ask yourselves: Is this what you have been up to at St. John's College: stretching your imagination, confronting your blindness and ignorance, and coming to some recognition, however tentative, of who you are in all your imperfection, what propels you to go where you must, what calls you to do what you will, what gives each of you a singular soul, what makes you whole?

Do you recognize that you have sometimes been brought to a breaking point, when it hurt you to accept your blindness of something or someone, or when you heard a voice within you that you hardly recognized confront you with a truth you wished you could deny but could not? Are you prepared to keep asking these questions when you leave here, alive to the learning now begun? Do you have the courage to maintain your integrity in a world that may often seem not to care for what you think or who you are? Will you continue this search for an understanding of yourself and your world while engaged in the career you may choose to pursue, even if you should confront an uncomfortable truth about the work you are doing?

## The Case for the World

I recognize that in trying to make a good home for our misfit, I may have come down pretty hard on the world, blaming it for our woes, setting up heroes and heroines to confront it. I now would ask you to look again at that world.

In your four years at the College, you have been asking as many questions of your world as you have of yourselves. You have studied the heavens above and the earth below, the movement of planets and the elements of matter, the conception and growth of living things and the relation of their parts to their wholes, the laws of nature (such as they are) and the forces at work in the world - even spooky action at a distance.

In the world of human affairs, you have studied political, societal, religious, psychological, historical, economic, and ethical forces that have more or less shaped the societies we live in ... or vice versa. These forces may seem more capricious than those you have studied in the laboratory, but they have nonetheless influenced the world you will be living in, the world that belongs to you as much as you belong to it.

The mysteries of the human heart, and of the soul within you, are every bit as wondrous as the mysteries of the political and the natural worlds. And so you have asked questions of the world, in part because it is your nature to wish to know, in part because you wish to know your place within that world, and in part, I dare say, because it is *your* world and you are bent on loving it as you love yourselves. It will be your *love* of the world that will bridge the divide between you and it.

Your world needs you; it needs your desire to understand it, your openness to what it has to teach you, your acceptance of its imperfections, and your sincere wish and best efforts to be useful to it because you care for it as it has cared for you, however unconscious that care may have been.

## The Case for the Hero in the World

Once again, consider Socrates and how he put the case in his own defense: that he was a *gift of the god*, and that he was attached "as upon a great and noble horse" that needed to be stirred. That great and noble horse was the City of Athens, the world's first democracy of any sort, the city that reared and educated the man, the city that Socrates so loved he would not trade a death sentence in Athens for life in any other city. This was Socrates's world. He saw his service as a gadfly to be a *divine* gift, a gift of love for his world in the hope that he could help Athens recognize the corruption within it, correct its course and recover its integrity. How different is Socrates's world from ours?

In her essay *When I was a Child I Read Books*, Marilynne Robinson located the American Western hero on the frontier, something she called "neither a place nor a thing." Such a hero could perhaps be located someplace in the imagination, on a frontier of society, a frontier of

science, a frontier of medicine or law or technology or any other discipline you might commit yourselves to. The frontier might be on the edge of a habitable wilderness, at a town hall meeting, in the workplace, or even within the warmth of a household. These frontiers will always remain open.

Robinson described the archetypal hero or heroine as sometimes a visionary, sometimes a critic, sometimes a rescuer or an avenger, expressing discontent with the status quo and a willingness, perhaps even a calling, to seek change, always with a positive interest in the good of society. But she added something more, a reflection on the beauty of human society: “Rousseau said men are born free, yet everywhere they are in chains. Since the time of the Hebrew prophets it has been the role of the outsider to loosen those chains, or lengthen them, if only by bringing the rumor of a life lived otherwise.”

The Allegory of the Cave in Plato’s *Republic* reminds us that we need help to *break* the chains that have kept us staring comfortably at the mere shadows of things; that we need to be turned around to face the reality that has been hidden from us; that we need to be dragged up the rocky slope and out into the light of the sun where we can see the extraordinary beauty of the world of things as they are; and that the journey up is a painful one. We realize how exceedingly difficult, if not impossible, it must be to make this journey to understanding alone. We need that “outsider” to shake us up and help us free ourselves to make lives worthy of our humanity.

### **The Case for Your Education**

This image of the lone individual in society should be a familiar one. Consider the paradox you face every day in your education at our College: the learning you each come to enjoy is yours alone, but you pursue it in the company of others. You make from the bits and pieces that you have read, heard, and thought through, something entirely new that belongs to you alone. And yet, you have needed others around you, helping you with your discoveries of the world, helping you uncover unsettling truths about yourselves, and opening fruitful paths to your learning.

Nonetheless, what you have learned you have *freely* learned (it is *your* learning, not a learned professor’s or someone else’s.) That freedom has helped you develop an adaptable mind, equally open to tradition and to progress, one that gives you practice in the art of inquiry, in asking the questions the human race has asked since mankind first began to speak. They are questions arising from the depths of wonder; questions revealing the vast extent of your ignorance about the world and about yourselves; questions demonstrating a startling truth: that your ignorance is the source of your greatest strength. For it is ignorance, not knowledge, that will propel you forward. It generates the *desire* to know, which draws you expectantly into the unknown.

This humility of the intellect is actually a powerful force. We often call it wisdom, and it is one of the things the world needs: a good understanding of how to develop and where to direct our

desire to know and our desire to be better women and men. This generative force is also something your professions will need, something your co-workers and neighbors will need and hopefully appreciate, and something your children will need to live well in the world they will one day inherit.

You are fit to enter the world, having had four years of practice in the art of recognition without having to pay the price of an Oedipus or an Antigone or an Othello or a Lear. You have had this practice within the confines of a relatively safe classroom and among friends who have helped you recognize what you don't know and what you still need to learn to grapple with what the world will throw at you. These friends - the books and the natural objects of your study, your tutors, and your classmates – these friends have helped you understand both the limitations of your reach and the possibilities open to you. They have freed you from conventional thinking, freed you to doubt what you have been taught about the world, and thus freed you to imagine a world different from the one you find yourselves in and the possibility of a future that you may lay claim to one day, a future you may even help to shape.

This mention of the power of the imagination reminds me of a story that may shed some light on what Buchanan might have had in mind when he said we were making misfits in the universe. Stringfellow Barr, president of St. John's when Buchanan was dean, said this of his friend: "The difference between Scott and me was that when I see a baby, I'm enchanted with him; and Scott is always feeling, 'Well, that's not the baby I had in mind. Babies ought to do better than that.' All human enterprises, including birth, seem to him a little disappointing. He's a Platonist in the sense he's got some notion of the baby in the back of his mind that no baby lives up to, whereas to me it's such a miracle the little brat is alive – so what, if he has defects. His ears stick out and he's cross-eyed, certainly, but he's alive." Barr was talking then about the birth of the St. John's Program, but his observations about Buchanan – about Buchanan as a kind of Socrates – these observations may help us understand how Buchanan saw the world in general, and that only misfits were well fit to recognize the world as it is and the world as it is meant to be ... and then to make the effort to do something to close the gap between the two.

It is now your turn to take the gift of your education out into the world, which needs the open, thoughtful, loving stewards, critics, and visionaries you are capable of being. May you fare well and find happiness in this endeavor!

Thank you!