

Empowering Readers for a Just and Humane World

New Student Academic Convocation
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Thank you Dean McKeon for presenting to me these first year students, the class who will graduate at 9.30 am on Sunday, June 13, 2010, at Qwest Field. Thank you from all of us to you and all in Enrollment Services who recruited, reviewed, offered aid, and enrolled this class. In effect you have done your work and you are handing them over to the university for their education. As president I now formally entrust them into the care, the classrooms, the science labs, the collegueship of the faculty. My job today is an easy one and an enjoyable one to introduce you the faculty to your students and to introduce you the students to your faculty.

I get to say a few words in doing so, and it's not like me to pass up the chance. It's a new day, so it's a brand new talk. You tell me what number it is.

I told a story Saturday about a hike, where I take my soul for a spin. Well yesterday morning I also took my soul for a spin by walking around Green Lake at dawn. At the end I was doing my stretches against a bench where on a large slab of concrete there was a large design and saying in blue, pink, and yellow chalk. I puzzled it out and it read "Be the change U want to see in the world". Wow, I thought, some new first year student got up early today—or more likely stayed up late last night—to write out her motto and commitment for her college education. I had a clue that this might be true in that the "you" in "Be the change U want to see in the world" was a capital letter "U" like the one I said—and they let me actually get away with this—is the U that is not missing on their Seattle U. tee-shirts because you/U are the one who is wearing it?

"Be the change U want to see in the world" is not far from our mission of "Seattle University is dedicated to educating the whole person, to professional formation, and to empowering leaders for a just and humane world". Unpack any one of those and you find the other two. Let's just try that last part again as you did yesterday, just to warm you up. Say after me "empowering leaders for a just and humane world".

I want to talk about one aspect of the “empowering leaders for a just and humane world” in this your academic convocation, your introduction to your faculty, your educators, your launch into a new academic and intellectual collegueship with them. I and all of us at Seattle U. believe deeply in what I am now going to say and that we believe is at the center of the new world you are being introduced to today.

Here’s how I get at it and what I want to say. I heard this past year a lecturer on campus say: “All leaders are avid readers”. That stuck with me and I know it’s true. Every single one I’ve known whether mayors, governors, corporate leaders, generals, moral leaders, leaders for justice, leaders in the arts... all leaders are avid readers. It’s true also of the Jeffersons, Lincolns, Kennedys, Nelson Mandelas, Mahatma Gandhis, Martin Luther Kings, Bill Clintons, Bill Gates, Bonos, Fr. Sullivans, etc. All leaders are avid readers. That is not coincidental.

Through reading you thread your way from yourself to your worlds, you thread yourself from yourself to the other. It’s not threading the eye of the needle, it’s threading yourself, threading your I through the need of the world. Reading is the active, creative, imaginative, thoughtful, reflecting, puzzling, critical, feeling, full way of placing oneself in relationship to reality. It is not everything, but nothing can substitute for reading: learning and loving and living the art of reading.

So I am out to champion a one-letter variation in that mission of ours to give it some of its fuller meaning in this university. I want to take “empowering leaders for a just and human world” and proclaim “empowering readers for a just and humane world”. My view is clear: you can either read your way to leadership, or you can lead your way into readership. They belong together: “All leaders are avid readers”.

You may think this is too intellectual a point of view. I would rather challenge us to recognize how anti-intellectual a culture we live in. How easily the public at large, and politicians and “real world” corporate bosses can dismiss and denigrate and marginalize universities as hotbeds or hothouses of “academicians” or “intellectuals”, read “not in touch with the way things really are”. Exactly the opposite is true; it’s just that the realities we are not only in touch with but actually think about are quite uncomfortable and full realities. Or how often in our anti-intellectual culture do you hear “Get out of your head and into your heart”? Baloney! Getting into your head just happens to be for the human the highway to

the heart. Of course the heart is important—and especially in a university like this—but there is no danger in America of undervaluing the heart because of overprizing thinking. A motto we have clung to at Seattle U. for about eight years now is “connecting the mind to what matters” against all suggestions to expand it to “connecting the mind and the heart and the spirit and the body and the self and everything else of the whole person to what matters”. We resist this because if you add everything to mind, then mind no longer matters. For a university, especially for a Jesuit university, mind very much matters, or else nothing else works.

You are in for a big shock this Wednesday, Thursday, and Friday as you begin your first classes. You will get a syllabus in each of them that will lay out the course and the reading assignments of the course. You’ll likely be saying to yourself in the class and to your new friends afterwards: “She has got to be kidding!”; “Who does he think we are?”; “How can we possibly do all that reading?” Welcome to the university. Professors are not torturers. Reading is no longer “homework”; it’s now your life. You don’t take reading home. Reading is now the home where you live. Settle in, move in, make yourself at home in reading, decorate the home of your reading, furnish it, put out the welcome mat, invite over your friends, visit the home of reading of your professors. If you are really reading, the whole person is engaged actively: learning, exploring, pondering, analyzing, being stirred and moved, expanding, imagining oneself into a big world and a bigger self and a more intimate and mysterious God. Books create worlds in worlds: travel widely. “Empowering readers for a just and humane world”... You can’t begin to know—much less be an empowered leader of—the world, or what just is, or what is humane, without wide, deep, continuous reading. All leaders are avid readers.

I remember the late novelist Chaim Potok telling how when he was in college he was transported from his Hasidic Jewish Brooklyn neighborhood into the English aristocratic countryside by Evelyn Waugh’s *Brideshead Revisited*. Potok commented: I was fascinated that you could “create whole worlds in words”.

When I was an eleven year old boy in Juneau, Alaska, one dark cold rainy Saturday morning, I asked my Dad if he might have in the library of his den, where we were not allowed to go, a book that I might enjoy. He said, “Yes, son. I think I do.” He disappeared into the den and came out handing me Mark Twain’s *Huckleberry Finn*. I went back upstairs, put my pajamas back on, got in bed, started reading, and I have never stopped reading. The world of Huck and Tom

and Jim on a raft on the Mississippi River was about as different a world from Juneau as you could find. Reading took me there. I threaded my way through that world, explored it through reading.

I loved books like *Dogsledding Alone to the Northpole*, or *Sailing Alone Around the World*, or *The Lonely Lighthouse Keeper*. You see, in those books I was exploring my path in life, my Jesuit priestly vocation, and how I would keep the stormy world safe from my lighthouse watch! One summer in Fairbanks I served Mass at 7:00 am each day, showed up at the log-cabin public library when it opened at 8:00, turned in the book from the previous day, and checked out a new one. I read a book a day that summer. I was a slow reader then and still am today.

There was a famous Jesuit here for 45 years, a legend, a kind of Mr. Chips or Fr. Chips of Seattle U.: Fr. LeRoux. He was not five feet tall but he had a raspy voice and a crusty manner that made up for what he lacked in height. At the commencement before his death two years ago we gave him an honorary degree at Qwest Field. Engulfed in cap and gown in his wheelchair he said “I have some advice for you graduates: read a book; turn off the boob tube and read a book!” (The boob tube is how his generation referred to the television.) I think you get the point.

What I’m really talking about though—as he was—is not reading what is assigned in your classes. If I stop you and ask you on the mall “What are you reading?”, I’m not asking what course you are taking and so what readings you are doing, but what you are reading. I dare you to ask that of your professors—you might wait till after the first week!—“What are you reading?”

You may be asking yourself, “Well how am I going to find time to read?” There is a presumption in that question. I took a check on myself and found that in this last year I read 40 books: novels, histories, sociology, poetry collections, autobiographies, scripture studies, political science, science fiction, art history, For Love of Country by Martha Nussbaum and others—just like you I read it—theology, economics, technology, business, education. Hey and I’ve got a job! I don’t read because I have time, I read because I don’t have time... and so can you and so should you.

On this day of your academic orientation to Seattle University—in this city of Seattle that leads the nation in reading, that is as famous for its reading as for its raining—as you are being introduced to your faculty and them to you, a very good place to start, since our mission is “empowering leaders for a just and humane world”, is to recognize that “All leaders are avid readers”, and so for today to make that mission “empowering readers for a just and humane world”. These leaders are you because, hopefully, those readers are also you.