

Graduation Address

Los Angeles, May 17, 2004

“The Love Of Learning and The Desire For God”

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THE LOVE OF LEARNING AND THE DESIRE FOR GOD
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As a teacher I know that questions lie at the heart of the educational process. And what is more characteristic of Jewish learning than posing and pursuing questions?

So in that spirit I have a question to pose, albeit not an original one but from a poem of Mary Oliver, “The Summer Day”:

Tell me, what is it you plan to do
With your one wild and precious life?¹

Now it may seem that those who graduate today have already made their choice by committing themselves to years of rigorous graduate education. They have entrusted their one, wild and precious lives to the continuing vitality of Jewish tradition. Another generation of rabbis, Jewish educators and communal professionals has entered into the knowledge and wisdom of generations of learned Jews, thanks to the scholarship and teaching of their dedicated professors, the support of family and friends, and the generosity of donors to this school.

But working as a Jewish communal professional or educator or rabbi does not fully answer the question. Those are roles, professional positions each of you will inhabit with your distinct gifts, desires, and limitations. The question is a question about *your* calling, *your* vocation. By vocation I mean, as Frederick Buechner suggests, the place God calls you to is the place where your deep gladness and the world's deep hunger meet.”² The question, then, is how you will live out your distinct passion in service to others.

What will *you* do with your one, wild and precious life?

We know, of course, that we are not entirely free agents in addressing this question. Life happens to us—events transpire that we had not anticipated, obligations not sought summon us, and uninvited sorrow nevertheless makes its mark upon us. The answer we might attempt at twenty-five is not likely to be the one we make at fifty or seventy-five. It's a great question because we can never answer it once for all.

What might contribute to keeping this question before us? Let me suggest a few possibilities?

The first is to choose situations that keep us alive—and to have the courage to leave behind those that deaden us. We are entrusted with handing on our respective

¹ Mary Oliver, “The Summer Day,” in *New and Selected Poems* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1992).

² Frederick Buechner, *Wishful Thinking* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1993), 119.

religious traditions in their all their vitality and promise—so we must keep our imaginations alive, our curiosity vibrant, our spirit nourished, and our own energy refreshed.

Yet too many experience our religious traditions as boring, even deadening (or maybe even deadly). Another poet and essayist, Annie Dillard, offers this diagnosis of the churches:

Why do we people in churches seem like cheerful, brainless tourists on a packaged tour of the Absolute? ...On the whole, I do not find Christians ...sufficiently sensible of conditions. Does anyone have the foggiest idea what sort of power we so blithely invoke? Or, as I suspect, does no one believe a word of it? The churches are children playing on the floor with their chemistry sets, mixing up a batch of TNT to kill a Sunday morning. It is madness to wear ladies' straw hats and velvet hats to church; we should all be wearing crash helmets. Ushers should issue life preserves and signal flares; they should lash us to our pews.³

I will leave it to you to decide whether it would be appropriate to change a few of the references—as in “people in the synagogues”... “Jews mixing up a batch of TNT to kill a Saturday morning”?

Dillard's memorable, if hyperbolic, admonition that we should be wearing crash helmets to church and synagogue invites us to understand the “wild” aspect of our “one wild and precious life”: We are involved with the Divine, the Ein Sof, the One who speaks in the “still sound voice” (1 Kings 19:12; the New Revised Standard Version translates this as the “sound of sheer silence”). Are we ourselves “sufficiently sensible of conditions,” awake to the mystery of the Holy One in our midst? Are we alive with the desire for God, alive with the desire to commit to what God desires: the flourishing of all creation? Yet, doing what God desires is difficult to discern in every age. Listening for the sound of sheer silence is a particular challenge amidst the cacophony of our culture's contentious voices.

Simone Weil, that mystic who never felt herself fully at home in either of our traditions, makes a vital connection between what she calls “school studies” and service to others. She contends that the “development of the faculty of attention forms the real object and almost the sole interest of studies.” Attention, however, arises not from expending “muscular effort” but from desire: “The joy of learning is as indispensable in study as breathing is in running.” For Weil, every “school exercise” is a special way of waiting upon and setting our hearts on truth. “Not only does the love of God have attention for its substance,” Weil wrote, “the love of our neighbor, which we know to be the same love, is made of this same substance.”

The capacity to give one's attention to a sufferer is a very rare and difficult thing; it is almost a miracle; it *is* a miracle.... Warmth of heart, impulsiveness, pity are not enough.

...

The love of our neighbor in all its fullness simply means being able to say to him [her]: “What are you going through?”

³ Annie Dillard, *Teaching a Stone to Talk* (New York: HarperCollins, 1982), 58.

This way of looking is first of all attentive. The soul empties itself of all its own contents in order to receive into itself the being it is looking at, just as he [she] is, in all his truth.

Only he [she] who is capable of attention can do this.⁴

So in Weil's perspective, we go to school to ameliorate that attention deficit that is cured not by medication but by a desire to marry our deep gladness with the world's deep hunger.

I think that rabbi of the memorable name, Ben Bag-Bag had a keen sense of how we might do this: "Turn the Torah, turn it again and again, for everything you want to know is found within it. See with it, grow old and worn with it, and swerve not away from it, for you do not have a better pursuit" (Pirke Avot 2:25).

Perhaps the reason I have long been taken with this counsel to "turn it again and again" is that I have been privileged to be part of several generations of Christians who have been engaged in our own turning—the turning again and again of our New Testament texts and subsequent tradition. When turned one way, we see divine disclosure. When turned another, we see the polemical language of antiquity. When turned still another, we see our ancestors in faith using these texts to rationalize hostility toward and violence against Jews. When turned yet again, we see the imperative of contextual interpretations that will counter such sacrilegious uses of our texts. From this last turning we must not—and will not—turn back.

In this process of turning and turning our texts, many in the Christian churches are themselves making that turning that is *teshuvah*. To be sure, this turning will not be accomplished in our time, nor can it alone stem the tide of antisemitism that once again threatens the Jewish people. But the church is indeed changing its posture toward Judaism.

As I was thinking about this turning, a memory from a course last spring came to mind. I was teaching "Studies in Jewish-Christian Relations," in which a significant proportion of the class is composed of students from the Jewish Theological Seminary of America (dare I mention this here?). One of the requirements is that the students must form study groups across the boundaries of difference, including religious tradition, race, and ethnicity. I give a wide latitude for what they do together, and ask only that one person from the group e-mail me a brief summary of what has transpired at each of their meetings.

This is one report I received last May, written by a JTS student, Lisa Malik, about the last meeting with her *chevruta*, Union Theological Students, Jill Lum and Julie Petrie:

From: Lisa Malik

To: mboys@uts.columbia.edu

Cc: jill@lum.net ; Jillum@aol.com ; jp750@columbia.edu

Sent: Thursday, May 08, 2003 12:16 PM

Subject: Study Group Notes

⁴ All references are to her essay, "Reflections on the Right Use of School Studies with a View to the Love of God," in Simone Weil, *Waiting for God*, trans. Emma Craufurd (New York: Harper Colophon Books, 1973).

*UTS Study Group- Jill Lum, Lisa Malik, Julie Petrie
May 6, 2003*

After class, the three of us went to see the film, The Pianist. The film tells the story of a musician, Szpilman, who survives the Holocaust. As the granddaughter of Holocaust survivors, I tend to be moved by films about the Shoah. Throughout The Pianist, I felt particularly moved and agitated, perhaps because it so reminded me of my family's own experiences. Like Szpilman, my grandparents were "in hiding" in Poland during the war. Like Szpilman, they were not sent to a concentration camp. Admittedly, as a child, I always felt apologetic about my grandparents' story because they were not in concentration camps; somehow, I always imagined that being "in hiding" was a lesser form of horror than the camps. But, I have grown to realize that there shouldn't be any 'competitions' when it comes to this tragedy. Genocide is genocide. Dehumanization is dehumanization.

....

After the film, Julie and Jill were virtually speechless. But their silence was not the silence of apathy. They so wanted to listen and to offer their emotional support. Even during the movie, they kept looking at me to see if I was okay. A few times, they reached over to touch me. They hugged and kissed me at the end of the night. Those gestures were the most powerful form of communication, even more moving than words. That night, I had an "A-ha" moment. This is what Jewish-Christian dialogue is all about. It's about forging relationships, so that words are sometimes not even necessary. I wonder if this is the way to prevent another Holocaust from happening. If people of different religions and ethnicities form real relationships with each other, then maybe it won't be so easy to hate. Perhaps the Nazi perpetrators and non-Nazi Gentile collaborators and by-standers would not have been so quick to participate in Hitler's Final Solution if they had had real relationships with Jews.

"They kept looking at me to see if I was okay. ...they reached over to touch me. They hugged and kissed me at the end of the night. Those gestures were the most powerful form of communication, even more moving than words." In their turning toward Lisa, Jill and Julie embodied what I mean about the church's new posture toward Jews.

Lisa's phrase, "forging real relationships," highlights one desire I have for what the Class of 2004 will do with your wild and precious lives: form relationships with your Christian counterparts. To say the obvious, Christians cannot have "real relationships with Jews" without reciprocity. Our traditions are not symmetrical. The differences between them are real and profound. But we have much to learn from those differences, not only about the other, but about ourselves. Diana Eck, a Christian who is a scholar of the religions of India, says about her experience: "My encounter with Hindus has enabled me to understand my own faith more clearly and has required that I

understand my own faith differently.”⁵ So, too, I believe, with Christians and Jews: real relationships with the other result in deepened knowledge of our *own* tradition as well as a new angle of vision on it.

Perhaps at this juncture it is appropriate to express profound gratitude for my friendship with Professor Sara S. Lee, whose dedication to Jewish education inspires enormous respect and, I confess, a degree of envy. Would that we had more such educators in my own tradition!

Some may object that the enormity of the tasks within your own tradition makes interreligious exchange peripheral or optional. I haven’t been friends with Sara for nearly twenty years without learning something of the issues, problems and needs in Jewish communities. But the truth is that the demands within *all* our communities are so pressing that we may be tempted to devote our energies entirely within. Yet there are consequences to becoming an *enclave culture of religious professionals*—a sort of narrowing of the imagination and a constriction of our common humanity.

Part of the responsibility we have to our world is to help people negotiate the borders of religious differences. This spring the Association for Canadian studies polled 2014 people, asking what factors they thought might be the biggest source of tension between groups in Canada (e.g., between whites and peoples of color, between Aboriginals and non-Aboriginals, English and French, different ethnic groups). Much to everyone’s surprise, the largest percentage *ranked religion first*, some 47 percent in Ontario and 43 percent in Quebec, and about 33 percent on average in the other provinces.⁶ This is both bad news and good news: bad insofar as we seem to have learned so little from history, good insofar as we have heightened awareness of the ways in which religion can have such toxic effects on intergroup relations. It makes all the more appropriate the dictum of Hans Küng: “There can be no peace among nations without peace among religions. There can be no peace among religions without dialogue between them. There can be no dialogue between the religions without research into theological foundations.”⁷

So, members of the Class of 2004: May your gifts of knowledge, healing and wisdom enrich the Jewish people. May your gifts also transcend your own community and be a blessing to all of us. May what you have worked so hard to learn helped to give form to Zechariah’s vision (8:4): “Old men and old women shall sit again in the streets of Jerusalem, each with staff in hand because of their great age. And the streets of the city shall be full of boys and girls playing in its streets.” May that peace we pray for Jerusalem encircle all the world’s peoples. And may you live in such a way that you live into your answer to this final exam question:

Tell me, what is it you plan to do
With your one wild and precious life?

⁵ Diana L. Eck, *Encountering God: A Spiritual Journey from Bozeman to Banaras* (Boston: Beacon, 1993), xii.

⁶ Sue Montgomery, “Religion Ranks First for Social Strife: Poll,” *The Gazette*, May 8, 2004: A-1, 4.

⁷ Hans Küng, *Global Responsibility: In Search of a New World Ethic* (London: SCM Press), 105.

