

Remarks for retirement party, April 27, 2006

I well remember the first retirement party I attended at Southwestern, for Wanda Lancaster, a remarkable woman with a great passion for wildflowers. She was the director of special events, back when there was precious little money to spend on anything: we didn't even have Xerox machines in those days. So Wanda would drive out into the county before a special event, to places where she knew she could find good flowers to adorn the occasion.

At her retirement party, Wanda spoke a memorable sentence: "I'm grateful to Southwestern because it allowed me to be creative."

I've hoped to be able to say that when I retire. And I can say it, and I do say it.

It's been a wonderful thirty years with much to be happy about, and I'll spare you a list of the good things we do today that we weren't doing back then. But don't let anybody tell you that it was all just sweet abundance in those good old days, as tide of money kept running higher and higher.

All that new money posed serious challenges, and we didn't meet all of them well. We had lots of exasperations and fights, and made mistakes, including serious mistakes. And I'm not the only one who thought from time to time "What Southwestern needs right now is three or four good funerals."

New opportunities and difficulties are coming on. The mission of the liberal arts remains central to the human enterprise, and is likely to come increasingly under threat.

I don't know why so many of our fellow Americans shut down their brains, and give bellicose slavish allegiance to religious and quasi-religious fanaticisms. The newspapers yesterday had an amusing story about a high school club called "Witnesses to Absolute Truth," and of course there are many stories that are not amusing.

The work we do --- the attempt to understand our world, to develop our creative capacities, and to ground decisions in values we have examined and continue to examine, and the marvelous business of bringing young people to share in

this adventure --- this work will have to make its way increasingly among people who respond to independent thinking with abhorrence.

The pursuit of learning produces momentous social benefits, but it also generates the deepest kind of fun; and it is fulfilling beyond measure to do this in the company of young people finding their own world. Southwestern allows us all, in this completed sense, to "be creative."

As I thought about these remarks, a scrap of Shakespeare kept popping uninvited into my mind. It's an exchange between Glendower, a elderly mystical-minded Welsh King, and a witty young Scotsman named Hotspur.

"I can call spirits from the vasty deep" says Glendower.

"Why so can I, and so can any man," Hotspur replies, "**BUT WILL THEY COME** when you do call for them?"

For a teacher of the young, the answer to that question needs to be "YES." The spirits must come when we call them.

When we walk into a classroom and close the door,
educational reality begins.

What begins is a disciplined effort to look through the
surfaces of the natural world, the social order, the welter
of psychic life, the record of human achievement in music,
literature, politics, economics, and drama --- the deposit
of many agelong histories --- to look through their
flashing surfaces to structures demonstrably at work
underneath.

At its best, our work causes the truth of the thing to
become visible, clearly discernable, right there in the
classroom. An intangible algorithm of thought is found to
inform and make sense of the subject matter at hand.

For a teacher of literature, as I expect for all of us,
working toward such an understanding has the effect of
making the subject matter itself come alive. We summon King
Lear from the vasty deep, and he appears among us. We
summon David Copperfield and the Wife of Bath. We summon
the great salt-sea mastodon, Moby Dick, and the demoniac
Ahab chasing him.

And when the class is over, the effort to find the truth, to tell the truth, leaves us emptied out; and the truth of things itself, having seemed so intensely present, again subsides beneath the flashing surface of our daily preoccupations.

We then have a troubled awareness of missing something, of not having seen things truly, of a mystery remaining, as our fancied knowledge slips out of frame under the pressure of something that remains unknown. Then our knowledge, like ourselves, reveals its transience.

We are such stuff as dreams are made on, says another conjure man that Shakespeare dreamed up, and our little lives are rounded with a sleep.

I'm deeply grateful for your friendship and for our joint labors over so many years, and for your coming today to usher me joyfully across this threshold.