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REFLECTIONS ON THE LIVING TRADITION

Jesuit Education and the Task of Thinking in Modernity

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[Editorial Note: The following address, delivered by Mark Freeman at the 1995 Alpha Sigma Nu induction ceremony at the College of the Holy Cross, captures a moment of intellectual and personal reflection at the intersection of tradition and transformation. Freeman, who had received the Alpha Sigma Nu National Book Award for his work *Rewriting the Self: History, Memory, Narrative* the previous year, brings his characteristic insight to bear on the evolving challenges of higher education in a "post-absolute" world. Though deeply personal in tone, the speech is also a meditation on the enduring task of Jesuit education: the formation of thoughtful, morally grounded individuals capable of navigating uncertainty with depth and care. In recounting his own unexpected journey into the heart of Jesuit pedagogy, Freeman not only offers a vivid snapshot of Holy Cross at a particular historical moment, but also gestures toward the timeless work of meaning-making, ethical discernment, and intellectual hospitality. Preserved here in its original form, this talk serves both as a tribute to the tradition of Jesuit humanism and as an invitation to reconsider its promise today—at a time when the call to think, to reflect, and to build lives of purpose remains as urgent as ever.]

Let me begin by saying how happy I am to be here tonight, in this role. I have to confess to you that there is a kind of sweet irony to all of this for me, mainly because my own religious and cultural background is, how shall we say, a bit different than the one embodied here. At one point last week

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when I was trying to figure out what I might say tonight, I for some reason conjured up a scene from Woody Allen's movie *Annie Hall,* when he's invited to dinner at his WASP girlfriend's home in the Midwest and all of a sudden imagines that, in the eyes of everyone there—all robust and proper and cornfed—he must look like some skinny, anemic rabbi, the very epitome of all of that was not-WASP, the Other. Another time last week I thought about what I might say tonight I was at my own family's dinner table at my brother's house in Connecticut: all the loud and passionate exchanges about politics, the sarcasm, the New York accents, the wine and the cold cuts (or, as they say, the "deli") strewn all around the table, a wonderfully familiar tableau—the kind of scene that Seinfeld would have been right at home in . . .

What would I say at that induction ceremony? What *could* I say? How did all this happen anyway? How has it been possible for it to work? Well, I'm going to try to answer this partly in a personal way, partly in a philosophical way; and in the process of doing so I'm also going to try to articulate why a place like Holy Cross may be uniquely prepared to lead us into the third millennium. And all of this, mind you, in 10–12 minutes. Here goes.

I'm going to begin with the last idea, this idea that we here—students, faculty, members of the Jesuit community—may in fact be uniquely prepared to seize the present moment and use it as a tool for thinking and for leading us into the future. We live in what might be called a "post-absolute" world, a world where the values and traditions of the past are often radically cast into question, a world where one person's vision of the good life can be another's worst dream, a world where the very idea of the absolute brings up all too readily images of foot soldiers, marching in lockstep, the precise machinery of totalitarian violence. Now, there is a dimension of this postabsolute world about which I'm speaking here that is extraordinarily important and valuable. There wouldn't have been a civil rights movement if there hadn't been people willing to upend the status quo, to reject the "tradition" of white superiority and privilege and to think anew about certain values that had been thought absolute and immovable. There wouldn't have been women's movement if there hadn't been people willing to think deeply about difference and about the fact that we often seem to mistake culture for nature, fixed and unchanging nature, which of course can lead, sometimes problematically, to our assuming in turn that we do what we do because that's who we are, by design. There wouldn't have been such fascinating ferment in the humanities, in the sciences, and so forth, if there hadn't been people who could look at the practices and the discursive frameworks inherent in their respective disciplines and ask why:

Why should we, as literary critics, for instance, assume that there are these wonderfully coherent meanings, presences, just sitting there, waiting to be unearthed, in the books we read? Perhaps there are other things entirely that might be done with books, other ways of dealing with them, other meanings to be had than the ones ordained by the defenders of the faith. Why should we, as scientists or as historians of science, assume that history represents the steady march of progress toward "objective knowledge" rather than a series of shifting theoretical worldviews, essentially incommensurable with one another? Perhaps, in other words, there are other ways entirely of thinking about science, what it is and does, and about its claims—or about the claims of some its practitioners at any rate—to embody the unvarnished truth about things.

Needless to say, the same sorts of things could be said about religion too and the changes it's undergone in the wake of such thinkers as Nietzsche, Marx, and Freud, not to mention theologians and the like, interested in rethinking and reworking many of those dogmas that seem to have little foundation other than power.

I could go on, but I trust you get the idea: Our living in a post-absolute world has brought a great many changes to all of our lives; it's shaken them up and allowed us to see certain things that we might have been unable to see before due to our blind faith—whether in literary meaning, scientific progress, or what have you. To use a fashionable term in this context, many of our cherished idols have been "deconstructed," exposed for their pretensions to the absolute and undermined, undone. The result is that we now take a critical and indeed skeptical eye toward many of those things that had formerly gone unquestioned. We might also call this world we've come to inhabit a "who says?" world; and there is no denying, and no point in denying, that it's loosened things up quite a bit, which can be good.

At the same time—and I think especially of students in this context, struggling to find meaning and value, ways to live—this very looseness can lead to confusion, ethical paralysis, and, in some cases, despair: it can be difficult to find meaning and value in a world that often seems to do its best to prevent it from happening. I'm not just referring here, by the way, to those trends of intellectual life that seek to undermine and deconstruct but to those trends that exist in the wider world that make it difficult for all of us to feel rooted and at home: I'm talking about a world of economic pressures, "technologized" realities, urban violence and weird militias, peopled by misfits, like the one apparently responsible for blowing away half a building and a piece of our collective hope.[1]

1 This reference is to Timothy McVeigh, who was responsible for the bombing of the Alfred P. Murrah Federal Building in Oklahoma City on April 19, 1995,

Now, what's happened, of course, in much of contemporary life—in politics, in the media, and in the academy—is that a lot of people, threatened by what looks like nihilism, a *world* coming undone, unravelling, have turned to "fundamentalisms" of one sort or another. Please understand that I am emphatically not just talking about religion here: I'm talking about the literary critic who bemoans the bewildering array of deconstructive critical strategies presently in play, sees the end of civilization, and pleads for the return of the old ways, which felt so much surer and firmer. I'm talking about the politician who is fed up with multiculturalism and relativism and moral decay and who insists, once more, that we return to the good old days and the good old ways, before everything got so mucked up and uncertain. In the face of what looks like what Nietzsche called the "transvaluation of all values," there often emerges the desire for bedrock, an attempt to stem the tide.

hat I want to suggest with these two sides of modernity in mind—we can call them the deconstructive and the fundamentalist—is that in-between them there exists a tremendously important space for thinking. I'll put it this way: The task of thinking in a post-absolute world is to question radically any and all words that present themselves as final, "to acknowledge and respect differences," as a prominent publication puts it, while at the same time remaining open "to that sense of the whole which calls us to transcend ourselves and challenges us to seek that which might constitute our common humanity."

"What are our obligations to one another? What is our special responsibility to the world's poor and powerless? How do we find meaning in life and history?" For those who may not know, a number of the words I just used are from our mission statement, which in many ways is about precisely that space of thinking I tried to identify for you just before. I'll even go one step further here and put the issue as follows: In large measure, the task of thinking in a world such as our own is, I believe, an "ethico-religious" one, by which I mean one that is oriented toward articulating the good life and the deep mystery of being with as much passion for truth as we can possibly muster. One might think of this task as a "reconstructive" rather than a deconstructive one; and its aim is both to salvage what can be salvaged from the past and to build new buildings, new edifices of meaning and value, that might help us live better with one another.

When I arrived at Holy Cross, I had no idea what to expect. It never seemed a threatening place—my first contact here was, after all, Chick

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which resulted in the deaths of 168 people and which, at the time, was the deadliest terrorist attack on U.S. soil.

Weiss[2]—but I had no idea whether I'd fit in. As it turned out, I taught a variety of philosophically oriented courses in psychology back then and I thought about a lot of things, along with my students, that seemed pretty consonant with Jesuit education as I understood it. The "search for meaning and value," the mission statement says, "is at the heart of the intellectual life." Well, I was certainly a meaning-and-value guy right from the very start, and I basically felt at home doing the sorts of things I did; so, it seemed like I could fit in. Slowly but surely, though, something strange—and wonderful—happened. Different kinds of books would find their way into some of my courses—books about the soul, about psychology's virtual abandonment of the religious domain, and about the search for meaning—and different kinds of issues found their way into my own soul and mind. A two-course sequence I did early on with Steve Ainlay[3] called "Living in the Modern World" helped this along, as did my involvement in the First Year Program (FYP), which I came to feel ought to place front and center some of those issues that seemed to make Holy Cross unique.[4] I even made a plea at one point during the planning stage that the FYP should be about religion, about faith and reason, and so forth; but I was told, I forget by whom, that that could get a little bit heavy and that if we wanted the program to be accepted we'd have to come up with a broader rubric. In any case, there I was, the guy from New York with the noisy family and the cold cuts, pleading with his colleagues, at the College of the Holy Cross, to find a more adequate place for the religious. Next year, meanwhile, I'll be teaching, for the first time, a course on "Psychology and Religious Experience," focusing especially on the issue of holiness and transcendence. Strange but true. And so, to make a long story short. what had begun as a matter of "fitting in" has become something very, very different; it's become a matter of devotion, of helping to shape the life of this place, intellectually, socially,

2 Chick Weiss was the Chair of the Department of Psychology at Holy Cross who greeted me when I arrived for my job interview back in 1986 and, owing to our shared background and sensibility, quickly "reassured" me that Holy Cross was a good and appropriate place for me to be. He and I are the closest of friends to this very day.

3 Steve Ainlay is another good friend and colleague, with whom I worked closely both in the classroom and when he became Dean of the College and I became Associate Dean. I might also note that Steve went to dinner with Chick and me right after my job talk, and we had a darned good time, which seems to have sealed the deal for all of us.

4 At the heart of Holy Cross's First Year Program, which began in Fall 1992 and was for approximately a fifth of the entering class, was the question: "How then shall we live?" It was a great program, and very much in the spirit of Jesuit educational philosophy and pedagogy.

and spiritually, as both a teacher and now as an administrator. And again, it's also become a matter of seeing—in a way it might have been impossible to see had I landed elsewhere—that the search for meaning and value is, in significant part, a religious quest.

At one point after Father Brooks[5] announced his retirement, Irene Cole asked me, playfully of course, whether I'd be a candidate for the presidency of the College. And I immediately said sure: Mark Freeman, S.J.: Mark Freeman, Some Jewish guy. Well, I'm still that guy, but something else in addition; somehow a difference and a distance has been bridged; there's been a new link formed in the chain of our common humanity. I'm extraordinarily grateful to the College for what it's given me, which is not only a home but hope, in the possibility that this chain can grow longer and stronger.

What I want to say, in closing, to the students out there who've become a part of Alpha Sigma Nu, is two things. First, congratulations: you've accomplished a great deal, and you should be proud of what you've done. Second, I want you to realize that how long and strong the chain of humanity becomes is very much dependent on what you do in the world. So, rise to the occasion of being human, live your life deeply and well, and use your excellent minds, your talents, and your love to help make this world a better one.

Further Reading:

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Ricoeur, Paul. *Hermeneutics and the Human Sciences*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1981.

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5 John Brooks, S.J. (1923–2012), was the President of Holy Cross when I arrived and during my early years at the College. He was an extraordinary figure, mythical in a way, and it was my great good fortune to work under his direction during those formative years.