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REFLECTIONS on a
CHURCH-RELATED HIGHER EDUCATION

of

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Thank you very much for that generous introduction. I am ~~absolutely~~ delighted to join you here at Valparaiso. I am honored to be invited to speak at this first inaugural address honoring past president Albert Huegli, who brought such distinguished leadership to this institution. The fact that a lecture has been named in your honor stands as a testament to the dignity and respect that you hold among your peers.

I have been asked to talk about the purposes of church-related education, and I ~~thought I might~~ *should* note at the very outset that the impact of such education has been profoundly influential in my own life. My parents enrolled me as a high school junior in a Brethren boarding school in Harrisburg, Pennsylvania, where for the first time in my life I felt that my educational, social, and spiritual needs were brought together. I attended a small, Methodist liberal arts college to complete my baccalaureate degree. I taught briefly at a Jesuit institution, Loyola University, and then for five years I served as academic dean at a small, church-related college in California.

All of these experiences profoundly shaped my life. They reinforced the influence of deeply religious parents, and they were also an extension of the influence of my grandfather, a preacher who taught me by his saintly life the lessons of Christian living. Attending church-related colleges and schools also persuaded me that education of the highest quality can be fostered when faith and learning are intertwined. I am greatly indebted to a tradition that is continued by Valparaiso University.

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 As I thought about what represents the essence of church-related education, I decided that it has to do with the climate on the campus. Without oversimplifying a complicated issue, I suggest that a church-related education can be well described in one simple word—"connections." The connections I have in mind reveal themselves not in the structure of the institution, but in the spirit of the campus, and in three essential ways.

First, the quality of a church-related college is revealed not just by its theology, but also by the quality of communication on the campus, in the way the students and the faculty and the administrators are connected verbally to each other.

Communication through language is, after all, our most essential human function. It is through the use of symbols that we define who we are and how we feel, and it is through the majestic, gene-driven, God-given process we call language that we are connected to each other.

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 But we take this miraculous process so for granted. Consider, for example, the miracle of this very moment. I stand here vibrating my vocal folds. Molecules go skittering in your direction. They touch your tympanic membrane. Signals scurry up your eighth cranial nerve. And there is a response, I trust, deep in your cerebrum that approximates the images in mine. Do you realize the audacity of this act in which we are now immediately engaged? And yet, I am assuming—as we all do from the moment of our birth—that by vibrating my vocal folds, somehow I can create vital connections with other people.

I have always been fascinated by the references to language in the Bible. "Out of the heart," the Scripture says, "the mouth speaketh." And the Gospel of John says, "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God." What a stunning proposition! The Word, the Scriptures say, was God, suggesting, perhaps, that it is through language that we discover the Creator. Surely, it is

through language that we discover one another. I think I don't overstate the case when I say that language is a sacred act.

The use of language profoundly determines the nature of a college education, yet the sad truth is that we live in a world today where language is shockingly abused. We live in a world where obscenities abound. We live in a world where politicians seek to destroy each other with 60-second sound bites. And language is used destructively on campuses as well, by subtle ridicule, by racial slurs, by thoughtless side comments, by not listening to each other but only pausing while we rearrange our prejudices and pretend we are listening, or being so caught up in things that we fail to take time to speak and listen carefully to each other. We pass each other, but we do not connect.

When I was growing up in Dayton, Ohio, we used to say, "Sticks and stones will break my bones, but names will never hurt me." What nonsense! I'd usually say that with tears running down my cheeks, saying all the time, "Hit me with a stick, but stop the words that penetrate so deeply and that last so long." Children, even before they go to school, understand both the power and the weaponry of words.

The question is, how do we use the God-given symbols that we have? This determines the quality of a church-related education—not the creed that is printed in the catalog, but the quality of the language that is experienced every single day. Malcolm Bradbury, writing recently in the *New York Times*, declared that if we do not have mastery over language, language itself will master us. "We discover life," he said, "through language."

I'm suggesting, then, that the first test of a Christian college is the significance we assign to symbols. ~~I do believe that~~ all students in such an institution should be asked to complete a course in expository writing, to learn the discipline of self-expression. I also believe that all students might be asked to complete a senior seminar on a consequential topic to demonstrate their capacity to integrate ideas. And

I believe that every student in a church-related college also should complete a seminar on the ethics of communication, to help them learn to analyze propaganda, examine their own words, and begin to understand that, in the end, the message we send must be measured not by the accuracy of the structure, but by the honesty and intention of the message.

Recently I read an article by a patriarchal educator named T. Elton Trueblood, who for many years was at Earlham College. He said that when he was a graduate student, decades ago at Johns Hopkins, he had a mentor who insisted, in the Oxbridge tradition, that he write a paper every single week. And he said that when the paper would come back there would be all sorts of red marks correcting the syntax and the citations, but then at the bottom of every paper, the mentor would have written, "But is it true? Is what you have written really true?" His teacher was reminding him relentlessly that we communicate in order to connect authentically with each other, and if we can't trust each other in the messages that we send, if we do not convey as authentically as possible how we feel and think, then this God-given process somehow is distorted and disconnected.

So, what is a church-related college? I ~~think~~ it is a place where people understand and revere the centrality of language, and where there is a climate in which we seek to heal, not hurt. It is a place where everyone speaks and listens carefully to each other in what can only be described as a true community of learning.

~~This leads me to the second way in which the use of language reveals the spirit of the campus.~~ ^{Social,} At a church-related college, connections are made not only through integrity in the use of language, but also through the coherence of the curriculum. A Christian college affirms ultimately that there is a ^{unity} coherence in God's revealed truth, and that somehow that coherence ^{should} needs to be reflected in the way we organize the territory of knowledge ^{and} we call the curriculum of the institution. The truth is that on most campuses today, students are offered a grab bag of isolated courses. They

complete the required credits, but what they fail to gain is a more coherent view of knowledge and a more integrated, more authentic view of life. I do believe that in this process, the sense of the sacred is diminished.

The work of geneticist Barbara McClintock, the Nobel laureate, helps illustrate that everything is one, that there is no way to draw a line between things. McClintock's research confirms the absolute dependence and relationships of variables on each other.

Frank Press, a recently retired president of the National Academy of Sciences, sent me a copy of a speech that he had delivered several years ago in which he said that the scientist is in some respects an artist. To illustrate his point, he went on to say that the magnificent double helix, which broke the genetic code, is not only rational, it is beautiful as well. When I read Frank's speech, I thought of watching on television the lift-offs at Cape Kennedy. In the last seconds, there would be anxiety in the expressions of the scientists and engineers, but when the space shuttle lifted successfully into orbit, the scientists wouldn't say, "Well our formulas worked again." They would say, almost in unison, "Beautiful!" It always struck me that they chose an aesthetic term to describe a technological achievement.

I heard recently that science is structure in search of passion, and art is passion in search of structure. Whatever it is, I do wonder if, at the core, artists and scientists aren't in fact engaged in a common quest to discover relationships and patterns, satisfactions from the beauty of God's ordered world. Several years ago, when the world-renowned physicist Victor Weisskopf was asked, "What gives you hope in troubled times?" he replied, "Mozart and quantum mechanics." But where in our fragmented academic world can scholars and students make connections such as this?

A fragmented curriculum violates the theology that undergirds a church-related education, which in my opinion should celebrate the majesty, the integration, and the

wholeness of God's creation. At Valparaiso, you are engaged in a quest that allows students, through an integrated curriculum, to see relationships and patterns, and in your capstone courses in theology, you put God at the very center of it. This to me affirms the dignity and purpose of church-related education.

I was fascinated when I read Stephen Hawkin's magnificent essay, *A Brief History of Time*. I was struck by the way he ended his inquiry into the connections in the universe itself. As some of you may recall, in the final paragraph of that little book, Hawkin, who perhaps is a modern-day Einstein, said that if we are able to find the integrating theory of the universe, it will be the ultimate triumph of human reason, for then, he says, we will know the mind of God.

Ultimately, integration is affirmation. I believe, then, as startling as it may sound, that the church-related college is a place where the coherent curriculum helps students know the mind of God. ~~SHH~~

~~Language and the spirit of the campus are linked in a third way. In addition to leading students to discover our~~ connections through the majestic use of symbols and through a curriculum with coherence, the church-related college helps students discover connections ~~between different~~ ^{across} cultures ~~and understand~~ ^{as well as} the commonalities that draw the human community together, ~~which, I believe, is a spiritual as well as intellectual experience.~~ We hear a lot these days about multicultural education, with emphasis on the differences among us, and that is crucial. I do believe that God made us each distinctive. My father used to give what was called in those days illustrated talks in Sunday school. I will never forget one visual presentation he made. He showed enlarged photographs of snowflakes, and we were awestruck by the beauty and symmetry. Yet, my father stressed, the miracle was that not one snowflake was the same as any other, and that was the miracle, too, he said, about people.

~~So~~ I celebrate the differences among us, ~~but~~ ^{as well as} I also believe that there is another side of the human community that must be affirmed. We must search for

commonalities as well, to understand that while we are all alone, we are also all together. While we live independent lives, we are also fundamentally dependent on each other. I believe that in a church-related college, the search across cultural lines is not only to affirm differences, but to affirm connections, too.

Kay and I have a son who lives in a Mayan village in the jungles of Belize with his Mayan wife and four children. When we visit Craig each year, I am impressed that the Mayans and the Americans, separated by a thousand miles and a thousand years and who seem to be absolutely disconnected from each other, have at a fundamental level a great deal in common. The Mayans have their family units. They have elected leaders. They have village councils. They have law enforcement officers. They have jails and schools, and places where they worship. It is all very different, but I have to tell you, it is all very much the same.

We have a five-year-old grandson in Belize; we have a five-year-old granddaughter in New Jersey. While they speak different languages and have different colored skin, it is my urgent hope that when they grow up they will know down deep inside that they are both members of the same human family, precious in God's eyes. I firmly believe that church-related education means gaining a perspective that is global.

Ideally every student should study in another country, be immersed in another culture, learning differences to be sure, but capturing similarities as well. If not all students can study in another culture, at least on campus they should, through lectures and films and meeting visiting students, discover and celebrate the great mosaic of God's creation. I affirm Valparaiso because at this institution you understand the centrality of an international perspective.

This brings me to the fourth connection ^{that is, in some} ~~regarding language on campus, and, in~~ ~~some~~ respects, ~~it is~~ the capstone of what I wish to say today. When all is said and done, a church-related college is a place where students make connections not only

through the use of symbols or through the coherence of the curriculum they study or their understanding of cross-cultural connections, but also through the connections they make between faith and learning. At such a place they are able to move and are encouraged to move from competence to conviction.

When the American sociologist Daniel Bell was asked to give the Hobhouse Memorial Lecture of the London School of Economics in 1977, he called his speech "The Return of the Sacred?" Interestingly enough, he put a question mark at the end of that provoking title. In his lecture, Bell discussed what he saw as a dramatic resurgence of religious belief in modern culture, and he quoted the great German sociologist Max Weber, who wrote at the end of the 19th century: "With the progress of science and technology, man has stopped believing in magic powers, in spirits. . . . He has lost his sense of prophecy and, above all, his sense of the sacred." Bell quoted Weber further: "Reality has become dreary, flat and utilitarian, leaving a great void in the souls of men which they seek to fill by furious activity and through various devices and substitutes."

~~In my own view,~~ today we are beginning to discover that the sense of the sacred is inextricably interwoven with the most basic human experiences of birth, and love, and death. I realize that when the discussion turns to values, a strange embarrassment seems to come upon the academy. We seem comfortable talking about all questions except those that matter most. In his penetrating book *Faith and Learning*, Alexander Miller said that a "decent tentativeness is a wholesome expression . . . of scholarly humility; but we seem," he said, "to have rather a sort of *dogmatic* tentativeness which suggests that it is intellectually indecent to make up your mind."

In the end, education cannot be divorced from values. If it is, we have unleashed upon the world a horrific force that can only bring pain, despair, and ultimately death itself. George Steiner, the British philosopher, reminded us that a man who is intellectually advanced can at the same time be morally bankrupt. "We

know now," Steiner said, "that a man can read Goethe or Rilke in the evening, that he can play Bach and Schubert, and go to his day's work at Auschwitz in the morning." Speaking of integrity and language, I read just recently that Goebbels had a Ph.D in literature from Germany's most distinguished academic institution. Steiner seeks to answer the question of what grows up inside literate civilization that seems to prepare it for barbarism. I believe what grows up is knowledge without wisdom, and competence without conscience. ~~I am convinced that~~ ^{Finally,} a church-related college must, above all, be a place where life's most consequential questions are unapologetically considered, where students are encouraged to discover divine purpose for their own existence. Let me make it very clear, I do not believe that a church-related college is a place that lives by dictates and indoctrination. I do not believe that you can inject belief. What one does is create a climate that makes honorable the quest, a climate in which people are encouraged to inquire into the deeper meanings of their own existence.

~~I further believe that~~ this climate is captured not so much by a required course, but by the modeling of teachers who demonstrate the essence of the inquiry, as they, too, reconcile the tension between faith and learning. That, in my judgment, is the climate in which values are affirmed.

Several years ago, I couldn't sleep one night and instead of counting sheep, I counted all the teachers that I'd had. There were a few nightmares in the bunch, I must confess, but I also remembered three or four outstanding teachers who consequentially changed my life. I remembered a university professor who taught literature, who read *King Lear* and *Macbeth* aloud in class. As I observed the life of Professor Smith, I learned through his spoken as well as written messages, that the study of literature was not an inquiry into ancient history, but an inquiry into the deepest yearnings of the human spirit. I remember Mr. Wittlinger, a high school history teacher, who said to me one day, "Ernest, you're doing very well in history. If

you keep this up, you just might be a student." It was the highest accolade I had ever had. I thought, you mean I'm not a baseball player or a cowboy, I'm something Mr. Wittlinger calls a student? He rearranged my head at a time when I was totally confused about who I was or what I might become.

I also remembered, ~~as I have mentioned so often before,~~ my first grade teacher. As I was walking to school with my mother on the first day of school, I asked her if I would learn to read that day. I really did think that you went to school to learn to read. My mother and father used to write notes to one another, and my brothers and I, as they say in Washington, weren't "in the loop." I wanted to learn to read to break the adult code. Further, my mother and father thought that they should teach me how to behave, and that the teachers at school should teach me how to read. In any event, I walked into the classroom, and there she stood, half human, half divine, my first grade teacher. She looked at twenty-eight frightened children and said, "Good morning, class. Today we learn to read." Well, hello, Miss Rice, goodbye, mother! We spent all day on four words, "I go to school." We traced them, we sang them, and God forgive her, we even prayed them. "Thank you, God. I go to school."

~~I mention those reveries about teachers to make a larger point. In the case of Miss Rice,~~ fifty years later when I wrote a book on college and another one on high school, I placed, up front in each one, a chapter called "The Centrality of Language." That wasn't by chance. It was the influence of a first grade teacher who instilled in me the idea that language and learning are inextricably interlocked. I think it no accident that when I reflect on the power of a church-related college, I come back to the question of the integrity of language. Is it possible that a first grade teacher is still shaping who I am and how I feel? The answer, I'm convinced, is *yes*!

~~When I thought~~ ^{Thinking!} about the great teachers that I had, it occurred to me that they all shared four essential characteristics. First, they were well informed. You can't, as the Sophists say, teach nothing well. Second, these teachers **also knew their students.**

They were able to relate their knowledge to the readiness of students. Third, the great teachers that I had created an active, not a passive, learning climate in the classroom. Those three characteristics made them *good* teachers, but it occurs to me that a fourth trait was what made them *great*. Most important of all, they were open and authentic human beings who taught not just the content of the subject, but taught by the quality of their lives, by their integrity, in everyday living. As difficult as this is to define, these teachers were successful because they not only taught their subjects, they taught themselves.

~~I believe that~~ this brings me to the essence of a church-related institution of higher learning. I am concerned about its governance by the theological body that gave it birth. I am concerned and interested in the covenant that might sustain that relationship. I'm interested in the shared theology that might be defined. But when all is said and done, I want to know what is going on in the classroom. What is the nature of the messages between teachers and students? Is it in a classroom where students can become teachers, too? As I look back at the colleges I've attended, I remember not just the buildings, I remember the encounters in the classroom. Let me hurriedly add that, as models, teachers need to show their doubts as well as their faiths, show their worries as well as their hopes, because that is what life is. Teachers should not deny students the opportunity to see the agonies as well as the ecstasy of affirmation. That is the climate of an authentic community of Christian learning.

One final observation: A church-related college, I believe, prepares students not just for work, but for vocation, giving them a purpose that extends beyond the campus and endures throughout their lives. The poet Vachel Lindsay wrote: "It is the world's one crime its babes grow dull, / Not that they starve, but starve so dreamlessly, / Not that they sow, but that they seldom reap, / Not that they serve, but have no gods to serve, / Not that they die but that they die like sheep." I believe that students in a church-related college should graduate understanding that the tragedy of life is not

death, that the tragedy is to die with commitments undefined, with convictions undeclared, and with service unfulfilled. Reinhold Niebuhr wrote: "Man cannot be whole unless he be committed. He cannot find himself unless he find a purpose beyond himself." In the end this is what a church-related education is all about. I truly believe that in a church-related college, a campus is not an isolated island, but a staging ground for action, where ultimately the vision is to be of service to one's fellow human beings.

Here then is my conclusion. Is it too simple to suggest that church-related higher education means, quite simply, discovering connections? Discovering connections through a spirit of community on campus, discovering connections through a curriculum with coherence, discovering connections by inquiring into the human commonalities that transcend the cultural divides, discovering connections through the interactions of teachers who are also mentors, and discovering connections through a life of service. With such an education, students come to know that to be truly human one must serve.

As I have inquired into the heritage of this great institution, and as I inquire into the quest that's going on here today, I have described the search and the yearning that undergirds the community here at Valparaiso and reaffirms the heritage that we have been given by President Huegli, whose service we honor here today.