

**ADVICE AGAINST DESPAIR:
CARING FOR THE WHOLE ... AND FOR OURSELVES:**

**William Cronon
Northland College Commencement, May 27, 2006**

INTRODUCTION

President Halbersleben, Dean Fairbanks, Reverend Saetre, Members of the Faculty, Parents and Family, and most of all, members of the Class of 2006: let me begin by thanking you for the honor you do me with this special degree.

But the real honor is being able to stand here with all of you who are also receiving degrees today, because in fact you have worked far harder for your degrees than I have for mine, and the milestone we celebrate for you is a much greater turning point in your lives than it is in mine.

The future lives and worlds that open out for you from this moment forward are both daunting and exhilarating to contemplate.

If any of you are ever asked to speak at a graduation ceremony like this one, you will understand the challenge I face.

No one is in this room because you came to hear me speak. I'm just a delay in the ceremony, standing between all of you and the degrees you came here to receive and the parties that will follow as you gather with your families and friends to celebrate all that you have experienced and accomplished during your time here at Northland. From this point of view, maybe the best you can hope from me is that I won't speak too long.

But there's in fact a bigger challenge, which is that a commencement address is as close as the secular institutions of our society come to a sermon...and I'm pretty sure most of you didn't come here today to hear a sermon.

The task before me is to say something memorable that is worthy of the event. What I say should encompass all that you have studied and accomplished here at Northland, all the ways you've changed and grown, while at the same time gazing toward the future and offering sage advice about the best path to a successful and happy life that will make a difference in the world.

That's a tall order at a time when everyone is hot and tired and mainly hoping the speaker will finish quickly so we can get on with the ceremony and the parties. Worse still, all too many commencement addresses are filled with tired clichés and platitudes whose profundity long ago eroded away after endless repetition, like the wearying speeches of Polonius in Hamlet:

Neither a borrower nor a lender be.

Give every man thy ear, but few thy voice.

To thine own self be true.

And so on and on

Believe me, if I pursued this strategy, you would soon be as weary of me as Hamlet was of Polonius, and I might meet the same lethal fate. Besides, I can't hope to match David Saetre's gentle eloquence and quiet passion this morning, in one of the best commencement speeches (or sermons!) I've ever had the privilege to hear.

An alternative strategy might be to try to be funny, with homely advice that however trite at least has the virtue of being practical. There's a famous fictitious commencement address supposedly delivered by Kurt Vonnegut at MIT in 1997 and endlessly circulated on the Internet (you can find it by Googling "Vonnegut" and "commencement"), but it was actually written by a journalist named Mary Schmich.

In it, she spoofed the genre of the commencement address by offering useful advice like:

Wear sunscreen.

Read the directions even if you don't follow them.

Floss.

And, my personal favorite:

Get plenty of calcium. Be kind to your knees. You'll miss them when they're gone.

And so on.

Unfortunately, I'm no good at being funny. So what I want to do in the brief time I've been allotted is to reflect just a bit on what I think is special about Northland College and the education you've received here; and then offer a single piece of advice about your future based on what you've learned here, by offering just a word or two about despair and joy. More on those in a bit.

THE SPECIAL MISSION OF NORTHLAND COLLEGE

I trust I don't need to tell anyone in this room what an unusual and special institution Northland College is. I hope you'll forgive me for reminding you one last time of the words Northland uses to describe its mission and core values. I'm sure you've heard and read these many times before, but this very fact means that you may take them more for granted than you should.

As you listen to me read them, you might reflect on the ways Northland has enacted and embodied these values during the time you've made a home for yourself in this place.

Northland College's Mission and Core Values:

Mission: Northland College integrates liberal arts studies with an environmental emphasis, enabling those it serves to address the challenges of the future.

We value our mission as an environmental Liberal Arts college engaged in the pursuit of academic excellence and education that transforms the lives of our students.

We value the dedication of our faculty, staff, students, and Trustees: we are a caring and close-knit community that encourages each individual to grow, learn, and become an agent of positive change.

We value - as individuals and as a community - the place where we live and work, and we are committed to sustainability and good stewardship, in order to conserve this place for the generations that will follow us.

We value, finally, the humility and awe that these connections generate in us: connections that tie our fate to that of this planet.

Northland's focus on the environment is obviously one of the things that makes it so special. All of you came here knowing that Northland puts at the center of its curriculum the complicated web of ecological relationships in which we human beings are embedded, connecting us to all the creatures and organisms and earth systems without which our own lives would be impossible.

Whatever you studied here, whatever majors appear on your transcript, you can not possibly have passed through this place without reflecting on the environment and the ways your own life and work are connected to it.

There are thus certain moral riddles you've been asked to ponder over and over again:

- What would a more just and sustainable society look like?
- How can we become better stewards of the earth and its creatures?
- In the midst of everything else that fills our lives with distracting busyness, how can we perennially recover the humility and awe that remind us of our small place in the vast web of existence that is the Creation?
- And, perhaps most important of all, how do we work for change—in the world and in ourselves—that affirms and enacts these high ideals?

These seem to me the moral questions at the heart of the Northland education you've been lucky enough to receive. I would not say this of most other colleges in the United States. This mission gives Northland a focus and a moral center that is all too often lacking from most institutions of higher education.

But there is something else that makes Northland special, and it is just as important to the way it has prepared you for the future lives you're now beginning to forge for yourselves starting today. It is not quite so unusual as Northland's environmental mission, but it is just as precious.

Northland is a liberal arts college. This means that it is committed to the great tradition of liberal education that has been a defining feature of American baccalaureate education since the nineteenth century. It sets American colleges apart from most others in the world.

What is liberal education? It is NOT education to turn you into political liberals; indeed, liberal education makes very few assumptions about the kind of politics that should emerge from its training. It is committed to critical inquiry and to tolerance of contrary perspectives in the pursuit of truth ... but these things can serve almost any political philosophy except close-minded bigotry.

No, liberal education is education committed to the proposition that a free human being—an engaged, empowered individual worthy of the rights and responsibilities of citizenship—should be as broadly trained as possible in the arts and humanities and social and natural sciences if that individual is to earn a livelihood, contribute to community, struggle for justice, and live a joyous and honorable life.

You'd be surprised by how few educational institutions in the world share this value. It is very precious.

My own belief is that Northland's commitment to the environment could not be more ideally suited to the goals of a liberal education. Nothing, arguably, is more complicated than the environment and the many ways we relate to it. Our interactions with the biophysical world touch every facet of our lives. Indeed, the environment is perhaps our single richest metaphor for the interconnections that bind us to each other and to the world.

Striving to understand the interconnectedness of ourselves and the world: it would be hard to imagine a more complicated task requiring a greater number of disciplinary skills, a more compelling moral challenge, or a richer source of wonder and awe and humility.

If you were looking for something to give liberal education a compelling intellectual and moral center, I doubt you could find a better one than Northland has. You have all been the beneficiaries of this remarkable institutional choice, and as you graduate from this place, you now become its guardians as well. You are now a member of the community that will sustain into the future not just Northland College itself, but the values for which it stands.

TAKING RESPONSIBILITY FOR THE WHOLE

I promised that I would try to offer you just one big piece of advice in this talk, so let me now turn to that task.

I should confess that despite my enthusiasm for Northland's commitment to environmental stewardship and the struggle to build a more sustainable society, I also think there's a potential moral peril in this mission that I want to make sure I warn you about as you leave this place.

I have always believed that the single most attractive feature of the environmental movement is its commitment to taking responsibility for the whole. If the world is as interconnected as Northland has taught you to recognize, then the things we do in one part of the world can hardly help but be profoundly affected the things we do elsewhere in the world.

The challenge of this environmental insight is that there is literally nothing in the world or in our lives that is untouched by it. If stewardship and sustainability require us to take responsibility for the whole—and I think they do—then the task before us is daunting indeed, maybe even overwhelming.

Taking responsibility for the whole would seem to require us to know literally everything: the insights of every discipline, the organisms of every habitat, the processes of every biophysical system, the histories and geographies of every place on earth, and—scariest of all—the nearly infinite permutations of interconnections among all these things.

Taking responsibility for the whole, in short, would seem to require of us the knowledge of gods...and of course, none of us are gods. We are mortal beings, all too finite in our knowledge and wisdom.

So it's not surprising that as we strive to understand more and more about the complexities of the environment, I think at some point most of us begin to wonder whether we're really up to that task. It's pretty easy to feel overwhelmed by how much there is to know, and by the depth of our own ignorance.

There is a second problem as well. The challenge is not just how much we need to know. In addition to how hard it is to understand the nearly infinite intricacies of the environment, there is also the sheer vastness and immense scale of the environmental problems we face.

As we contemplate global climate change, for instance, it's hard not to feel discouraged (to put it mildly) by the fact that virtually every feature of our economy and social life contributes to the greenhouse gases that appear to be wreaking havoc with the earth's climates and ecosystems.

As we recognize that most of us in this room will still be alive as humanity passes the point of peak production for the oil supplies that sustain virtually every aspect of our physical lives, it's hard not to feel overwhelmed by the immensity of the task of making the transition to other sources of energy, many of which pose environmental risks that are also worrisome.

I could go on—gesturing at extinctions, emergent diseases, nuclear proliferation, overpopulation, poverty, racism, all the endless forms of violence and injustice and *unsustainability*—but I hope I've made my point, and I certainly don't want to be gloomy on this day of all days.

Indeed, I've introduced these worrisome issues precisely because I want to warn you against gloom.

Much as I celebrate the environmental commitment to taking responsibility for the whole, I want to make sure each of you understands that the environment is so vast and complicated that no one of us can understand it by ourselves, and no one of us can possibly hope to "save the environment" by whatever small actions we might aspire to make in our individual lives. It's just too big. Our individual capacities are just too small. We are too small, too powerless, too ignorant.

There are a couple of important lessons in this:

The first is that building a sustainable society, promoting good stewardship, and working for change is something we cannot do by ourselves. We do it together.

In this sense, the work you have done *together* during your time here at Northland—the projects you've worked on in each other's company, the friendships you've made here, the community you've nurtured, the relationships you've formed here that for most of you will be among the most important and defining of your entire lives—this shared work is the only way any of us can ever hope to enact the high moral ideal of taking responsibility for the whole environment.

We do this work together, in community.

The second lesson is a reminder of a key paradox about the environment, which is that precisely because we are always inside it and because our every action inevitably affects it, the challenge of living sustainably will never go away. We will never “fix” or “solve” the environment, and we will never reach a moment when we don't have to worry about the ways our lives affect the earth and its creatures.

This is to say, the work is never-ending because the environment is life itself. Merely to be alive as a human being on this planet means affecting the world by one's actions. It is not possible to be alive without having an impact on the environment.

The only question is what kind of impact we want to have, what kind of marks we want to make, what kind of legacy we want to leave.

It seems to me that these are the questions that brought you to Northland in the first place, and Northland has given you the tools for asking and answering these questions for the rest of your lives on this earth.

FOLLOW YOUR HEART TO WHERE YOUR TALENTS AND PASSION MEET

I said I wanted to warn you against gloom, and this brings me to the final part of what I wish to say to you today.

Contemplating the vastness and complexity of the environmental challenges we face, and the smallness of the actions that any one of us can make in addressing those challenges, I think it's pretty easy to conclude that there's really nothing any of us can do that could possibly make a difference.

It's pretty easy, in other words, to despair.

I suspect that many of us in this room who care about the environment and who fear the scale of the environmental challenges and crises we face have felt this emotion at one time or another. I know this feeling of despair. I understand it, I sympathize with it, I respect it. I have felt it myself...and that is precisely why I want to warn you against it. At its worst, it can make us doubt the human capacity to do good, and there are few more dangerous forms of doubt than that.

So let me say to you: despair is not a useful emotion. It does not lead to action that makes the world a better place. It does not build a better society. It does not lead to the humility and awe that Northland so eloquently describes in its statement of values.

Think about those two words for a moment: *humility* and *awe*. *Humility* is our recognition of our own limitations, our acceptance of the fact that we are finite and mortal and limited in our capacity to change the world. We are not gods. *Awe* is our recognition that the universe is far greater and more wondrous than anything we could possibly have made ourselves, a Creation so much beyond our human finitude that we can only feel wonder in the face of its endless miracles.

Put like this, humility and awe begin to sound like pretty good correctives to despair. They ask us to focus not on our limitations and inadequacies and failings, but on the greatness of what we have been given. They ask us to remember what a miracle it is to be alive at all.

I think humility and awe are worth remembering as you go out into the world to practice the talents and skills you've honed here at Northland.

Taking responsibility for the environmental whole does not mean feeling despair that the world and its problems are so vast that none of us can hope to fix them. No, it means remembering that we do this work together, and the great task of our lives is for each of us to contribute what we can with the talents and skills and passions that are the gifts we have to share with the world.

Some of you will leave this room to work in laboratories, some will run businesses, some will care for the land, some will heal the sick, some will teach, some will guide people to discover the beauty of wild places, some will work for political change, some will write or paint or design computer software, and so on and on.

Taken as a group, there are so many many things you're going to be doing and contributing in the world...but each one of you alone will do just a few of these things.

That is precisely as it should be. There is no despair in this fact. Quite the contrary: if you embrace it with humility and awe, there is nothing but joy in it. Each of you alone will do a few small but deep and wonderful things. All of you together will change the world.

Remember, you've done two things during your time at Northland:

You explored this great thing called the environment—this sacred web of interconnections whose names are Life or Nature or the Creation—that connects us to each other and to every living thing

At the same time, you also began the quest you'll be on for the rest of your life of trying to figure out the special role that you yourself want to play in the years you've been given for your time on this planet: how you'll earn a living, how you'll exercise your talents, how you'll express your passions, how you'll share your gifts, how you'll contribute to family and friends and community, how you'll express your love...how, in other words, you'll enact the values you've explored and affirmed here at Northland..

Don't worry that you can't solve the Big Problem called the environment; none of us can, because struggling to live honorably in the never-ending presence of that Big Problem is what it means to be alive. It will never go away, and it in fact gives meaning and purpose to our lives.

Don't worry because the contributions you can see yourself making may sometimes feel small; they aren't nearly as small as they seem.

One of my all-time favorite quotations is from the great English philosopher Edmund Burke: *"No man ever made a greater mistake than he who did nothing because he could only do a little."*

In the face of the vast and sometimes terrifying problems we face, I want you to follow Burke's advice: don't despair because you can only do a little. Be humble and grateful that doing even a little for the common good is all any of us is ever able to do. In truth, it is the only way anyone has ever changed the world.

So here's the Big Message I have to offer you on this day of celebration here at Northland College:

I hope you will all seek to understand this wondrous world and take responsibility for its myriad interconnections, but please don't ever imagine that any of one of us can hope to save the world by ourselves.

We can only do that together. We need each other's companionship desperately to move forward toward that common goal.

So: please follow your heart to the place deep inside yourself where your talents and passions meet.

Try to find in that place something you can do really well that will make a difference, however small, that brings joy to you and to those around you—and that makes the world a better place.

Seek to do these small but immensely powerful things, and I'm pretty sure I can promise you a good and honorable life. And I'm pretty sure I can also promise that you'll change the world by doing so.

Congratulations to you all, and thanks so much for sharing this day with me.

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