

BY Salvatore Scibona

St. John's College—Annapolis Commencement Speech

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Allow me to stipulate my lack of qualification to give this speech. Also the fact that I still haven't finished *The Brothers Karamazov*. Also that I traffic in the made-up exploits of made-up people, so am untrustworthy. Also my general ineptitude, sloth, moral vanity, and myriad habitual failures of judgment I am likely to repeat just by opening my mouth up here. Also let me stipulate my gratitude to the class of 2012 for their very generous, if misguided, invitation and to St. John's College in Santa Fe and here, for a more joyous inner life and social life than I ever imagined I would lead. A teacher of mine once said that the point of a liberal education was "to make for yourself a mind that you want to live in." That's pretty good. I would add also a mind that others might enjoy instead of having to endure.

You're all on a kind of Olympus right now. The training you have just finished is fresh enough that I'd like to get *your* advice if I could. The habit of question-making you have acquired here is hard won and—I'm sorry to report—easily forgotten. I have seen marriages, professions, promising nascent friendships, political movements, novels-in-progress all collapse after the language used in them became declarative, declarative, declarative, exclamatory, declarative; not a question in sight. Maybe you heard about the U.S. Senate candidate last week, fresh from winning his party's primary, who told an

interviewer “To me, the highlight of politics, frankly, is to *inflict* my opinion on someone else with a microphone or in front of a camera.”

Remember in high school, or freshman lab, when you were that person? I was. (Too often I still am.) Remember how lousy it felt? Opinion-inflicting bears the relationship to real conversation that Diet Coke bears to chicken dinner. It does little more than satisfy the urge to put something in your mouth. You go to bed hungry, you wake up weaker and sad.

But then remember, maybe in sophomore year—you were either in seminar or engaged in some “Let me not to the marriage of true minds /Admit impediments” late-night assignation, spooning up the contents of that other person’s sweet brain, question after question? That was pretty hot, right? And filling? And it *fed* you.

Something there is about our broader culture that erodes the habit of questioning you have acquired here. Or maybe it’s just the habits of the ego, which Freud tells us begins in the infant with proportions that are “oceanic”—what a word. Scratch us and that ego is still down there, bounded in a nutshell, counting itself king of infinite space notwithstanding its bad dreams.

Anyway, you have done hard time getting good at all this: reading, interrogating, homing in on the genius of others. The Force is strong with you—for now—and I wish I could ask you to remind me how that trick goes. The trick of one question after another til sunup and everybody else has passed out—even Aristophanes, but you go to the Lyceum, wash up, and spend the rest of your day just as you would any other day. I envy you that; I wish you could show me how it’s done. In time, even if you’re lucky enough to find people willing to do it with you, you will still face the following problem: because

this kind of conversation doesn't come to us by nature, or by accident, but by work, by technique, and by practice, if you fail to continue practicing it, you will lose it. In a state of nature, human beings don't talk the way they do in *Middlemarch* or at St. John's College; that should make us prize our way of talking here all the more. It is a skill you made out of the raw materials of your brain and your upbringing. You made this beautiful thing. Now how to keep it?

If there's anything we ought to have learned from St. John's it's the folly of presuming to give advice, that is, overstepping on another person's will. One passage from a Program book that sticks to my mind like a burr to a sock is when Kant concludes in *The Groundwork of the Metaphysic of Morals* that "Autonomy" is "the ground of the dignity of human nature and of every rational nature." Elsewhere he defines autonomy as "the property of the will by which it is a law to itself." Without our will—without our freedom—we are things rather than people. With it, we have a categorical value—in his terms a dignity—infinity beyond a market price.

I take from this that we should approach other people's freedom not only with caution lest we offend them, but with an active reverence we reserve for nothing else—this I continually fail to do, which may account for the burr on my sock.

The student committee whose lovely letter I received a few months ago posed an excellent question. "How does one take the Books and make them sing in a daily life outside the Polity?" (The word "Books" was capitalized. God bless you.) How do you make them *sing*? Right. Yes. Splendid. A violin no one every plays is only wood, catgut and varnish. How do you make it sing? Your books unread, unreturned to, unexpanded on, are not books but pulp and ink.

You must *play* the books.

Twist them. Abuse them. Make them serve your purposes. They won't mind.
Without you they would not exist.

You now have behind you an extraordinarily modest education. That is, an education in extraordinary modesty. The training you have gotten has dragged you away from the ego's tireless proclivity to dive back into its ocean of suppositions and opinions; you have trained yourself to climb out of yourself and focus on the *words on the page*, and on your friends, and what they're saying. To observe the books with care and respect has been more than enough.

But nearly every book we read here represents a vigorous dissent from the books that preceded it. Thanks to the degrees you are receiving today, you are Masters and Bachelors of Heresy. At the risk of preaching to the choir, anybody who mistakes St. John's for an indoctrination into some kind of fixed Establishment fails to apprehend how nearly everyone we study here advocated a position at odds with the views of his or her times, often at considerable risk. When they weren't in jail or enslaved, program authors devoted themselves to revolutionizing established ideas—Plato, the writers of the Gospels, Lavoisier, Copernicus, Galileo, Faulkner, Woolf, Frederick Douglas, Marx, Hegel, Nietzsche, Locke, Newton, Swift, Hardy, Twain, Kierkegaard, Booker T. Washington, Flannery O'Connor, Albert Einstein. They knew the past, the better not to be constrained by it.

So let me be frank with you about a challenge I suspect you'll face. After we leave here we face some big strategic dilemmas. And we might practice on them the Johnnie Jedi mojo—the observation and analysis that is the hallmark of seriously modest

reading—all in the hopes of making rational decisions. But free choice is not determined by reason. It is the defining characteristic of a choice that nothing *necessitates* it outside our will. You may have fairly concluded here that there are some things you wanted to be cut out for that you are not cut out for. But you cannot reason yourself to a logically necessary conclusion that relieves you of the burden of your freedom.

You must choose.

The Books you have read here are not for admiring. They are for using. Here's a little on the subject from the novelist Marilynne Robinson:

It is precisely in relation to these “monuments of unaging intellect” (to borrow a phrase clearly meant to be viewed with suspicion) that we do not think. And they are monumental in the degree that they seem only to commemorate Thought, to be stranded in time like Easter Island statues, with no one living able to say how things so massive could have been erected. I do not intend this as an attack on the canon, or on the idea that certain works are appropriately viewed as treasures of whole populations. My objection is to the habit of treating such works as categorically different from anything we ourselves can aspire to. What do we feel in Whitman but the physical exhilaration of consciousness? What do we feel in Dickinson but the physical shock of consciousness? We feel their thinking, in other words. They should help us feel our own.

What I am trying to say is that we must not treat these books as different from life. Don't let cynics persuade you that you are about to enter the real world having spent

two or four years in some foreign province. Notwithstanding your Jedi training, you have not been on a swamp planet in the Dagobah System, you have been in Annapolis, Maryland. Your graduation need not constitute an exile or a divorce.

But it might turn into one if you don't make certain efforts. I'm not just talking about rereading Program books, or reading other books. I'm talking about treating your education here as an instrument you will play in other—no more or less “real”—realms of your life. You asked me how to do this. I do not know. How do we do this?

If there is a danger in a St. John's education it's that the practice of reasoned analysis will blind us to the final necessity of choice. Or else we might bear all too well in mind the philosophical habit of studying our choices until they wear us out and we look at new occasions for choice as torture chambers. We might learn to fear and even to hate our freedom.

But if as Kant suggests we owe reverence to the will of others, if that's the source of their dignity, then why would we not owe reverence to our own?

A friend of mine has a photograph of himself as a little boy in a field of pumpkins, hundreds, from which his parents had instructed him to pick one to take home for Halloween. In the photo, he's sitting on one of them, covering his face, and crying. There were too many. He was overwhelmed.

The trap of the analytical mind is to think that if you study long enough all but one of the pumpkins will reveal a flaw, or that the one true pumpkin will show itself irrefutably, glowing. This fantasy seduces us by seeming to relieve us of the burden of our will. It doesn't. The boy in the pumpkin patch was experiencing a kind of anguish—

felt most acutely as children or in dreams—that education can sometimes obscure but never fix.

Thomas Mann said that “A writer is somebody for whom writing is more difficult than it is for other people.” Maybe a Johnnie is someone for whom reading is more difficult than it is for other people—but I’ve noticed more often that a Johnnie is someone for whom *choice* is more difficult than it is for other people. I hope I don’t flatter you too abjectly by saying so—we have this in common with most people who’ve studied philosophy: a wandering practice that trains us to search all we like for brightly lit responses to our questions but to plan for a life of dark roads. To surrender to whim would make for an easier time; but, okay, you did not come here for an easy time.

How do you play the books? With your *will*.

Let me tell you briefly about a book I read recently—not a Program book, although its author is at least deceased—and a sort of loopy decision, carried out in a Cape Cod rainstorm, with little forethought about the time it would later consume; a decision unreasonable to the point of silly: Last winter, I bought a piano.

I should mention that apart from about fifteen hours of guitar practice in the third grade and singing in practicum here, I had never played a musical instrument; my enthusiasm was matched only by my ineptitude. Thanks to Ms. Berns’s luminous tutorial sophomore years, I could read music, I could listen to it and write about it, but my fingers were perfectly stupid. As my piano teacher pointed out, I did not know how to sit on a bench. Nevertheless, I rearranged the furniture in my living room to make way for the new instrument, and fell to. Brothers and sisters, I come among you to report that the piano is awesome.

The book I found in my local bookstore, while looking for something else. It had the attractive title *Playing Piano for Pleasure: The Classic Guide to Improving Skills through Practice and Discipline*, originally published in 1941. The author, Charles Cooke, was at the time a thirty-six-year-old *New Yorker* writer. He neither taught piano nor played professionally. In his word, he was an amateur.

As the introduction points out, in Cooke's time the word *amateur* still meant somebody who loves. It has come to mean an incompetent. "Among the many uses of Cooke's lovely and inspired book," the introduction goes on, "is to remind us that this is wrong and our great loss."

I took the book up the street to a coffee shop and commenced loving it right away. How can you resist a chapter that starts like this: "Habit is a miraculous thing. To me it is more miraculous than nuclear radiation"? What Cooke has to say about staying an amateur and the pleasant necessity of practice apply as well to making music as to our subject here.

As far as I can tell, the technological advances of the last seventy years have not made learning the piano any less a matter of discipline now than in Cooke's day. What has changed since then is our notion of what constitutes a good time. When Cooke suggests that we work at a thing painstakingly *in order to enjoy it*, I suspect his original readers did not take him as asserting a paradox. Today he would more likely sound like a prude or a crank. Imagine the writer of the following in an infomercial:

The first habit we are going to form is that of daily regularity in our practicing.

The second is that of attacking all our work the hard way, rather than the easy way. This will apply to our mastering of passages in pieces and then to our mastering of entire pieces. We will worm our way, expending considerable effort, into the small end of the cornucopia, in order that we may later emerge, expending less effort and having the time of our life, out of the large end.

Some of the downgrade in the status of the amateur has come from a change in our goals. If, say, we take up painting with the aim of “discovering ourselves,” whoever that may be, then when, inevitably, we hit a wall in our progress, we have no recourse but to wonder if we just *were not cut out* to paint, to play the piano, to write a novel. Telling use of the passive voice in that expression—who is doing the cutting out more than we are? In this model, what is truest of us is what comes to us “naturally,” which has come to mean “without effort.” I submit to you that a large part of our contemporary passion for discovering ourselves comes from the hope that, once discovered, that self will be such a touchstone of authenticity as to make choices unnecessary. It is a stalking horse for our fear.

If instead we choose to take up painting in order to paint well and enjoy our progress while we do so, we would still hit the wall; however, Cooke would not only have us push through the wall, but *enjoy* ourselves as we did it. He proposes an older and more capacious idea of pleasure—one that *includes* experiences of frustration and anxiety rather than anesthetizing us to them. They make us feel like incompetents, like *amateurs*, and that is right where we want to be.

Anyone whose practice of her art form, her profession, her marriage, her trade alienates her from her origins as a devout amateur is in big trouble. Work must not prevent her from maintaining the spirit of a beginner. The goal is not to move from amateur to expert, but to improve and to *stay* an amateur.

A few years ago I made a little study of the blues. I mean the doldrums. What I had been doing when they showed up and more importantly what I was doing when I was free of them. My list: if I spent a reasonable part of the day reading, writing, walking, socializing, life was pretty good. Then I started to expand on these things a little and to jot them down on a calendar at the end of the day. “Read, ran, scribbled,” etc. Soon after I started the piano it landed on this list of essentials. But what should I call it? For a while I wrote “practiced”; this was wrong. Too authoritarian. The word I wanted was “played.” Discipline, like reason in good decision-making, is a *sine qua non*, but isn’t enough. You must also *play*—that is, do, on purpose, while mindful of enjoyment.

If we *play*, if we make ourselves present to the joy of *using* the Books to exercise our will and chose our life in a daily way, they will be a fountain of happiness for the rest of our lives.