

“Thinking About Abundance in a Time of Scarcity”

Baccalaureate Sermon  
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Emory University  
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The Baccalaureate service provides an opportunity to express thanks and to celebrate you and to express our appreciation and good wishes to you. We have taught you, mentored you, learned from you, loved you, and seen how you have cared for and loved each other. It is a pleasure to have this opportunity to speak with you on the eve of your commencement ceremonies.

The Baccalaureate message itself is an attempt to call out, from between the lines and from the interstices of your experiences at Emory, lessons that you really have learned, ways in which we all have grown but may not yet have labeled and typed into our mental transcript. In prior years we have addressed such themes as wisdom, wonder, uncertainty, aspiration, and humility. This year’s Baccalaureate message addresses the topic of abundance. It may seem at first to be an odd choice among topics that might be addressed during an economic climate in which many in the world are experiencing a feeling of something quite the opposite of abundance. Maybe we should be talking about sacrifice, or maybe about something rosier, like Mother’s Day. But abundance is something that you have experienced in your time here in ways that transcend bank statements, housing markets, job markets, and other material measures.

To discuss this kind of abundance requires more the exercise of those parts of our brains (and souls) committed to wisdom rather than to memorization or calculation. For wisdom, we draw upon our own experiences, of course, but we are wise also to examine the inspired reflections of others. Great wisdom literature is found in biographies and sacred scripture among other places. So we turn today to the writing of the Christian apostle Paul. He writes, in the passage just read, that we would do well to acquire the discipline to think on “whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is pleasing, whatever is commendable.” (You may recognize these words from the inscription in the Business School’s Patterson Green, by the way.) He goes on to write that “if there is any excellence, anything worthy of praise, think about these things.”

Ok, you say. That sounds good. After all who would not want to give some thought to those things? They are sort of “feel-good” subjects. But our writer (sage) is not suggesting a light-hearted or feel good occasional exercise, I don’t believe. His wise words are reminding us – no COMMANDING us – to THINK about THESE things as part of the root of what it means to live full and abundant lives.

Whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is pleasing, whatever is commendable, excellent, whatsoever is praiseworthy.... The challenge of thinking on these things is a very real one, stemming from the fact that doing so is not our first instinct, does not come naturally. Presumably that is why it is communicated to us as a command rather than just a reminder. Unfortunately, our natural tendency is to be critical,

focusing on the negative, and I don't know if it is genetic or is acquired and cultivated. Wild animals seem to assume the worst in other species, including humans, and thus flee from presumed predators – part of their genetically selected-for-survival instinct, it seems. (On the other hand, our domesticated house pets seem, by good breeding, to be able to see nothing but the best in us. I love that bumper sticker that says “May you be the person that your dog thinks you are.”) Other than genetics, perhaps our critical selves are the products of years of education and cultivation. Critique, after all, is a legitimate and necessary component of literary, historical, artistic, and scientific practice.

But criticism going beyond a well-honed analytic practice seems to have become an over-used life tool in our time expressing itself as cynicism and even cruelty. Inexplicably, we seem to get great personal satisfaction from the defeat of someone else's idea, or bursting someone's bubble, or from the exposure of someone's income tax filing mistake that leads to their embarrassment or discourages their career advancement. It's as though we harbor the illusion, as my father used to warn me, that our own candles appear to shine more brightly if we can extinguish the light from those around us. Criticism – again not to be confused with necessary critical analysis – but personal criticism that is intended to cause others not to admire someone else or the value of others' legitimate ideas, is now a highly refined and unfortunate practice. Public criticism, which in earlier periods had been considered impolite or even scandalous behavior, is now a mainstay of evening talk show humor, so-called “mock-umentaries,” political campaign advertising, and even what passes for investigative journalism. We like to “bring 'em down.” But it is that widely practiced, and widely laughed-with form of criticism that is the antithesis of the practices and disciplines of abundant thinking and living. Instead of thinking on whatever is true, honorable, just, pure, pleasing, commendable, excellent, and praiseworthy, we find it seductively satisfying, more fun, to think on whatever or whoever is vulnerable, imprecise, imperfect, unpatriotic, disloyal, uncultured, unaware. - whatever makes others uncomfortable, uncertain, whatever is countercultural, edgy, or shocking.

It may be that our intentions are good. After all, there is something noble about wanting to correct all of the wrong in the world. But when we focus on doing so, even with good intentions, we discover that we are like the ship captain who orders all of the crew below decks to focus their energies exclusively on caulking and repairing every leak. The ship might indeed stay afloat, but with no one on deck, the vessel will merely be adrift, proving once again that the absence of flaws alone does not result in the accomplishment of purpose. Time and time again we end up feeling empty even when negatives in our lives are minimized.

Instead of obsessing over removing the bad, abundance comes to us when we shift our focus to the things that Paul instructs us to think upon. We know this to be true as evidenced by those times our lives when we have let our pursuit of the negative slip from our priorities. Recall for a moment your first few weeks as a freshmen at Emory. Why is it that some of the best friends made at any college or university are those made in the first semester of the freshman year? One possibility, I would suggest, is that in those early days, personal feelings like emptiness (the opposite of abundance) — the emptiness of home-sickness perhaps, fear of loneliness, desire for friendship, etc. — all temporarily (and happily) blinded us to the flaws in each other and to our fears that our own flaws matter. The pursuit of the negative dropped in the list of our personal priorities. Is it possible that we are more inclined to look within ourselves

and to each other to find whatever is true, honorable, just, pure, pleasing, commendable, excellent, and praiseworthy — that we are more inclined to be doing so in those circumstances than we were inclined to be critical of ourselves and each other? I think so. The result was abundant friendship.

Can we retain those lessons from our freshman experience—not the pain, but the openness? Can we discipline and condition ourselves always to be open to the possibilities of new relationships and the beauty of new experiences? Can we even tell if we are experiencing abundance? Interestingly, most of us aren't really sure how happy we are today, much less what to do about it. We can log onto web sites that list the symptoms of depression and allow our hypochondriacal selves to imagine the worst. Not only is this unfair to those who suffer from genuine mental health distress, but for those who do not, it begins once again to focus us on all of those things about which Paul would challenge us not to think — rather than to ignore them as we did in those early freshman days.

Some of you may have had a class with or enjoyed a lecture by Associate Professor of Sociology, Dr. Corey Keyes, who researches the field of psychological well-being. He writes as though he has read Paul's words on abundance as well. He is clearly dissatisfied with the notion that the opposite of depression is ... merely non-depression! He proposes that the opposite of mental illness and languishing should be mental health and flourishing. *Flourishing*—what a great word. He even has composed a set of 13 “symptoms” that are indicative of people who are “afflicted” with flourishing. These so-called symptoms include, “Has positive attitude toward others while acknowledging and accepting people's differences and complexity.” “Exhibits self-direction that is often guided by his or her own socially accepted and conventional internal standards and resists unsavory social pressures.” You get the idea.

So now we begin to understand that there are measures for abundance, for flourishing, and that Paul is not offering a merely sugary proverb or sunny platitude. Instead, to think on these things is a command that calls for and deserves our deliberate effort. You have heard this before. From the Dalai Lama's visit with us in the fall of your junior year and also from the Tibetan Buddhist tradition of compassion meditation (being studied at Emory for its positive effect on those with tendencies toward depression), we learn that to think on the matters to which Paul would have us focus our attention requires practice and deliberate effort.

The pursuit of abundance, although informed from Judeo-Christian and Tibetan Buddhist wisdom alike, seems to us counterintuitive. We are used to assuming that external events or behaviors might MAKE us happy and full, as though some external circumstances can present themselves in such a way that we can't help but feel filled. We imagine that perhaps it can be inherited or won in the lottery or experienced at a vacation resort or found in the arms of a lover. But the inspired wisdom of our scripture suggests that it is not present circumstance but rather this certain discipline of the mind to “think on these things” that brings fullness and abundance in any circumstance. It is like inverted insight, but we are assured that to feel full we must do more than simply taking the time to smell the roses during good times, but we must have courage and discipline to command our minds to think on these things even during the stormy periods.

Your time at Emory has been marked by stormy periods, beginning with your arrival here at the same time as hurricane Katrina hit the Gulf Coast and ending with the current economic storm (or, should I say, climate change) that is upon us. We all have experienced personal storms of which, perhaps, no one but ourselves will know. And there will be more external and internal storms breaking into each of our futures. There has been and will continue to be ample opportunity to focus on storms.

But instead of doing so, or even as we are forced to do so in some cases, we can be assured that it is still possible to secure this type of deep abundance through deliberate mental discipline and serious work. Please let me be clear, though. I am not suggesting that we approach life solemnly, just seriously. The 18<sup>th</sup> century English author Samuel Johnson writes that “the size of a [person’s] understanding may be justly measured by [their] mirth.” C.S. Lewis in his essay *The Weight of Glory* writes that, while life must be taken seriously, “This does not mean that we are to be perpetually solemn. We must play. But our merriment must be of that kind (and it is, in fact, the merriest kind) which exists between people who have, from the outset, taken each other seriously.”

You, Emory graduates, know how to do this. You took each other very seriously during those early freshman encounters – even seriously enough that you were unashamed at sharing and enjoying each other’s silliness – clear evidence of being serious about allowing others access to who we really are. The risk of continuing to take each other seriously in this manner is that we could make ourselves vulnerable, we could be embarrassed. But as far as I can tell, there is no risk other than occasional embarrassment to the serious pursuit of abundance, and that is a trivial price to pay compared with the ongoing cost of living a less abundant life.

So in summary, the pursuit of abundance is unnatural, counterintuitive, requires mental discipline, is serious work, and carries the risk of embarrassment. Although one of the key steps toward achieving and maintaining it is clearly prescribed by inspired wisdom, it may be that only by belief in this wisdom and faith in the inspirer of all truth can we hope to have the courage to pursue this kind of abundance.

So as you go from this place, this Emory community, may you have the courage and faith—

To approach each new person you encounter as a candidate for friendship.

To encounter each new situation as a candidate opportunity for adventure, inspiration, and learning, not threat.

And from Emory and the bonds that you have formed with each other, may you take some memory (some example) of what is true, what is honorable, what is just, what is pure, what is pleasing, what is commendable, what is excellent, and what is praiseworthy, so that in all future circumstances, you may think on these things and more.

And may the abundance and peace of God be yours now and forever.

Amen.