

Remarks Upon Receiving the Henry Paley Memorial Award By Christopher B. Nelson, President, St John's College

*Presented at 2015 Annual Meeting of the
National Association of Independent Colleges and Universities*

February 3, 2015

Thank you. This was an unforeseen honor, and I am deeply aware of the responsibility this award confers as I reflect upon the man in whose name it is dedicated, and upon its illustrious previous recipients—many of whom I have been privileged to know. I feel a bit like Willie Mays who was reported to have said when he first arrived at the Polo Grounds to play for the Giants: “Can you imagine! I get to play baseball and they pay me for it too.” You honor me for doing what I most love doing, serving the public trust in helping to raise up the next generation, and promoting and defending the case for independent higher education. And now I carry the burden of trying to deserve the honor you have bestowed.

I am grateful to see so many of us today working with our extraordinary leadership at NAICU to carry our message to those who need to hear it—to the White House, to the Halls of Congress, and to the general public. David Warren and his very fine staff deserve our gratitude for all they have done to lead this effort. I offer a special word of thanks to my colleagues in the Maryland Independent Colleges and Universities Association for their friendship, support, and counsel over the years. Thanks also to my friends in the Annapolis Group and all those I have worked with in our various presidential associations.

St. John's College is a small community of learning, a tiny state in the great republic of higher education. But it is also a microcosm of what we all try to do when we are at our best. We all try to attend to the activity of learning with our students, to engage with them fully in the eternal present, while the flame of intellectual desire consumes us in the search for some truth that seems just beyond our grasp. I don't think there is anything that can match the shared experience of learning together with students who are engrossed in the quest for understanding. It makes all the rest of our presidential responsibilities worth the labor and the struggle.

We at St. John's remain devoted to liberal education despite the challenges facing it in a world that has become increasingly blind to its vision. How, in this circumstance, we ask, can we keep our eyes on the goal of educating the mind, the heart, and the soul for the *attainment* of happiness, which is the ultimate end of liberal education, just as the *pursuit* of happiness is our political birthright? Not easy these days! Not for any of us!

Despite the fact that our institutions have reduced the average real cost of attendance over the last decade, we are continually attacked for the cost of liberal education. We are asked to prove the value of our education in terms of financial return when we know that the greatest good we offer is incommensurate with the prevailing economic metaphor. We are required to assess learning “outcomes” as though liberal learning consists in mastering the exchange of information, when it is really about mastering the arts of inquiry and exploration. We are charged with bearing the primary accountability for the learning of our students when we know that learning belongs primarily to the students, and that no one can do their learning for them.

Liberal education is about developing character and the power of self-transformation—or rather, in the case of our students, self-*formation*, since so many of the young are still inventing a self to

be transformed later. This shaping and reshaping of the self is the single most valuable ability one can have for meeting the demands of the ever-changing world in which we live. This ability has never been, and will never be, attained by programs of study calibrated by yardsticks that measure how well students retain information or practice skills.

We are constantly forced to repel these assaults on our institutions. In doing so, we very often adopt the mindset of the assaulters in the very attempt to make ourselves understood by them. The more we do this, the more we risk losing our way and forgetting *our* purposes. *Our* purposes are these: We want our students to acquire freedom from the constraints of the pressures I have listed, freedom from the prejudices of upbringing and popular opinion, freedom from the limitations of educational disciplines, and ultimately, freedom to form their own judgments, to achieve their highest aspirations, and to make for themselves lives worth living, lives befitting their humanity.

What can we do to persuade our institutions, the press, our public officials, and the general public that society desperately needs this kind of education? Here I can say a few encouraging words about how, together, we might do this. And my confidence is not shaken by speaking to an audience that includes colleges and universities that do not fall under the general rubric of liberal arts colleges. I remain confident because all our institutions, including the research universities and colleges of professional preparation, understand that every individual needs personal freedom of thought to make the best and most intelligent life choices. We all know that the most successful individuals understand their own strengths and weaknesses, and have the independence of mind to explore beyond the boundaries of their present knowledge, as well as beyond the narrow confines of their particular fields of specialization.

Fortunately, the world seems to be approaching an inflection point in its previously insatiable demand for more and more specialized knowledge. Today it is clamoring not only for specific expertise, but also for ingenuity, innovation, and the ability to connect disparate areas of experience. For some time now, and with increasing frequency, our universities have been bringing liberal studies into their professional programs. Why? Because the liberal arts are the province of ingenuity, innovation, and interconnection! The solution to the world's current needs already exists, and has existed for millennia.

The human faculty that makes ingenuity and interconnection *possible* is imagination. And developing imagination in all its forms is the proper excellence of the liberal arts. Through repeated encounters with the greatest writings and artworks of the past—in literature, philosophy, mathematics, science, history, ethics, politics, music, painting, sculpture, dance, and so on—we become accustomed to the habits of imagination that enabled our most ingenious predecessors to conceive boldly, to invent what did not yet exist, to recreate both themselves and the world around them.

To reinvent the world in the face of modern challenges, we need to reinvigorate imagination through liberal education. If the world cannot see this because it believes that specialized research is both the beginning and end of higher education, then we need to meet the world where it is. We may need to abandon our traditional defenses of liberal education—arguments that rest on the benefits of broad learning, development of character, and preparation for citizenship—in a world that does not seem to value such virtues nearly as much as the virtue of skilled participation in an efficient and prosperous economic system.

The world wants ingenuity, innovation, and interconnectedness? Then that is the place to start. Let us create beautiful and aspirational arguments leading from ingenuity and interconnectedness

back to imagination and its guardian, liberal education. Let us abandon our defensive posture altogether, and replace it with the confident bearing of a physician who knows the cure. Let us recreate the rhetorical landscape around the world's current desires. Let us devise a new repertory of innovative and attractive tropes that will succeed where the old defensive tropes have failed. Let us invent the positive rhetoric that will help to shrink the world's blind spot, so that it can begin to see liberal education as the answer to its needs.

The attack on liberal education will not likely be turned back by individual efforts, no matter how ingenious. We must therefore devise and deploy our alternate rhetorical idiom as a coordinated force. We must use that idiom almost to the exclusion of the economic idiom. With persistence, if our vision is attractive enough, it will crowd out and eventually replace the world's idiom.

What will this rhetoric sound like? At the very least, it will eschew the economic metaphors that distort the essence of learning and teaching—rejecting terms like “value,” “investment,” “payoff,” “consumer,” “provider,”—and it will invariably and vigorously question the use of such terms, so that the users may begin to suspect they have a blind spot.

I have just begun thinking about how I would go about making this new positive case myself, but collectively we ought to be able to find many ways of doing so. We are, after all, the offspring of godlike poets, the heirs to the most persuasive rhetors who ever lived. If we can summon a smattering of their inventiveness, tell our story with a fraction of their ardor, and forge fresh language suited to the dignity of our object, we can wean the world from its addiction to specialization, at the very least in our high schools and in the early years of college.

We owe this to our students, because they are still finding their way. We owe it to the world, because we love the world, with all of its beauty and ugliness, and we want it to be a better world for our having been here. We owe it to ourselves, because—let's face it—we are substantially responsible for the worldview that attacks us, a view that we have reinforced by too great a willingness to engage it on its own terms.

Over the years, our collective voices have proved increasingly helpful—and indeed they have long since become *necessary*—in making a hard-hitting and multifaceted case for independent higher education. Let us now bend our wills to building a new case for the education that the world needs today.

We college presidents enjoy an extraordinary privilege in leading our schools and in helping to educate the next generation. This privilege carries with it a great responsibility to exercise the public trust we have been given with all the wisdom, compassion, and humility we can muster. Just as I am grateful for the friendship and support you have given me over the years, I know that you share with me gratitude for the guidance and support we receive from our NAICU colleagues.

And Now, Good Luck on your visits to the Hill! Thank you.