

“In Idleness, I Become Real” Remarks to New Inductees to SUU’s Chapter of Sigma Tau Delta

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I congratulate all of you new inductees to Sigma Tau Delta. I congratulate you on the academic achievement that has qualified you for membership in this organization. I also congratulate you for having chosen a major that is not only wonderfully useful but even more wonderfully useless. (I shall be accused of speaking in a willfully paradoxical way, but I hope to make it clear that I am not.)

The wonderful utility of English as a major should be evident to everyone:

It is, after all, a Major that enables those who command the skills it teaches to write proposals, articles, reviews, summaries, précis, arguments, books of all kinds, and well, yes, speeches.

It is a major that enables those who command the skills it teaches to read texts of various kinds with understanding and insight.

It is a major essential to the success of publishers, schools, law firms, government agencies, and public-relation firms.

All that is good and laudable. We all need the goods and services that come through the usefulness of English. But at a more fundamental level, perhaps we need even more the marvelous uselessness of English.

What do I mean by “the marvelous uselessness of English”?

What I refer to as the marvelous uselessness of English has been memorably evoked by W.H. Auden in his poem “In Memory of W.B. Yeats”:

. . . poetry makes nothing happen: it survives
In the valley of its saying where executives
Would never want to tamper; it flows south
From ranches of isolation and the busy griefs,
Raw towns that we believe and die in; it survives,
A way of happening, a mouth.

Poetry—which as you already know (or will in time) is the highest form of English”—makes nothing happen.” It does not win elections, contracts, or court cases. It does not launch rockets or develop new medicines. It does not build automobiles or erect factories. It is useless—but sublimely useless, for in that uselessness we find the imaginative space we need to meditate, to reflect, to contemplate in wonder and awe our place in a stunning universe.

And in a world of feverish labor and frenetic business, we need the uselessness of poetry and the reflective imaginative space it gives us.

To clarify our need for the uselessness of poetry, I would turn to the German philosopher Josef Pieper, who in his marvelous little book *Leisure: The Basis of Culture* laments that modern men and women are so caught up in the world of work that they have forgotten the very meaning of leisure. (And I recommend short books with a clear conscience.) Leisure, Pieper explains, is not merely sloth or loafing. Nor is it resting up for the next job. True leisure means meditation, contemplation, and reflection. Himself a devout Catholic, Pieper explains that leisure may even mean worship, a point he illustrates by quoting the words of the Lord through the Psalmist: “Be still, [be still] and know that I am God.” It is within this realm of reflective leisure that Pieper locates imaginative literature. It is within this realm of true leisure that we find the wonderful uselessness of poetry.

Professor Joseph Schwartz—a great scholar and mentor for me during my years in graduate school at Marquette—explained this realm of true leisure in this way: “It is a realm of the spirit that we must visit—or we shall perish.”

To further clarify what I mean in praising both the utility of English and its uselessness, let me turn to two titans of Chinese culture—the Master Kong (Confucius), the central figure in *The Analects*, and Lao-tzu, the author of the *Taoteching*. Confucius would certainly appreciate and laud the usefulness of the major you have chosen. For he was certainly a man who stressed getting things done. In Book 7 of *The Analects*, the Master says, “The failure to cultivate virtue, the failure to put into practice what I have learned, hearing what is right and being unable to move towards it, being unable to change what is not good—these are my worries.” Teaching a doctrine of unyielding moral strenuousness, Confucius declares, “The Gentleman [that is, the *jenza*] is ashamed that his worlds have outstripped his deeds.” And in explaining how he approaches any question, Confucius emphasizes unstinting labor: “I hammer at both sides of the question and go into it thoroughly.” This, again, was a man who would value the utility of English—its power to get things done.

Lao-tzu is a different matter. At the very center of Lao-tzu’s philosophy we find the doctrine of *wu-wei* or wise and reflective passivity. “Advantage belongs to doing nothing,” we read in *Tao TeChing*. “Advantage belongs to doing nothing.”

It is entirely understandable that for centuries—and surprisingly, again in our own 21st century—Chinese officials charged with getting things done have valued and affirmed Confucianism. However, poets and artists more generally have gravitated to Taoism. Remarkably, even Du Fu—the Chinese Shakespeare, if you will, and a poet thoroughly imbued with Confucian sensibilities—expresses himself in a notably Taoist vein at the conclusion of his “Two Impromptus”: “It is here, in idleness, I become real.” In soul-nurturing idleness, Du Fu finds his

deepest reality. And it is the sublime uselessness of poetry—including that of Du Fu—that gives us such idleness.

Of course, we cannot permanently withdraw from the world of work into a realm of meditative reclusiveness—though I would hope that when you put on your academic robes for graduation, you will recognize at least briefly that those robes ultimately come to us from the monks who attended the first great European universities, monks who devoted themselves to the *via contemplativa*—the life or the way of contemplation. But we are not monks and we only wear our monkish robes for part of a couple days each year. We must spend most of our lives in the *via activa*—the life or way of activity, the world of work, and in that world the remarkable utility of an English major will again and again demonstrate itself. That utility extends our will in a way that may properly be called empowering.

But do we really want to empower a will informed by nothing but appetite, vanity, ego, and ambition? Such empowerment can only mean distress, pain, and grief to those who get in its way.

The uselessness of poetry does not empower our will. In some ways, indeed, the uselessness of poetry means the very opposite of empowerment. It often means feeling overpowered by a sense of wonder, a sense of awe, a sense of astonishment. The uselessness of poetry does not give our will greater reach, greater force. Instead, the uselessness of poetry gives our will an innerness, an innerness where tenderness, appreciation, and responsiveness may grow.

“We become what we behold.” So declares William Blake in *Jerusalem*. When we spend time with the poetry of the great masters—Shakespeare and Milton, Chaucer, Spenser, Wordsworth, Dickinson, Whitman, both of the Brownings, Hopkins, Yeats, Auden—and I must stop or we will be here all evening. But when we read the poetry of these great poets, we are not taking up a tool to remake the world to suit our desires. No, we are opening up ourselves to let ourselves be remade, reshaped—worked *on*, if you will, by the greatest imaginative powers the world has known.

Please do not misunderstand me. I do not mean that we should spend our leisure reading only inspiring, uplifting, and edifying poetry. We very much need the harrowing poetry of Wilfred Owen and Siegfried Sassoon; we need James Thomson’s *City of the Dreadful Night*, the violence of Bertran de Born, the dark broodings of Thomas Hardy, and the emotional distress of Elizabeth Bishop. We need dark, troubling and distressing poetry to shake us out of complacency and smugness, to humble us and to remind us of the humanity we share with those in pain and despair.

But surely our leisure can be ample and capacious enough to include both the dark and the light, both Dante’s *Paradisio* as well as his *Inferno*.

And it is with a couple luminous poems that I wish to conclude.

First, I would like to share a poem by Walter Nash entitled “The Last Pitch of the Stair”:

In the days of candlelight
At the last pitch of the stair
Was the place at bedtime every night
Where I balked and resisted, bawling in fright,
Because the devils were there.

Where the old bead-curtain hung
I felt them touch my head.
I thought they fingered my lips and tongue
And sightless upon my eyelids swung
The malevolent undead.

To poultice my alarm
and make the devils go,
Sister would chant some powerful charm
Like “Old Macdonald had a farm”
Or “One man went to mow.”

Songs are healers, and some
Have the merit of answered prayer;
Then I pray God send me tunes to hum
Or verses to make, when I shall come
To the last pitch of the stair.

The second is a poem entitled “Eden Rock” by the Cornish poet Charles Causley (and if you have not yet discovered Charles Causley, your life is unnecessarily narrow and dark):

They are waiting for me somewhere beyond Eden
Rock:
My father, twenty-five, in the same suit
Of Genuine Irish Tweed, his terrier Jack
Still two years old and trembling at his feet.
My mother, twenty-three, in a sprigged dress
Drawn at the waist, ribbon in her straw hat,
Has spread the stiff white cloth over the grass.
Her hair, the colour of wheat, takes on the light.
She pours tea from a Thermos, the milk straight
From an old H.P. sauce-bottle, a screw

Of paper for a cork; slowly sets out
The same three plates, the tin cups painted blue.
The sky whitens as if lit by three suns.
My mother shades her eyes and looks my way
Over the drifted stream. My father spins
A stone along the water. Leisurely,
They beckon to me from the other bank.
I hear them call, 'See where the stream-path is!
Crossing is not as hard as you might think.'

I had not thought that it would be like this.

May your future life give you much success with English as a wonderfully useful tool. But may your future include enough of the marvelous uselessness of poetry that you will feel to echo the words of Du Fu: "It is here, in idleness, I become real."