

Spring Convocation 1993

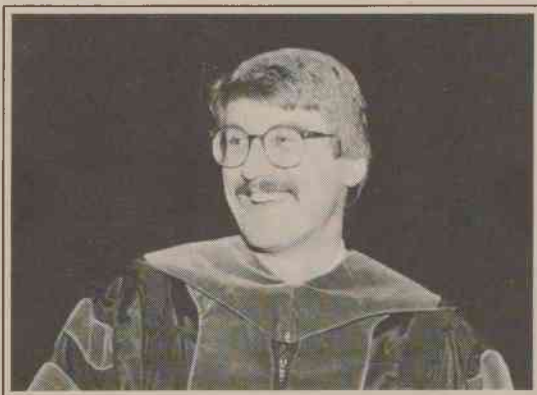
Virtue and Power

tion, and renovations on their homes. Some universities also have turned their sports programs into purely money-making enterprises, and they exploit college athletes to make that profit under the "win at all costs" philosophy. Here at Chowan, I am pleased to see coaches who are not only concerned about their team's athletic successes, but who are also concerned that their athletes succeed academically and in other areas of life as well. It is also good to see so many student athletes receive academic honors this morning.

We see the split between virtue and power in many other areas. We live in a world where 13 million children died of starvation last year, and where 500 million people go to bed hungry every night, even though the world produces enough food for every single person on this planet to have three decent meals a day. We also live in a country — the richest country on earth — where 14 million children live in poverty; that's 1 out of every 5 children. In my opinion, the real leeches of our society, the real parasites of our society, are not the homeless, the poor, or those who depend on welfare to survive. The real leeches and parasites of society are those who gain knowledge and who use that knowledge unethically, to abuse other human beings or to exploit nature in order to enrich themselves. If we gain true knowledge, however, we can also gain the power and virtue to change things, even if it is only in a very small way.

That is why you will run across in many of your classes at Chowan, not only a presentation of the so-called "facts" in each discipline, but hopefully a free and open discussion of the ethical implications of that data. You will find this to be the case in the classes you take in history, psychology, government, literature, business, science, education, and others. Maybe even in some of the religion and philosophy classes.

Here at Chowan College, we believe that if knowledge is seen as both virtue and power, then whatever knowledge we accumulate here will make a difference in each one of our lives, and that we also can have a positive influence on the lives of other human beings. Let me illustrate that point



By Eric A. Surface

with two examples of people who made a significant impact because they believed that knowledge was both virtue and power.

Martin Luther King Jr.

In 1929, a baby was born into a middle-class family in Atlanta, Georgia. The father of that family was a Baptist minister, and he and his wife raised all of their children to believe that education was the best way to bring about personal and social progress. The new baby was called M. L. by the family, and he quickly learned to value education as much as his parents did. He worked so hard that he passed his college entrance examinations when he was only 15. After finishing college, he attended Crozer Seminary, where he graduated first in his class. He then earned a Ph.D. at Boston University. All during this time he read everything he could get his hands on, from Greek philosophy to Hinduism to modern existentialism. He heard about a guy in India by the name of Gandhi, so he went to the library and checked out six books about him. He developed an encyclo-

pedic knowledge of history, philosophy, psychology, and theology, but struggled every day to apply his vast accumulation of knowledge to the problems of everyday existence. This knowledge would become the foundation upon which he would build his entire life, as he later told his college professors.

After he earned his doctorate, he was offered several teaching positions, but he and his wife decided that he should pastor a church for a few years first. So they moved to Montgomery, Alabama, where he became pastor of Dexter Avenue Baptist Church. He would never become a professor, but beginning in 1955, with the Montgomery Bus Boycott, Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. would change the course of history. That is why we celebrated his birthday this past Monday. Knowledge is power, but it also should be virtue, and all of us should therefore be dedicated to the unfinished task he left behind.

Malcolm X

The second example I want to share with you is a person whose name has been in the news a lot lately: Malcolm X. He also was the son of a Baptist minister, but his background was much different from Dr. King's. Malcolm X wrote in his autobiography that his first memory was when an offshoot of the Klu Klux Klan burned down his family's house. His father was murdered by that same group when Malcolm was just six years old. A few years later, Malcolm's mother was admitted into a mental institution, and he ended up in a detention home. He moved to Boston and then New York, where he became involved in a life of crime — working in illegal gambling, using and selling drugs, and finally committing armed robbery. He was caught by the police and sentenced to prison for 8 to 10 years.

In prison, Malcolm was converted twice: his first conversion was to the Muslim faith, and his second conversion was to the liberating value of education. He started teaching himself by copying down every single word and definition in his dictionary. He later wrote these words in his autobiography:

I could for the first time read a book and understand what the book was saying. Anyone who has read a great deal can understand the new world that opened. You couldn't have gotten those books away from me with a wedge. Months passed without my even thinking about being in prison. In fact, up to then, I had never been so truly free in my life.

Malcolm X continued to learn, grow, and develop his mind, especially after his trips to the Middle East, Europe, and Africa. As Michael Dyson, professor of African-American Studies at Brown University observed: His capacity for change and his commitment to knowledge, several times led him to abandon cherished ideas that he earlier thought were true, simply because he kept striving after true knowledge.

Three Ways Knowledge Makes A Difference

One of the many things that we can learn from Dr. King and Malcolm X — and, I hope, from the faculty here at Chowan College — is that knowledge is important, and that it can make a difference in our lives in at least three ways. First, knowledge can make us better human beings. Second, it can empower us to achieve our goals. And third, it can create in us the virtue and power to treat other human beings and our natural environment in a humane and ethical way. May all of us gain knowledge here at Chowan College, and in the spirit of Socrates, use that knowledge in the service of virtue, in order to enhance our own lives and the lives of our fellow human beings. Knowledge is virtue, and knowledge is power. That is why we are here this morning to celebrate academic excellence and the accumulation of knowledge.



By Erik A. Surface

The Speaker

Dr. David B. Gowler, an assistant professor of religion, believes that the students' academic development and overall well-being should come first, and that is why he came to Chowan.

When asked why he came to Chowan in 1990, Dr. Gowler replied, "Chowan presented an opportunity to do what I love to do best—teach."

For Dr. Gowler, a college community should revolve around fulfilling the academic needs of its students by providing the best possible instruction and facilities. He especially believes that a caring, talented faculty and a strong library are important to the students' academic success.

"The two greatest assets of a college are its faculty and its library, and here at Chowan, both are excellent," said Dr. Gowler. "When two-year-college students, who have transferred, come back and say that the quality of instruction at Chowan is better than that of the four-year school where they are now enrolled, you know that we are doing something right."

Dr. Gowler considers his two greatest professional accomplishments to be the successes of his former students and the approach to New Testament studies that he developed.

"Nothing pleases me more than keeping in contact with former students and seeing the things they are accomplishing," said Dr. Gowler. "I've had the chance to teach some very good students who have gone on to do some very fine things; it makes me very proud."

Dr. Gowler found a way to merge two opposing approaches to New Testament studies which has now been accepted by many respected scholars.

"There are two main schools of thought in New Testament studies, the literary approach and the socio-scientific approach," said Dr. Gowler. "The two sides weren't talking to each other; both sides were too busy saying 'no, you have to do it this way' to listen to each other. I found a way to merge the two schools. I argued that you cannot do a literary interpretation without the cultural context of the narrative."

Before coming to Chowan, Dr. Gowler was an assistant professor of religion at Berry College in Rome, Ga., and an instructor in New Testament at Southern Seminary in Louisville, Ky.

He received his bachelor's degree from the University of Illinois and his master of divinity degree and doctorate from Southern Seminary.

Dr. Gowler has published a book, "Host, Guest, Enemy and Friend: Portraits of the Pharisees in Luke and Acts," four articles, many papers and numerous book reviews.

Dr. Gowler is currently editing three books for "Emory studies in Early Christianity," of which he is an associate editor, and writing a book.

David and his wife of 10 years, Rita, who he dated for five years before they married, have a two-year-old son, Camden.