

Address at annual Honors Convocation

Striving to achieve academic excellence

We have set aside time today for the purpose of honoring students who have earned good grades. I wish first to speak, however, to students whose names are not found on the Honors List. I can identify with you. I remember wanting to be on the Honors List when I was in college. I also remember the experience of going to class, studying, but not making good grades.

In my remarks today, I am influenced by Dr. Edwin Graves Wilson, a man whose ability as a teacher is surpassed only by his larger than life character. It was in his course, a favorite among students, that I was introduced to the poetry of William Wordsworth.

In his autobiographical poem, *The Prelude*, Wordsworth reflects upon his experiences at college: "I was not meant for that place, nor for that hour." "I felt as if I were being weighed, as though in a balance." Wordsworth still speaks to me, and I imagine that he speaks to many of us. We, your teachers, don't see you as grades, but as people just like ourselves caught up in an intoxicating dance called education.

We are at a place that puts a high premium on learning and teaching. There are many institutions of higher learning that do not place as much emphasis on the student as we do here. We hear stories of students who transfer, but who come back and tell us that they were better off here because of the value we place on students.

What is important for us to consider today is academic excellence. I think of the athlete who trains for the Olympics. This person makes a choice about priorities. Training the body becomes extremely important. Training the mind should be our number one priority. We value hard work. We hope you have fun with friends, but we also hope that you learn the joy and satisfaction that comes from rigorous, disciplined study.

Many of you who are on the Honors List, and some of you who are not, have already developed the discipline of seeking the library which is the heart of our institution. We have many impressive buildings and facilities at Chowan College, and they all radiate out from our library.

Good grades are important. But in one sense, as Wordsworth reminds us, good grades are not the only thing that matters when we think of education. Long ago Socrates suggested that education is not about the acquisition of information. In the Socratic sense, education is what he calls, in those enduring words, "the conversion of the soul to wisdom." Socrates talked about—but more importantly, lived—his ideal. He didn't write a book. In fact, he thought that writing a philosophy book was tacky. For him, learning happened only in dialogue, and in this sense, his teaching style was similar to that used by Jesus Christ.

Socrates talked about his ideas with his students, but his ideal embraces both intellectual development and something of even greater importance—a moral commitment to use knowledge carefully for human betterment. It is sad to think of people who go to school for a long time, but who are never educated in this sense.

Pop culture's poet laureate, Eric Clapton, sings a song and tells the story of a man's rise and fall:

*Once I lived the life of a millionaire.
Spent all money.
Didn't have any cares.
Took all my friends out for a mighty good time.
Then I began to fall so low.
Lost all my friends; had no place to go.*

*If I get my hands on a dollar again,
I'll hang on to it 'til that old eagle grins.*

*'Cause nobody knows you
When you're down and out.
In your pocket is not one penny,
And as for friends you don't have many.*

*When you get back on your feet again,
Everybody wants to be your long lost friend.
I've said it's strange, without any doubt,
Nobody knows you, when you're down and out.*

I will say more about the down and later.

What do we cherish as students and faculty alike? What is our real purpose? What do we value most? Two words come to my mind: academic freedom. When Dr. William Louis Poteat spoke to the Baptist State Convention in 1922, he defended academic freedom at Wake Forest. He answered his critics, "Welcome truth . . . and do not stop to calculate the adjustment and revision her fresh coming will necessitate." But he also said, "Our deepest need is to be good, after that, to be intelligent. . . . What the world needs now as always," he continued, "is the . . . marriage of goodness and intelligence."

It is academic freedom, which Dr. Poteat argued so eloquently for, which provides a setting for liberal education, and I can think of nothing that we in our society need more than liberal education. We offer a major at Chowan College in Liberal Studies. It is a fine major—second only to a major in Religion. Some students here today may be undecided about a major. I would invite you to seriously consider a major in Liberal Studies.

A major in Liberal Studies would expose you to a world of ideas—in history, art, ethics, music, the sciences, and other areas. For

those of you majoring in other areas, choose your electives carefully. Don't take a course just because your friends are taking it. By all means, don't ask yourself which course is the easiest. The courses which challenge you the most are the ones that will stay with you for the rest of your life.

So let us re-commit today to learning, to discipline, to striving for perfection. But I guess this is what we would expect to think about on a day such as this. Dr. Poteat's other word was "good." "Our deepest need is to be good," he said, "after that, intelligent."

What can we say about the word "good?" It sounds like an old word to me, an old-fashioned word, a quaint word. Maybe there are other words we would prefer to be applied to us: fashionable, sophisticated, charming, intelligent.

Words come in to our language each year, but what we fail to consider, perhaps, is that words also die. I guess a word is a word only as long as someone uses it. It may sound like a far-fetched notion, but are we in danger of losing the word "good"—or more importantly, are we in danger of losing all that it represents?

Some schools are installing metal detectors today to keep the guns out and to make the schools a safe place. What a sad commentary on our society. To get an education is increasingly to put one's life in jeopardy. If the news is a mirror of society, then surely goodness is not the first word that comes to mind when we look in it.

But there are good people, and we all know such people by name and by face. I can think of two voices from beyond our campus who speak about goodness.

The first person who comes to mind is St. Francis. Francis, the son of a wealthy merchant undergoes a transformation after he's captured in war. His experiences with a poor foot soldier, a



Dr. Lowe presents Honor Roll pins following convocation address

leper, and a priest finally culminate in an encounter with his father who accosts him in the street. Francis' father upbraids him: "All that you have, I gave you. The clothes on your back—everything!" Thereupon, Francis proceeds to strip himself naked and hurl his clothes in a pile at his father's feet. Francis had become the apostle of poverty.

Another person comes to mind, one who is perhaps still on our minds today because we as a nation are remembering him. He is Martin Luther King, Jr.—a preacher whose eloquence and passion still capture our deepest emotions. Most often remembered as a champion for civil rights, Dr. King died from an assassin's bullet while en route to help feed the poor at a soup kitchen. He, like Francis, cared for the down and out. Inspired by the prophetic voices of Jesus Christ and Ghandi, he sought to use his formal education for the purpose of doing good.

It is a wonderful thought to consider you, our students—though only a short time—who will use your education to do good, to make our world a better place.

When we think of the civil rights movement, we remember an era when so many hate-filled hearts and minds were so twisted out of shape. We think of a time when people actually delighted in thinking horrible thoughts, in saying terrible things, and in doing those things which are so blatantly not good. Martin Luther King, Jr., once said, "One day we will learn that the heart can never be totally right if the head is totally wrong. Only through the bringing together of head and heart—intelligence and goodness—shall [we] rise to a fulfillment of [our] true nature."

Almost two hundred years ago, the Romantic and visionary poet, William Blake wrote *The Songs of Innocence and The Songs of Experience*. In these delightful poems he contrasts the age of innocence with the age of experience. It's true that once we leave the age of innocence we can never go back to it. We can revel in it; we can remember it whenever we hold a child, but we can never return to it. He writes in one of those poems: "We are put on earth a little space, that we may learn to bear the beams of love."

My wish for our continued work together at Chowan College, at this "little space," is that we will all seek good grades as we also maintain our collective quest for that which matters most—goodness.

*I am indebted to Dr. Edwin Wilson for this theme. The quotations from Dr. King and Dr. Poteat are taken from Professor Wilson's convocation address, "To Honor the Legacy," and the quotations from Wordsworth and Blake were discussed in the classes he taught at Wake Forest.

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