

WE might agree with Forrest Gump that "Life is like a box of chocolates," partly because, as his mama told him, "You never know what you're going to get," but also because we realize that it can be full of nuts! More significant on this day in which we honor those who walk another path is his statement, "Stupid is as stupid does." Having chosen to come to college, you strive to avoid stupid behavior and to attain knowledge; college is for learning.

But you also know that there are those, even here, who scorn learning, who are here for other purposes, or who do not know what their purpose is, whose behavior not only illustrates "Stupid is as stupid does" but who are content with that motto. These people drift. They may drift out of college and into some other endeavor as the wind of circumstance blows them, or they may graduate, still with no purpose, knowledge, or understanding. Though Gump graduates from the University of Alabama in the movie, we can take some comfort that in the novel he flunks out after his first semester. In Gump's words, we read what Coach Bryant tells him,

"... I can understand how you flunked remedial English, but it [mystifies me] how you managed to get an 'A' in something called Intermediate Light, and then an 'F' in phys-ed class—when you is jus been named the Most Valuable College Back in the Southeastern Conference! ... I regret ... having to tell you ... but you is done flunked out of school, and there is nothin' I can do."

Forrest says, "... it ... come to me what he is saying—I ain't gonna get to play no more football." Unfortunately, such grade discrepancies are less far-fetched than the book or the film.

More amazing and encouraging is that Bear Bryant could or would do nothing to salvage a football player who did not belong in college. College is not for all. Those we honor here evidently answer "yes" to what are ironic questions on this day: "Do you enjoy learning?" and "Is a place dedicated to the pursuit of knowledge for you?"

C. S. Lewis says, "... Progress means getting nearer to the place where you want to be." Deciding where you belong begins with a serious assessment of your purpose, your attitude, and yourself. Henry David Thoreau advises: "... Explore thyself." "If you are on the wrong road," Lewis adds, "progress means doing an about-turn and walking back to the right road" and in that case the man who turns back soonest is the most progressive man." But Thoreau cautions, "If you have built castles in the air, your work need not be lost" that is where they should be. Now put the foundations under them." College is the place where many build or secure those foundations.

Before your time and my remembrance, Gabriel Heatter, a radio reporter, always began his newscasts, no matter what had happened that day, "Ah, there's good news tonight!" Well, there IS good news. People here are part of that news. And radio is an analogy for that news. Like silent movies, radio is a pure medium. It is one-to-one, like teaching and learning. One need only be receptive, not simply accepting but receptive, open to good AND bad news, agreeable and disagreeable formation. As in reading, the true receptor participates, not just sitting and inhaling words whole but savoring them, appreciating and rejecting but willing to understand. Even without spoken words, the reader gains full value from exchange, an engagement in debate with words and meaning. These honored engage. They and you learn from this debate, gaining through involvement.

However, as more contemporary newsman Paul Harvey says, "Now for the rest of the story." We seem no longer to live in a time when we can laugh at as we apply to ourselves Mark Twain's statement, "Let us be thankful for the fools. But for them the rest of us could not succeed." Now, many seem to praise or envy the fools. In a recent speech, Carl Sagan bemoaned, "One trend that bothers me is the glorification of stupidity, that the media are reassuring people it's all right not to know anything—that in a way it's cool." In fact, in his latest film, Pauly Shore looks at the camera, directly addressing those watching, and does say, "Sometimes stupidity can be pretty cool" (Vincent E5). Sagan says of this attitude: "That to me is far more dangerous than a little pornography on the Internet."

Consider the popularity of such movies as *Ace Ventura*, *Pet Detective*, *Forrest Gump*, *Dumb and Dumber*, any film with Pauly Shore, as well as the perhaps unintentional dumbness, and mindless violence, of some Stallone action pictures, in which we are led to sympathize, empathize, or

even admire people who succeed not only without using intelligence but mainly and often because they lack intelligence. Chance, circumstances, and instinct move these people through life and play stronger roles in their lives than mental ability. We may like Forrest as a person and wish him well; his film is well-made and affecting.

Is he a model? Some say these movies affirm that anyone can attain (please note: not "achieve") success—despite obstacles—if he or she is sincere; these critics forget to add "obnoxious" and "crude" as labels for some of these characters. Like Beavis and Butthead, Pauly Shore seems entrenched at MTV. Should we emulate them? This situation is not entirely recent. Jerry Lewis has long been considered a comic genius in France. Are pencils up the nose and slobbering water as witty as they were in the fifth grade? Nothing is wrong with laughing at these characters except as they convey and certify certain attitudes toward life and learning. Why praise stupidity and denigrate intelligence? In the media, if not mad scientists, intelligent people are mocked or presented negatively—the absent-minded professor, the genius without common sense, the pompous egghead. This day denies those views.

But assumptions about the virtues of gaining knowledge have decreased as cheating has increased in schools at all levels. Many are content simply to get by without learning or proud to deceive, smug in their ignorance. Studying is sneered at; those who study are outcasts. Words like "nerd" and "dork" have gained prominence in recent years in the search for more abusive epithets than "bookworm" to describe those who seek knowledge earnestly and honestly; their original and their altered meanings express some current attitudes. The definition of "nerd" is "a dull, ineffectual or unattractive person" or one "dedicated to a nonsocial pursuit." Has the pursuit of knowledge become nonsocial? A dork, omitting its sexual meaning, is "a stupid, awkward, or slow-witted person." Reversing the meaning to apply to a studious person demonstrates a contempt some people have for intelligence. I recently heard a zoologist say that the human being is the only animal with round buttocks. We gaze in awe at this uniqueness, especially when packaged attractively, but neglect the uniqueness at the other end, the brain. We use them to watch television more than we use our brains to think

about what we see on TV. Mark Twain said that we are the only animals that blush, or need to.

In the Renaissance, the philosopher Desiderius Erasmus could write a book entitled *The Praise of Folly* to be perceived as satire; today, we are unsure, just as we might now take seriously Thomas Gray's poetic line, "Where ignorance is bliss, 'Tis folly to be wise." Calling his religious view "the philosophy of Christ" Dutch scholar Erasmus could combine in his life the critical, rational, and secular attitude of classical antiquity and Italian humanism with the religious piety of the German middle ages

without fear the humanism would anger Jerry Falwell or the merger burden the "mere Christianity" C. S. Lewis, in our own time, feared can be caught and lost in entanglements. The theologian had no such fear because he considered them one, his life; Gray does not repudiate rationality but refers to inno-

cence, a lack of awareness, as he fondly recalls life at Eton College where he learned to be an adult, knowing one cannot remain a child and that growing, becoming a complete person and achieving a full life, means learning and leaving behind foolish ways; for Lewis, this life means not only religion but intellectual awareness of religion, even—or especially—in its merest form, as part of a whole.

As he wrote, "Simplicity, simplicity, simplicity! ... let your affairs be as one or two ... not a hundred or thousand ..." Thoreau, like Erasmus, sought the wholeness of life, to understand the many as one, as does Robert Frost, who reacts to those who judge him a fool for cutting his own wood. "My object in living is to unite/ My avocation and my

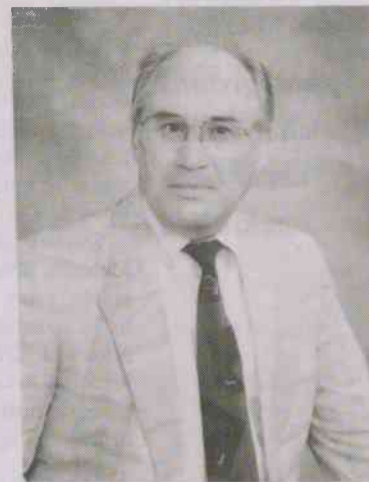
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Stupid Is as Stupid Does

An address delivered
at
spring semester
HONORS CONVOCATION
by
John H. Davis, Ph.D.
Professor of English

*"Progress means getting nearer to
the place where you want to be."*

—C. S. Lewis



DR. JOHN H. DAVIS

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