

Under the slings and arrows of outrageous fortune, have you persuaded yourself that there are knowledges and truths beyond your grasp, things that you simply cannot learn? Have you allowed adverse evidence to pile up and force you to conclude that you are not mathematical, not linguistic, not poetic, not scientific, not philosophical? —Scott Buchanan



Scott Buchanan
1895 - 1968

CONVOCATION

January 20, 2003
Santa Fe, New Mexico

This event marks the occasion when new students officially enter St. John's College. Each student processes individually, as his or her name is called, to be introduced to the president and to the dean. This is also the occasion when each new student inscribes his or her name into the St. John's College Register. Mr. John E. Balkcom, president of the Santa Fe campus, delivered this address to the students.

FRESH WATER IN THE HIGH DESERT

We convene this evening at the end of the day chosen by our country to celebrate the memory of the Reverend Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. In his 1963 *“Letter from a Birmingham Jail,”* which you will have the opportunity to study while you are here, Dr. King wrote:

...there is nothing new about this kind of civil disobedience. It was evidenced sublimely in the refusal of Shadrach, Meshack, and Abednego to obey the laws of Nebuchadnezzar, on the ground that a higher moral law was at stake. It was practiced superbly by the early Christians, who were willing to face hungry lions and the excruciating pain of chopping blocks rather than submit to certain unjust laws of the Roman Empire. To a degree, academic freedom is a reality today because Socrates practiced civil disobedience. In our own nation, the Boston Tea Party represented a massive act of civil disobedience.

Dr. King’s view of Socrates, it seems to me, squares with that of the editor of an odd little paperback entitled *The Portable Plato*. I recently ran across this book on the shelf of a local bookstore and began fanning its pages from back to front through the *Republic*, the *Phaedo*, the *Symposium*, and *Protagoras*. At the front, I found the editor’s introduction, authored to my surprise by Scott Buchanan, the founding dean of the program in which you matriculate today.

For those of you who are new to St. John’s College, let me acknowledge that these comments reveal at least one violation on my part, and perhaps two, of the unwritten rules of participation in the New Program. Not only did I read the introduction to this book—by itself a violation—but I even bought the book for its introduction.

I bring this introduction to your attention because it not only unveils four of Plato’s dialogues, but it also suggests how you might best take advantage of the program offered you by this fine, committed faculty.

Early in his introduction to *The Portable Plato*, Buchanan says

For many people in the past the reading of Plato has been the beginning of their deep liberal education. Such education takes

devious ways and it has many by-products, some good, some bad, all of them disturbing.



So, as you begin this program, allow yourself to be disturbed. Allow yourself even to be, as Buchanan expressed it, “...irritated and repelled by the behavior of Socrates and his conduct of the argument” in many of the dialogues. If you find yourself irritated by Socrates and by Plato, not to mention Austen and Dostoevsky, that’s good: you’ve begun the program.

On the opposite side of the coin of irritation, beware of falling in love with Socrates, or with Plato, Dostoevsky, Austen, Hegel, or Aristotle. Our tutor Mr. Goldfarb, as you will learn, has a certain passion for Plato, and he repeatedly warns us that Plato, though always tough minded and often tragic in his thinking, repeatedly pulls our leg, hoodwinks the reader, makes a fool of us when we take him too literally or seriously. So, be prepared to be disturbed but also to be duped by the chicanery of the great authors we read.

Give Plato, as Buchanan suggests, a “direct, simple, rapid reading.” Then, I would add, read it again slowly. Do the same with Kant, Hume, Kierkegaard, Lucretius, Herodotus, and Thucydides; likewise, Euclid, Lobachevsky, then Newton and later Einstein.

And notice the questions that come to mind as you read these texts and others; notice especially those questions you may be inclined to discard or ignore, perhaps because ‘no one else could possibly have that question.’ This silent mental chatter often flags an unexamined question that would serve well the conversation that accompanies the readings. Do speak up; do ask your question. But allow our tutors, especially early in your participation in the program, to guide you regarding which questions will serve us well and which ones might divert the discourse.

As you engage in the discourse of this program, take Buchanan's further suggestion to "...analyze and criticize the common sense" of every man and woman at the table, including your own common sense. Study your own ignorance, especially as revealed in your questions. Again, Buchanan: "The test for competent questions is of course: Does the questioner know the ignorance that his question expresses?"

Why do these things? Why invite disturbance, discomfort, and confusion? The benefit of this stratagem of self-induced discomposure and annoyance—whether you spend one year or five or forty at St. John's (as Mr. Steadman and Mr. Swentzell have)—might be an invitation to what Buchanan in a 1958 speech called "The Last Don Rag."

In this speech, Buchanan asks four vitally important questions. I say "asks" in the present tense because these questions live as richly today as they did over forty years ago when Buchanan first delivered them.

The first question is, "Do you believe in and trust your intellect, that innate power that never sleeps?" He adds, "This is not a theoretical or dogmatic question, but rather one of experience." So, the first benefit of your coming here and of your allowing yourself the experience of unease and agitation is the opportunity to experience trusting your intellect, of relying on what Buchanan calls "that innate power."

Buchanan's second question is, "Have you...become your own teacher?...Have you yet recognized that you are and always have been your own teacher?...Do you know what you don't know and therefore what you should know?" The current public discourse on education takes little or no account of this fundamental tenet of liberal education. Its absence from the discourse says much about the education of those leading the deliberations.

Or perhaps it reveals how our makers of educational policy would answer Buchanan's third question, which is for me the most powerful and discomfiting. He asks:

Under the slings and arrows of outrageous fortune, have you persuaded yourself that there are knowledges and truths beyond your grasp, things that you simply cannot learn? Have you allowed adverse evidence to pile up and force you

to conclude that you are not mathematical, not linguistic, not poetic, not scientific, not philosophical?

This last sentence describes both accurately and painfully the experience of many students and alumni from our major colleges and universities. Their programs of study have led them successively to conclude that they cannot become facile with integral calculus, cannot grasp Wittgenstein's insights on language, can neither fully appreciate nor emulate the sonnets of Shakespeare, cannot complete the Millikan oil drop experiment, cannot engage the political philosophy of Plato's *Republic*.

Your opportunity here *as a person* is no less than to enliven your intellect, to discover that you have the capacity to do each of these things. At the very least, you have the occasion to engage yourself and your intellect productively in the conversation that accompanies each, to come to know, as Buchanan put it, "...what you don't know and therefore what you should know."

Your opportunity as a citizen, both here and afterward, is to begin to revitalize and improve the collective discourse now shaping and reshaping the republic in which we live. Whatever your politics may be, I do hope you share with me an urgent sense that we need to raise the quality and sharpen the clarity of our collective discourse, of what Buchanan calls "the common human enterprise" that we are only too "ready to let...go by default." Buchanan suggests that our letting go of this common enterprise costs us a fortune in the currency of human dignity.

Buchanan's fourth and final question is, "Do you accept the world?" Candidly, this question escapes me. One part of me wants to say, 'of course I accept the world, and I've found my own way to live in it.' Another part says, 'no, of course not; how could I merely accept the absurdities I see in this world?' Possibly this fourth and final question of Buchanan's "Last Don Rag" pertains to Dr. King's presence in that Birmingham jail in 1963: perhaps he refused to accept the world as he found it then. He put his life on the line for his refusal, as did Socrates.

When you complete this program, you become a member of the larger community of St. John's College alumni about whom Buchanan observed:

...when I run into a St. Johnnie or two...in no time at all a conversation springs up, like fresh water from an old spring, in a world where there are fewer and fewer conversations.

This wellspring of conversation merits your scrupulous attention and full participation.

Let me restate what our founding dean might suggest to you about tackling the New Program:

1. Expect to be disturbed, irritated, and occasionally repelled by what you read.
2. Beware of falling in love with these texts and authors.
3. Give each text a “direct, simple, rapid reading.” And then, if your intellect has the same mortal capacity as mine, read it again more slowly.
4. Notice the questions you have, and ask them.
5. Analyze and criticize the common sense of every person at the table, especially your own.

The sixth and final rule, of course, is “never read the introduction to a Great Book.” Consider Buchanan’s comment in his own introduction:

I would...advise the present reader to stop reading this introduction at this point and turn to the dialogues. I promise him that the rest will wait for him until he comes back with the confused curiosity that the wonder of the dialogues themselves engenders.

We welcome you and your confused curiosity to this “brilliantly conceived small college.” We are genuinely delighted you’re here, and we look forward to your becoming fully immersed in the work of this community of learners.

I declare the college in session: *Convocatum Est.*

John E. Balkcom
President
ST. JOHN’S COLLEGE - SANTA FE, NM

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

Max,

Last night I finished reading *How to Think about The Great Ideas*. It was not part of my reading schedule, but once I picked it up, everything else somehow became less important to read at the time. I would greatly like to thank yourself, Dr. Adler, and the Center for putting that compilation together. This book proved to be the most lucid and panoramic collection of Dr. Adler's works that I have read, and solidly convinced me that philosophy is everybody's business. Serendipitously this book also strengthened my faith in God by showing that reflection on common experience points vehemently towards our Divine Creator.

Thanks,

Hank Rawlins

WELCOME NEW MEMBERS

Elbert Cook

Karl Haden

Theo Poulos

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