

THE 1986 COMMENCEMENT ADDRESS

“A GOOD SPOT OF THIS EARTH”

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Ladies and gentlemen of the graduating class of 1986 – and those who encompass you as a great cloud of witnesses – I salute you. I see here, as I would in the mythical town of Lake Wobegon, women who are strong, men who are good-looking, and children all of whom are above average. Congratulations – from me and my colleagues – even from those who did not recognize that you were all above average.

Two things about commencements pain me. One is having to wear these unbearably hot black gowns. The other is commencement speeches. Having heard them for more years than not since my birth, I can say with certainty that commencement addresses just have to be the duller literary genre going. Little did I suspect that our president would inflect upon me such a torment as to have to deliver one of them myself. I have read Solzhenitsyn's *Gulag Archipelago* in its eighteen-hundred page entirety, but nothing in my experience has prepared me for this day.

For those of my colleagues who were wondering how long I could speak without mentioning Solzhenitsyn, your time of waiting is over. Though, if you snooze, who knows what pearls I might cast before the . . . faculty?

Having mentioned Solzhenitsyn, I should tell you that he, too, once gave a commencement address. It was at Harvard, that secular Calvin of the East. This wise man knew enough to devote merely one sentence to the typical genre. “My congratulations and best wishes to all of today's graduates,” he said. Then, noting that Harvard's motto is “Veritas,” truth, he launched into the deep waters of the spiritual malady afflicting the West. My subject today will not be as grandiose as his. It begins with geography.

There was a piece of land. It was about two hundred acres in size. A young brave boy would have taken a good hour to run around it all. In the beginning it was mostly a swamp. The swamp sank into many ponds. Stands of trees, maple and beech, interspersed themselves. If one were to have looked at it, he would have called it “Good.”

Then people came, people who hunted and fished for their food. They, too, found the land good. They set up camp. For fish they walked a few miles to a rather grand river, which had rapids that were not really all that grand. But at night, and also for hunting, these people preferred to stay on their good spot of this earth, sitting around a bright campfire. There they could perch on the crest of a knoll. Alongside their camp flowed an underground river, which they could tap for drinking water, since the closest lake, filled with reeds, was too far away for carrying water. All was well.

Today we do not know what happened to these earliest occupants of this good spot of the earth. As the poet Tennyson said, “Oh earth, what changes hast thou seen!” What we do know is that, later, someone bought this good spot of earth to raise cows and horses. People cleared some trees and planted silage corn for the cows, timothy for the horses, and clover for both. And so this place turned from being mere *terra firma* to being *terra agricultura*. Cows mooed. Horses whinnied. The farmer built a big stone house and filled it with a light of gas lanterns. The ponds remained. Forest turned into field. Two slim dirt road-paths crossed at a corner of the farm. All was well.

Then, some thirty years ago, just a tick and a tock on the geologic clock, the land underwent one more change. Some people – they were American, though they called themselves Dutch – came to this land, looked at it, and declared that it *r-r-really vas goot. Ja*. They bought it.

And they put up buildings on it. They kept the old house; it looked manorial. The other buildings which they put on this good spot of earth were much bigger. They even built a very large building in case persons would want to dip under water without going over to the lake filled with reeds or the river which was rather grand (though its rapids were not) or would want to shoot rather large round balls into slightly larger round hoops made of metal painted orange. It was large enough to house persons sitting in rows, in case someone should want to stand up and speak at them all at the same time. Once they got a-building, they did not stop – to this very day.

And so *terra agricultura* became *terra cultura*. For what these Dutch people had built was a college campus. Naturally, they named it after a Frenchman. This decision made perfect sense to Dutchmen. They moved their little college on this new campus. “O earth, what changes has thou seen.” Where the corn and timothy and clover had been, they planted grass for a campus green. They preserved many trees and planted many new ones. They laid sidewalks criss-crossing the old pasture. They dotted the campus with electric lights. Where, before, a man had tried to make cows grow to maturity, now men and women would try to make children grow to maturity.

That agriculture is an apt image for culture the old Spaniard Cervantes knew. In his novel *Don Quixote* we come upon this exchange between the ageless idealist and his down-to-earth sidekick Sancho Panza.

“Everyday, Sancho,” said Don Quixote, “you are becoming less stupid and more sensible.”

“It must be that some of your Grace’s good sense is sticking to me,” was Sancho’s answer. “I am like a piece of land that of itself is dry and barren, but if you scatter manure over it and cultivate it, it will bear good fruit . . . Your Grace’s conversation” (Sancho continued) “is the manure that has been cast upon the barren land of my dry wit; the time that I spend in your service . . . does the cultivating; as a result of it all, I hope to bring forth blessed fruits by not departing, slipping, or sliding, from those paths of good breeding which your Grace has marked out for me”

Considering what Sancho chose as an image for Quixote’s thoughts, it is good that he did not slip or slide in it. And now I perceive a problem if I am to extend the image to talk of what it is that Calvin professors have to offer their students. Perhaps I should have stuck to the biblical image about casting pearls. But on this celebratory occasion this now seems like an equally perilous line of imagery.

Besides wanting to build a pretty campus, these God-fearing American Dutchmen had other ideas. They believed in what they called the cultural mandate: that the task of human beings was to subdue the earth and to rule every aspect of human culture for the glory of God, and in God’s name. As one of their illustrious forebears, Abraham Kuyper, had put it, there is no square inch of this earth which does not belong to the Lord. The many square inches of these two-hundred acres would bear witness to this settled conviction.

It is good for a person to have a spot of earth which he considers his own. For many of us, the home of our parents serves this role. If we move away, we can always return periodically to the place which is really ours. So fifteen months ago, when my aging parents had to move out of their big old home in Chicago to an apartment in Texas near one of my sisters, I felt a sense of great loss. Home – sweet, sweet home – was gone. Now I must try to make my little lot in Grand Rapids into a substitute as my own spot of earth. Where, I wonder, will your spot of earth be?

I know that a college cannot be to you mother and father. But, perhaps, in some secondary way, you can always think back to this particular spot of earth as your piece of earth. We all know the sense in which, as Thomas Wolfe put it, you can’t go home again. Alumni return and see few faces which they recognize. You who today are being transmogrified from students into alumni right before our very eyes will, when you return, know that feeling. Yet alumni keep coming back, coming back home. We are not your mother or father, but we are your

alma mater. In Latin, this term means nourishing mother, foster mother. In Spanish, *alma* means soul.

This good spot of the earth is also a kind of home for many who never attended Calvin. Many have prayed faithfully for this place. Many have given money. If you were on campus yesterday, you saw supporters of the college, some from far away, selling food and wares to help the place which they love.

The constituency of Calvin College is the envy of all other colleges that I know. It is not often that a Calvin professor has the opportunity that I do today to say, on behalf of his colleagues, "Thank you, constituency. Thank you for your generous support. Thank you also for your forbearance when we are silly and pompous. We professors are a strange lot; we say and write and do things which are quite incomprehensible to normal people. Though we may not always make it clear to you, we love the Lord, and we seek to do His will." And of course, graduating students, we welcome you to the annual alumni fund drive.

I have spoken about Calvin's being a home to which you can return. But we all know that the main thing is for you graduates to go forth from here to other spots of this good earth. For not only is every square inch of this campus the Lord's; every square inch of the whole earth is His. Maybe there are not enough Calvin graduates to redeem every one of those square inches. But there are enough of them to do a whole lot. Do you know, graduates of '86, that you are joining a host more than 35,000 strong? It will not fall to many of you to do heroic things. But many of you will give of yourselves to keep the Kingdom's machinery greased, to do the little things in community and church and (especially) home which go unnoticed and unpraised but which make a difference. Many of you will redeem a small number of square inches of this earth and turn them into a good spot. You will transplant a small piece of Calvin College and will share with your *alma mater* in the task of Christian reclamation.

From our perspective on Burton and East Beltline, we shall then say that what you have done with your lives has validated this place's reason for being. God will be the judge of your work and of ours. I think – but maybe just hope – that most of you will leave with the thought that this place has served you well. I think – but maybe just hope – that you will go forth imbued with our common dream that each will light a light for good and for God. We thank God for what you have brought to us. We thank God for what you take with you as you depart from us. Even now, I am picturing the cars that in an hour or two will drive off of this campus, carrying more than eight hundred persons into whose souls their foster mother, their soul mother, has sought to pour some light. This little light of mine. Let it shine. Let it shine.