

Opening Convocation Remarks  
26 August 2009  
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“Ti esti?” — What is it?

“Ti esti?” is the Socratic question, quite literally, “What is it?”

We have learned from Plato that Socrates’s approach in his dialogues was not aimed at framing what he knew, but rather what he did not know. To him knowledge was achieved through an awareness of one’s own ignorance. An understanding of the vacant vessel defines its sparse contents. The most learned among us are those most humbled by this awareness. Knowledge is contextual.

Socrates was perhaps at his best when posing ineffable questions like “Ti esti dikaiosune?” “What is justice?” Even the haughtiest among us must feign any confidence in the face of such an inquiry. The most meaningful aspects of our lives: justice, truth, beauty, and love are also the things we most struggle to understand, and yet here we gather at the brink prepared to plunge into the inky shadows of the unknown.

The art of this game is that it is actually an intricate terrace, each seemingly bottomless brink catching the plummeting student when the questions can be answered. This provokes harder questions that lead to a new ledge dropping further into the darkness. In this sense, Socratic enlightenment is an endless descent into the infinite.

Inquiry-based learning starts in the realm of the cub reporter’s questions. “Who,” “what,” “where,” and “when” provide the fodder of much education. At Sweet Briar, as the returning students know, you will dwell on the much more rewarding and exasperating “how” and “why.”

Plato used his “Allegory of the Cave” to similarly explain the intellectual journey: the cave dwellers knowing nothing of the world but the projected shadows cast by the fire behind their heads. Through inquiry a resident of the cave may become free and venture into the light of reality outside the cave. At this point you might think Plato and I have diverged: I have sent you careening into the darkness and he has released you into the light, but Plato continues his allegory by suggesting that the brightness outside the cave and the newly exposed forms are overwhelming and unfamiliar until the student adapts to her new environment.

Had Socrates made a better beverage choice (never order the hemlock) and survived to read Plato’s *Republic*, I believe he would have suggested to his most famous pupil that the cave is really a matrushka doll of caves with each new enlightenment being a step into a new, more clearly defined cavern much like St. Teresa of Avila explained her own spiritual journey in her memoir, *The Interior*

*Castle*. Here she describes the soul as an enormous crystal palace with progressive layers of rooms. The spiritual pilgrim must overcome obstacles and temptations to move through the transparent rooms of this metaphoric castle in an attempt to reach unity with God who resides in the central chamber.

This year we are using the honors theme of evolution and devolution as a touchstone for conversations across the disciplines. This year's theme was chosen in part because this is the bicentennial of Charles Darwin's birth and the sesquicentennial of the publication of *The Origin of Species*. Darwin's explanation of biodiversity, which was discerned through painstaking observation and years of careful application of the scientific method, a theory that posits that creatures who inherit traits that make them more successful and therefore more likely to reproduce and pass along these traits leading to gradual changes in species over time as heredity responds to environmental challenges, continues to spark passionate debates one hundred and fifty years after its publication. One of the questions we must explore together this year is why this topic is threatening to some people.

Four hundred years ago, Galileo Galilei, a pious Roman Catholic, published his observations of the moons of Jupiter, which supported Copernicus's theory of heliocentrism. Nearly seventy years earlier, Copernicus had used mathematics to determine that the earth revolved around the sun rather than the opposite. Through direct observation, Galileo proved Copernicus correct. For this he was brought before the Roman Inquisition in 1615. Though exonerated at the time, heliocentrism was condemned as "false and contrary to Scripture." When Galileo defended his view in the *Dialogue Concerning the Two Chief World Systems* in 1632, he was tried by the Inquisition and found guilty of heresy. He was forced to recant the following year closing his remarks with the famous quote, "*E pur si muove*" ("And yet it moves"). He then spent the remainder of his life under house arrest. Why has this once controversial topic become a point of history that no longer provokes debate, but evolution has not?

Imagine the Bible including a passage like this: "On the 401,500,000,000<sup>th</sup> day, God created prokaryotes and on the 1,677,321,000,000<sup>th</sup> day he made man (probably Australopithecus at that point in time) through a seemingly endless series of mutations that were passed on to the next generation when they allowed the inheritor to successfully compete within his environment and procreate."

Would such a prologue to the Pentateuch have helped the ancient Jews better understand whence they came, or was their actual sacred text a more useful guide for them to understand the shadows in the Platonic cave in which they found themselves at that point in human history? As teachers, and by this I mean all of us, we can only lead each other out of one mental cave and into another if we are able to explain the route in such a way that those whom we guide will want to follow.

Another topic that will be central to our discussions this year is sustainability. As we continue to develop our plans to comply with the Presidents' Climate Commitment, we will be working to understand how to be better stewards of the limited resources of the planet, reducing our carbon footprint, and hopefully slowing global warming. This too has become a point of debate in the face of seemingly irrefutable data. Here we must ask ourselves why either side of the argument is being supported, by whom, and for what purpose. What's in it for them?

This past weekend, I picked up trash along Sunset Road, which runs through the back of campus. The ditches were strewn with beer and soda bottles. In seven states, this is no longer a reality. Deposits were placed on these cans and bottles over two decades ago through a law nicknamed the "Bottle Bill." These legal actions were strongly opposed by the beverage industry and grocery chains that would have to later serve as collection centers, but college students, using their campus chapters of the Public Interest Research Group successfully campaigned to pass these laws, which led to an immediate visible improvement of the countryside in those states. Why haven't the remaining states enacted similar legislation? Do we really need to create institutionalized incentives to convince people to do the right thing? Galilean observation would suggest we do.

As Dr. Gottlieb in psychology said a few days ago, it is very difficult for any animal to forego immediate reward for long-term gain. For many, investing in the future is equated with denying oneself the rewards of the present. In spite of an awareness of a greater common good, we often only act in response to a tangible, personal benefit.

As future leaders, you as students need to constantly ask why things are as they are and how they can be changed for the better. Look to your faculty as models. When their Socratic inquiry leads you out of the cave, take time to reflect not only on what you have found on the outside, but think about how you were led to that point of transformation, because there lies the power to make an important difference in the world. You are fortunate because the assembly of scholars before you are truly expert guides, and it is my pleasure to introduce the one whom the student body has recognized for this very gift by naming her the 2009 recipient of the Connie Burwell White Award for Excellence in Teaching, Marcia Jones Thom.