

Convocation Address

"Spera in Deo"

By Dean L. Overman

Dimnent Chapel - Hope College - August 25, 2002

President Bultman, members of the faculty, parents, students and friends of the College, it's always a joy to be back in Holland. I love this place very much. And particularly it's joyful to participate with you in the convocation of the new academic year.

I believe that my appearance here today should give you all some hope because it demonstrates the college's ability to forgive the minor indiscretions of its students. I'd like to take this opportunity to apologize for surreptitiously entering my dog Zonia, a Norwegian Elkhound, into the Homecoming Queen competition. This was a harmless attempt to have Zonia's rare beauty quantified by a campus title. Knowing of Zonia's desire for recognition, some of us (I promised my wife I wouldn't name who) cajoled the administrative office into giving us the keys for the main display case in what was then Van Raalte Hall. We cut a picture of a blonde model out of Life magazine and put it in the display case and typed "Zonia Niles" underneath it (Niles was my landlord). The story then spread that Zonia was a new Norwegian beauty on campus (which she was); she still couldn't speak a word of English (which she couldn't); and she was extremely friendly (which was also true); and she loved to go for long walks (which she did). Although we were frustrated when Zonia's name was checked against the college registration records and removed from the ballot, she did win a majority of write-in votes--and that gave her a new sense of confidence and purpose.

You're about to begin a great adventure. I'm excited for you. I know, because I sat where you're sitting now just a couple of years ago.

I understand that the entire basketball team, or most of it at least, is here today, and I want to begin with a special message for the team -- win.

I'd like to give you eight practical suggestions about ways to increase your academic experience at Hope. This is for the improvement of the experience. I call them tanquamatic, tanquamatic steps. A tanquam is a person educated enough to go to college, so you are all tanquams, whether you know it or not. And these are eight suggestions that I have in terms of enhancing your academic experience.

1. Study early in the day when your brain is rested. If you wait until 10 p.m. to start your work, your brain's going to be too tired to function well; you may have to read a paragraph over and over again to get its meaning -- have you ever had that experience? If you do it in the morning, earlier in the day, you'll find that you learn faster. What's important about that is, it leaves you more time for play, and play is extremely important in college so don't shorten your time for play by lengthening the time it takes you to comprehend something. I encourage you to study earlier in the day between classes and then play with great vigor.

2. Find a quiet place to study. Consider making the library your friend – it's a great place, but any consistently quiet place will do.

3. Read your assignment before you go to class. If you haven't read the material which is about to be covered, you'll tend to write down everything the professor says, whether or not it's important. Now, I know that some of the professors may not like my saying this, but not everything the professor says is important. When I was teaching at the University of Virginia Law School, I told my law students to listen, think and then periodically write a summary of what was being said. So I encourage you to listen, think and periodically write a summary as a way of taking notes in class.

4. Revise and clarify your notes as soon as possible each day. If you wait until the next day, you may not remember a lecture well enough to make complete sense of your notes, or, as in my case, if you wait longer, you may not even be able to read your own handwriting.

5. As a general rule (this is a good tip, I think), if a professor has well outlined lectures, many of the questions on the examination will come from the lectures. So don't miss class.

6. Avoid mindless reading by making outlines. Outlining forces you to organize your thoughts around concepts. It gives you a rubric in which to put your understanding.

7. Something my sister taught me (who I think is here today) – start preparing for exams and term papers well in advance. Don't wait until the last couple of days. For papers, there is no such thing, in my view, as good writing. There's only good re-writing, so start early and then revise.

Lastly,

8. Enjoy college with all your heart. And I encourage you to make friends of your professors.

We just had a wonderful lunch at President Bultman's house with people who matter a great deal to me, who were professors when I was here. Let me just give you some personal history about my making friends with professors. When I left Hope, many of my best friends were the professors here, and I stayed in touch with them over the years – men like Lars Granberg, and D. Ivan Dykstra, Arthur Jentz, Jim Malcolm, Lawrence "Doc" Green, Russ de Vette, Roger Rietberg – and many, many more whose names I can't say without a feeling of gratitude, wonderful persons who enriched my life and the lives of so many students.

My point is that you now have the opportunity to have a similar experience, and I encourage you to get know your professors. They care so deeply about you. It'll be one of the great experiences of your life.

In addition to the eight tanquamatic or practical suggestions, my main message to you is that your future is very bright. I know that there are many problems in today's world. The daily headlines describe a troubled, embattled world – 9-11, war in Afghanistan, terrorism, financial disarray in Latin America, bombings in the Middle East, West Nile virus, possible war with Iraq, polluted water, global warming, corporate scandals, and personal tragedies. And sometimes, sometimes, the darkness surrounds our lives. When that happens, the goal is not to get used to the darkness or accept it or try to figure out who to blame for the darkness. The goal is to find some light.

Light is important, because light shoves darkness aside making room for us to experience beauty. Who will bring the light to pierce the darkness which covers our world today? You will. Why you? Because you are going to have an education at a college which looks at a search for whole truth -- not fragmented truth, but whole truth. Truth which includes the kind of knowledge which comes from experiencing beauty.

This kind of knowledge is more likely to be true. Let me give you an example of what I'm trying to say. Paul Dirac, the Nobel laureate in physics, spent his entire life in search of beautiful equations. Why did he spend his life in search of beautiful equations? Because he knew that it is equations with the quality of mathematical beauty which best describe the physical world. Physicist Brian Greene has written a wonderful new book called *The Elegant Universe*. In this book he discusses the beauty of string theory in astrophysics. If you read it, you will see why he stands in awe of the elegant nature of the universe. For the religious, this elegance, this beauty, is part of the glory of God.

The most beautiful place I know in the world, and I hope you all get there if you haven't, is Wengen, Switzerland. It's a mountain village in the Bernese Oberland with a majestic view of the Alps. A New York Times reporter once asked the rector of the English church in the village why he stayed there, and he said, "Because this whole place cries out to you that there is a God!"

When I talk about "beauty," I am talking about more than physical attractiveness, or truth in academic inquiry, or majestic scenery. I am talking about coherent, underlying good. Coherent, underlying good. The source of that beauty is God. I believe the existence of beauty is some evidence for the existence of a good God. Why is there any beauty at all? I urge you to search for the kind of knowledge which moves toward beauty.

Our choices in our personal lives determine whether we move toward beauty or away from it. Every day, to some extent, we have the opportunity to encourage each other toward a beautiful destination or toward an unseemly, unattractive one. Our characters are not static. Daily, we are moving either toward the life which is the light of mankind and something beautiful or we are moving toward something which is not beautiful at all.

Let me tell you what I am trying to communicate by describing the character of Gollum, most recently portrayed in the movie, *The Lord of the Rings*. What the movie did not show was that in J.R.R. Tolkien's book, Gollum was once a normal hobbit, but when he came into possession of the ring, he gradually became extremely selfish and greedy. The ring is a personification of evil, and Gollum becomes imprisoned in his own dark self-centeredness and eventually is transformed into a hideous creature.

Tolkien's point is not original. Listen to the words of John, written almost 19 centuries earlier:

"Whoever loves a brother or sister lives in the light, and in such a person there is no cause for stumbling. But whoever hates is in the darkness, walks in the darkness, and does not know the way to go, because the darkness has brought on blindness."
1 John 2:9-11

If we are to be bearers of light which will dispel darkness and make room for beauty, we can't be blinded by the darkness ourselves. We need to walk in the light. We need to love. Our choices count. You will have the best experience at Hope if you take advantage of the opportunities to move toward the life which is the light of mankind. That light still shines in the darkness and the darkness does not

overcome it.

There are many opportunities here, and basically what I am saying is build a transforming friendship with God, so that you will gradually move toward more and more beauty, certainly more and more the ability to recognize beauty when it's before you in your life.

Now, the cost of admission to the educational opportunity that you have before you is not just monetary; the cost includes forming convictions and acting upon them. Weave into your education the capacity to make judgments, to form convictions and to act boldly upon the values that you have. Don't delude yourself into believing that you can become a responsible person without ever taking sides, without expressing your convictions.

Education alone does not make us better persons. In the view of many, political correctness has made this generation of college students the most silenced generation in American history. But don't you be intimidated. You are the hope of the future.

Education, by itself, is not enough. Look at the Holocaust. A man could read Goethe, listen to Bach and the next day gas his fellow human beings. You can be bearers of light in a dark world, but to do that you must reach conclusions, take sides on issues, and act upon your convictions in a manner consistent with your faith. If you do, you will be prepared to enter the arena which was advocated by Theodore Roosevelt. Listen to his words:

"It is not the critic who counts, not the one who points out how the strong man stumbled¼ The credit belongs to the man who is actually in the arena¼who strives valiantly; who knows the great enthusiasms¼and spends himself in a worthy cause. Who, if he wins, knows the triumph of high achievement and who, if he fails, at least fails while daring greatly."

No one answers the call of an uncertain trumpet. Develop strong convictions.

But strong convictions alone are not enough. Malicious dictators have had strong convictions. We need a foundation or anchor which is tied to grace, and light, and beauty, and truth.

We also need a foundation which has some permanence. History demonstrates that physical, human, social and political constructs are all ephemeral; they're all very short lived. Look at nations. They rise and fall, showing very little permanence in the perspective of a few thousand years. Monuments exalting once powerful leaders collapse and lie ruined in sand. That's the point of Shelley's poem, Ozymandias, which if you haven't read I'm sure you'll read at Hope.

Even if we ignore history and believe that there could be social, political and physical constructs which would not collapse, our sun is exhausting its hydrogen fuel and in about five billion years the sun will go into its death throes. When that happens, the whole earth, indeed our whole solar system, will be engulfed by the sun as it expands in its dying throes. This is not a movie, this is actually going to happen. Another planet hospitable to human life will not give permanence, because, as physicists will tell you, the universe itself will eventually be unable to support life.

So, where is there any permanence? There is only one source of permanence: God. We have been made for the purpose of relating to God who does not change. Augustine, who tried so many blind alleys in his life, finally came to this conclusion

when he wrote, "O God, you have made us for yourself, and our hearts are restless until they rest in you." God is forever the same and in relationship to Him we touch eternity. Listen to what John wrote:

"The world and all of its desires will one day disappear, but we who are following God are part of the permanent and cannot die." *John 2:17*)

What is so very promising for you is that this personal God cares deeply for you and holds your future. Listen to the words of Jeremiah, and think of these words as you go through your education at Hope College. Grab onto them:

"For I know the plans I have for you, plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you hope and a future." *Jeremiah 29:11*

If you're convinced that you want your life to matter, if you want to act boldly, if you want to make a contribution in the world, to bring light to dispel darkness and make room for beauty, you've come to the right place. You'll not find a better foundation or anchor than that contained in the motto of this college: Spera in Deo, which is Latin for Hope in God.

I know you're going to have a wonderful time. I'm so excited for you. God bless you, and good day.