

Convocation Address (*Abschiedsrede*): “My Brilliant Career”—(after an Australian film of 1979 and in a similar spirit)

I am living proof that some very unlikely souls come into their own in the academy. I came into the world as an RH-factor baby in Tokyo, Japan at a time when that was still a life-or-death thing. At a certain point in my first week my body shut down. It took a while for the nurses to catch this and call in the doctors. It took a little while longer to restart my heart, and then longer to find blood donors, on the off chance . . . I am grateful for off chances.

There was brain damage of course but only time would tell if it was cognitively significant or, if not, how I might be restricted, physically or otherwise. This was a sorrow my parents would keep to themselves until I was in my twenties, lest, as they said when they told me, I use it as an excuse not to try. In all honesty, I think I might have.

Like so many missionary families our family moved often and between three differently languaged nations. I was confronted with three different languages of instruction and three different educational systems in my first years of schooling. I did not flourish. I was silent and sullen, not really knowing what was going on at first and unable to break the habit when my language skills progressed enough to begin to understand what was expected and what people would put up with even if it were less than expected. By grade four I was quite far behind: I didn't read well, I didn't count well, and my penmanship was atrocious.

My parents decided they'd be glad if I managed to finish grade eight. You see they leaned toward cognitive damage theory. But, they decided to test just to be sure and it turned out the damage had affected my fine motor control instead. I can attest I was comically uncoordinated. When playing catch with dad (early brain retraining) my throws inevitably went astray, backwards mostly. If only I'd had a Winnie the Pooh-like imagination. I could have just turned my back and thrown in the opposite direction, and the ball would have ended up in dad's mitt, some of the time, instead of the neighbour's back garden, inevitably.

In grade five I discovered trashy sports novels. Perhaps you can remember the genre, Dillon the chubby 5' 3" nerd improbably becomes the hero of Ridgemont High when a series of events leads him to be inserted into the championship basketball game and his secret 10,000 hours of practice in a dark gymnasium pay off when his last second shot, as the authors invariably wrote it, “ripped through the chords cleanly”. The formula was repeated in every book in the genre though the names and the sports changed. Trash or not, I didn't care; I couldn't get enough. My reading improved. From there everything else improved. Giddily I rose to the middle of the pack. But when high school hit, I transferred the skills I had learned over years in church and fell scholastically asleep with my eyes dutifully open and my mind snicked shut. Throughout high school, I worked a parttime job as a 'lawnboy' learning about the lawn care business from my various crew bosses' incidental remarks during breaks. I was starry eyed at the thought that if one played one's cards right one might be able to earn up to five figures. What a lucrative career!

So, maybe, there was cognitive damage after all.

I got into Calvin University, then just a college, despite a horrific final semester in high school. I confess I did not, as per the college motto, offer my heart promptly and sincerely. Rather, I thought to go for a couple of years before settling into a job, maybe cut hair, seemed easy, though surely “my fine motor control” would have counted against me. Or maybe not; it was after all the era in which one just put a

bowl on a little boy's head and razored round the bottom while watching high school sports on the local television channel.

In my first year at Calvin I found out I was not going to be a Biology major, the Genetics weeder course acted on me like a bracing spray of Round Up. Clearly a weed, I wilted massacring fruit flies along the way in my efforts to encourage procreation on litmus paper. Not even Procul Harem's Whiter Shade of Pale as lab background music provided a suggestive enough ambience for my chaste insectal research collaborators. I did manage to fulfill my language requirement. I took the popularly termed, "bonehead" three semester German sequence to do it. This included an interim course that would meet every day for three hours throughout most of January. At the same time, I was ploughing snow from midnight to 7, and it snowed almost every day that January. I would come straight to class at 8 am, frozen from a night of shoveling sidewalks while my crew partner remained in the cab and did the driveways (seniority, seniority). I would sit in that warm classroom and voilà, dreamland. The instructor Herr Kreuzer was predictably unamused by my sleeping. True to his name, there was crucifixion in the air. I was told by my fellow students that he would ask questions of my sleeping form and I would occasionally answer with a snork. In short, as in life itself, my university career had fragile beginnings.

But half way through my second year, I woke up, I started to listen, to read carefully, speak animatedly, to study languages, to think that the examination of ideas and histories and constructs was enthralling, full of meaning, worthy of my best efforts. It was Dillon and Ridgemont High all over again, but the literary quality had gone up a notch. Augustine replaced Dillon and the bullies of Ridgemont gave way to Augustine's Faustus and his band of belching Manichaeans *perfecti*, but even here there remained a game afoot when Augustine heard a child-at-play's voice, took up and read, or so I found out when I in turn heard a grown-up prof's voice, took up and read. From that time on, I came to class promptly and sincerely. I offered my heart to my course material, my teachers, my fellow students. And in what must count as a Dillonesquely improbable shot from "downtown" my somnolescent heart opened to its Maker. I'd like to say my heart "ripped through the chords cleanly," but that would not be true. Rather it bounced around the rim heartstoppingly like a Kawhi Leonard game winner, and on my worst days it feels like it is bouncing there still.

During the last two and a half years of my undergraduate program, I rose beyond the middle of the pack though I never looked back and so never really noticed. In belated hindsight, it seems to me that I was not on a path to succeed where noticing would be the point. It felt rather that I was being lured onward, put under a spell, and could not do otherwise. That may be just a storyteller's nonsense but allurements have been ever so strong in all the decades between then and now. As a matter of fact, I have long thought of myself as a scholarly magpie. If it's shiny I will alight and investigate. What is incontrovertible is that I have yet to stray from the path I assumed then, though no one would have been more surprised, if *per mirabile*, he could have seen the future than that boy-man during the winter months of his sophomore year of college wondering if this was the time he should leave school for the lawn business or barber shop.

You may be beginning to squirm at this point at what can only seem an act of self-indulgence, but I have not forgotten I am to provide an address that honours and encourages ICS's utterly precious graduands who have taken the great risk of coming to a small, ever endangered, graduate school. Such a risky act of self-selection can be reframed in a Madison Avenue way, of course. I could suggest our graduands think of themselves as having had the good taste to attend a boutique institution so as to take on its scholastic *haut couture*, but who'd believe that?

The graduate school with a difference we long called ourselves, but difference, to be different, in a time of culture-wide retrenchment is not comfortable. The tendency today is to shore up the culture's mythic centre at the expense of its very real margins. As a result, to be at the margins does not feel advantageous. To realize what one becomes in and through the scholarly formation undergone at the ICS is *ipso facto*, then, to struggle with the issue of fit in one's greater community at a time when fit feels like a condition *sine qua non* for belonging to that community. We may proudly sport our T-shirts proclaiming that we are "Keeping the Weird in Dooyeweerd", but how does that play when conferring with conflict averse principals or when responding to parental complaints that come out of Christian Nationalist talking points? Do we stand out all the way into the school office circular file? What do we do when we invest ourselves in this institution and the train of imagination and thought it has on offer? It is with questions like these in mind that I use my own example to show that being odd need not foreclose on academic service. The path from gift to call to grateful service is seldom straight, to be sure, but there is a path; I am living proof.

I will skip briefly past the twists and turns that led from a graduate program in History at The Johns Hopkins University to a year of philosophical study at the Institute for Christian Studies and on to the interdisciplinarity of the Centre for Medieval Studies of the University of Toronto. I will also skip my three years teaching in the History Department of Calvin College. What can be said is that the switchbacked way that led between these places, studies and work involved many self-conscious intentions and all of them seemingly beside the point. It also involved many events that washed over me irresistibly, and it was these "accidents" that proved "essential". I was still being lured or so it seems now. My path was not only mine to survey and follow (Augustine smiles). Even my coming to ICS a second time and for good as it turned out, seemed incalculable at the time. I was an intellectual historian not a philosopher. I applied for an ICS position not because I thought I'd get it, but because I was on the job market and hoped to be interviewed for I desperately needed the practice. Then beyond my expectations I was the only candidate left. ICS took a chance on me and I reciprocated in kind.

In August 1991 I moved into an ICS office with my books and an unorganized set of interests that took me to the marcher lands between history and philosophy, literary and rhetorical criticism and the hunch that one could effectively bring out the integrity of religious orientation and scholarly examination of the world via the transformative intention of so much ancient philosophical writing that Pierre Hadot began to write about in his 1981 *L'exercices spirituels et la philosophie antique* 'englished' in the mid-1990s as *Philosophy as a Way of Life: Spiritual Exercises from Socrates to Foucault*. I would bring this peculiar hodge-podge of scholarly attention and intuition to bear upon Reformational philosophy and historiography in service of ICS Junior Members, my Senior Member colleagues, and if possible the academy at large. In mid-August I was told that by the way in addition to my Fall term courses I would be teaching the Reformational intensive for first year Junior Members commonly known as ICS Bootcamp that would start in a week or so. You see the person who teaches the history of philosophy, I was told, has always taught ICS Bootcamp. Al Wolter's *Creation Regained*, Reformational classic that it is, emerged from out of his years of teaching ICS Bootcamp. This belated news and the holes in my Reformational grounding at that time entailed that the only book ever likely to arise out of my crack at ICS Bootcamp was "Adrenalin Regained" or perhaps "Heart Pulse Remixed."

Once again, I was not quick off the mark. In my first or perhaps second year at ICS I was asked a question by a very bright PhD candidate in one of my seminars. What accounted for a certain set of arguments leading to a claim we were examining in class? I thought I understood her question and launched into a long explanation of where the philosopher in question could or would have encountered similar

arguments to his in the course of his education and how he adapted them to the claim he wanted to make in the text we were examining. I went on further to identify what it was in his cultural background, life experience and personality that would have drawn him to the claim in question and to try and justify it argumentatively. Surely that was what she had hoped to hear? She listened politely and then, when I was done, she acknowledged the historical materials contextualizing the meaning of the claim we were examining, and the cleverness of its justifying arguments. But she wanted to know something different. She wanted to know what made the arguments and claim work (or not) from a systematic point of view and with an eye to present use or critique? Otherwise, however interesting, the material being covered just wasn't useful. I was at a loss. She forced me to see how much scholarly retooling I was in for at ICS, a retooling that would have to take place on the fly. Truth be told, it has taken me most of my 32 years at ICS to be sure of what I bring to ICS's precious Junior Members and the Reformational tradition ICS continues to develop in its way.

What did I learn on the fly over the decades? First off, I learned that a mystery of the one-and-the-many is powerfully operative in the privilege of working with ICS Junior Members. To guide them to be the sort of scholar, teacher, future principal or present reflective practitioner we hope to develop is to recognize that such people come to be one-by-one. There is no formula, no single pedagogy that works for the majority (and we'll do what we can for the others). There is at bottom this one haloed person and her singular set of gifts and interests, and that haloed person and his. Each mentor is called to espy the gifts of each mentee and to foster her or his explorations of interest. That is the "one" side of the mystery of the-one-and-the-many I am describing here. The other is paradoxically the necessity of a community in which this work can happen. The formation of Christian scholars or teacher-leaders can only happen one at a time but happens best when each feels themselves simultaneously a part of something bigger, feels themselves immersed in a community of scholarly friends, that is, a community formed around and gratefully integrative of their separate giftings and callings. That is the "many" side of the same mystery.

For our present graduates that community has perforce been virtual. Knee-jerk Luddite that I am, I was surprised to discover that a small Zoom seminar can develop a learning community filled with mutual respect but also mutual affection or at least amusement which is often almost as good. We at ICS are betting that a program made up of such virtual sites of communal learning provides yet enough grist to form an effective institutional, communal, and formative identity, but like everyone else we too are experimenting in the new social dispensation ushered in by the simultaneous arrival of apt technology and the pandemic. We will have to keep monitoring the communal aspect of the mystery if we are to steward well the gift we are entrusted with by the enrollment of each new Junior Member. We will have to answer the question over and over again: How do we develop the appropriate institutional culture in the new dispensation, a culture that creates the updraught any learner needs to support their intellectual ascent, especially past the bleak moments of personal downdraught when confusion reigns, when one wonders what one is doing "here", when depression threatens, or one finds it stubbornly hard to integrate new perspectives with strongly embedded assumptions about and practices within the world or one's calling, when the balance of insight gained and surety lost seems to slant alarmingly toward loss?

Secondly, while at ICS one properly works to develop a nose for the presence of spiritual dynamics at play in the world and the world of the texts we read together, and properly works to acquire the courage to speak out of that discernment, to promote what seems health giving and to warn against what seems death dealing, one must never forget that we all live on both sides of the antithesis we scent and struggle with. Our hearts are divided whether we are or seek to be God's friends, whether we are indifferent or

even position ourselves as God's foes. In an ambiguous world we all live as if to say both yes and no to the Creator's love-invitations to us and the creation at large. It is true of us would-be friends. Don't we all like Peter deny him three times before the cock crows? But in our increasingly polarized world isn't it just as important to remember and equally true of would-be foes? For the Creator's insistent love-invitations are to enter into the wonder and joy of an abundant world so as to flourish singly and together in the full complex of ways that we have been gifted and called to deep in our DNA but also and often surprisingly on the fly in our ongoing dialogue in and with the mystery of existence. And there is weal not just woe to be noticed and cherished far beyond the boundaries that simultaneously protect and hem in the community of God's would-be friends. The sound, and smell, the taste, the sight and even the feel of yes to God's many love-invitations and the world we are invited to enjoy, that is the pearl of great price we seek in our work at ICS and in the confusingly twisted yes-and-no world of our hearts and our experience. We have never worried overly about where to look and what boundaries to heed in our looking; that yes can and is to be found anywhere, even at the bottom of Nietzsche's tragic abyss or Zizek's original catastrophe; this must be so or life itself would long ago have proven impossible. That yes is of course no monolith, grey and dour. Rather it is a rainbow of yeses each colour-strand distinctive and yet connected to each other strand, forming together an integral arc. And each yes whether intended or even most assuredly not is ubiquitous in its effects, each has a butterfly effect of good in an ambiguous world.

I have for 32 years lived out of the Reformational tradition that allowed me to learn such things, at least in the version alive at ICS. I have absorbed it in gratitude for it has given me, so often fettered and frightened as I can be, the chance to contribute to a project of unfettered and unfrightened searching for the earthly shape of blessing, and to do so in the conviction that if we seek with as much of our hearts as we can bring to bear we have the promise we shall find (though not that what we find will look anything like what we expected). I have tried to pass that gratitude and conviction on to those precious Junior Members I have been gifted with and called to serve over the years. I have offered it as my gift to my Senior Member colleagues at ICS and to the students and colleagues I have been blessed with in the academy at large. What a lucrative career! It sure beat the heck out of cutting lawns or scalps in the way of putting bowls on little boys' heads and razoring round the bottom while watching high school sports on the local television channel. You can be a slow starter who never really gets to experience auspicious beginnings. You can have minimal fine motor control so that your kids put your art on their refrigerator doors, and can maintain stubbornly, despite the proverbial 10,000 hours, atrocious penmanship. The path from gift to call to grateful service is seldom as straight as a law-and-order Calvinist might hope, ruler well in hand, but there is a path; I am living proof. May you our graduands move in faith, hope and love toward the adventure that awaits you. Trust in the Creator's loving care, for God is steadfast sings the Psalmist even in the presence of death. But stay open. Our Creator, in my experience, loves surprises; don't put anything past him.