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## BEGINNING TO THINK...

*The following commencement address was delivered at Lebanon Valley College on May 13, 2006.*

**T**O THE PRESIDENT, BOARD OF TRUSTEES, the Dean, staff, my fellow faculty, but most of all, to the graduates and your family and friends – let me first say what a tremendous honor it is to be invited to speak to you today.

As you no doubt have discovered by now, graduation is a bittersweet experience. It is something you graduates have planned and looked forward to, studied for, and worked towards for the past four, five or in some cases, even six years. But now the end is only minutes away. You are surrounded by friends and family who loved and supported you, teachers who inspired and irritated you, the grounds, dormitories, and classrooms where you learned something unforgettable about yourself and the world, where you've fallen in and out of love, where you no doubt have eaten the same cafeteria food one too many times, where you may have drunk a little too much, stayed up a little too late, studied a little too little, all to the point that you realize while you're glad it's all over, you might still wish it didn't have to end so suddenly.

For what it's worth, I'm a bag of mixed emotions as well. For one, I can still remember the disappointment of my own college graduation when the invited speaker was the self-proclaimed "father of aerobics." His speech was part infomercial for his latest workout video, and part inspirational speech gone terribly awry. It wasn't quite the level of Chris Farley, but what I do remember from his speech amounted to the following: while we college graduates and our families might be proud, we should know that we were all fat, lazy, and destined for a lifetime of chronic illness. Hardly the message I wanted to hear as I embarked on my uncertain life after college.

Plus, to add insult to injury, that speech is still one of the only things that was said that I really remember from my college experience. It is not that I was a complete dunce, just that over the course of time, especially if you don't have

occasion to keep your knowledge and skills fresh, you will be amazed at what you forget. For instance, I know there was a time that I studied and learned physics, and calculus, and geology, but as much as I hate to admit it, that has all long since been forgotten. I remember being inspired by my English professor who obviously had such a profound appreciation and love for poetry. But while I remember his passion, I've forgotten the poems. I remember being challenged to think more critically and to write more clearly. But those papers were lost with the computer that is now at least 5 generations obsolete. Yet as much as I'd like to forget them, I can still hear the words of the "father of aerobics."

So as I thought of what one thing I'd like to say to you college graduates, take comfort in knowing I learned from experience what not to say. Obviously, it makes sense to eat right, get regular exercise, and stay in shape, but on this day of days, I'm sure you have more vexing questions on your mind. As for me, how is it possible to distill the four years of your collected accumulation of knowledge and skills into one brief address? Especially knowing the fact that I, along with the rest of the faculty, have come to know so many of you so well, even if far too briefly, over the last few years; and most probably, anything I might have to say, you've probably already heard too many times before. It is enough to leave me taking counsel with the mystics from all the religious traditions who teach us sometimes the best thing to say is nothing at all. What a scary thought that years from now you will be washed of your memory of so much that mattered so dearly to you during your college education, but still recall this day with its pomp and circumstance, the funny hats that somehow miraculously stay on our heads, and God help you, my words when I realize that it is probably best to say nothing at all.

Of course, ten minutes of silence would not make for a very interesting speech, would it? So before procrastinating any further, let me get to my point, which is a simple one—namely, *thinking is a dangerous, maybe even an impossible thing, but thoughtlessness is even worse*. The French existentialist Albert Camus once wrote that "beginning to think is beginning to be undermined." For Camus, this was a statement of the absurdity of human existence and thought—the idea that each and every question or thought leads to another in an infinite regress to the point that you don't know how to think or what to know. At the same time, living in an age that witnessed two world wars, genocide, and the threat of nuclear annihilation, thoughtlessness was not an option—forever caught between the impossibility of clear, certain, and final knowledge and the obligation to seek the truth that constantly exceeds your grasp. It is enough to boggle the mind.

Like Camus, you too live in a complicated age and contradictory world. You have virtually all the world's knowledge available at your fingertips, but there is

a difference between knowledge and thought, just as there is between skill and action. The challenge to thought is as grave now as it has ever been, and the consequences of thoughtlessness are even more far-ranging and severe—wars wage on unabated, acts of genocide continue, poverty, homelessness, and hunger remain, not even to mention the fear that is constantly before the public’s eye by the specter of terrorism. You may feel disconnected or uninvested in the politics of Harrisburg or Washington, even more from the concerns of the U.N., the IMF or the World Bank. Meanwhile matters of the global economy, questions of national sovereignty, and the structure of various multinational institutions are being decided—all decisions that will have a profound influence on the future of our world. Such problems—on such a global scale—are enough to boggle the mind, to overwhelm you into a feeling of insignificance and powerlessness. If so, you catch Camus’ point, that “beginning to think is beginning to be undermined.” Is it any wonder that we call “Reality TV” that which is anything but? And is it any surprise that it’s the fake news anchor Jon Stewart that has become the voice of your generation?

Long before Jon Stewart—at the dawn of Western civilization and during the West’s first great experiment in democracy—there was another great satirist who managed to shock his public into their senses. His name was Socrates, the ancient Greek philosopher who was the teacher of Plato and the fly in the ointment of Athenian society. Of course, you all remember that it was Socrates who taught us the philosophical wisdom of not-knowing. His not-knowing was not the bliss born of ignorance, but the wisdom born of humility. It was Socrates who stood in the market square asking the great people of his day the simple but incessant questions. As a philosophical gadfly, he managed to get under the skin of enough important and powerful people that he was eventually declared a disturbance to the public order, for which he was killed. His execution was at once both an expression of the public will and an exposure of its inherent limitations—and as such, he remains the riddle and tragic irony at the heart of democracy. After all, if the meaning of democracy is the promise to give each person the right to have his or her say, then in this case, and the innumerable ones that have followed in its wake, that meaning was tragically betrayed. But it must also be acknowledged that Socrates lived in dangerous times—that the very survival of the city of Athens and the great hope of democracy was in peril—that the Athenians had good reason to fear his influence—that he not only exposed public leaders to ridicule, but threatened to undermine the very fabric of the social order, turning children against their parents, and citizens against their rulers. After all, what right-thinking society willingly subjects itself to its own dissolution? What leader has the wisdom, or institution the strength, not simply to withstand, but to welcome, its critics? Who has the courage or will to think when beginning to think is beginning to be undermined?

Jumping forward some two thousand years, the great modern philosopher Immanuel Kant was once asked, "What is Enlightenment?" His answer then, which still stands today, is that Enlightenment is the "dare to think." For Kant, as an 18<sup>th</sup> century German intellectual, this meant the dare to think for oneself—not to merely accept received or inherited truths, but to question authority—all authority—and thereby become responsible for the decisions we make and the people we become. Kant was one of the architects of the modern university, with its division of faculties, and its specialized learning in knowledge and skills. But his greatest legacy was this challenge to think together with the moral imperative to act. It is this enlightenment challenge that remains the animating mission of colleges and universities around the world today. Your graduation is a testimony and celebration of your achievement of a course of study with this one main, overarching ambition in place—to teach you the skills, to give you the knowledge, and to encourage you to become the independent-minded men and women who will dare to accept Kant's challenge.

But though we rightfully celebrate your achievement today, if Kant was correct, this task of thought is a never-ending one. Lest we forget, the great hope of the Enlightenment also brought with it a legacy of violence, exclusion, and warfare as the so-called "Age of Reason" quickly degenerated into a "Reign of Terror" and the great promise of the modern world paved the way for the contemporary reign of the bureaucratic, the technological, and the consumeristic wherein our very humanity is now at stake. After all, what does it mean to be human when our identities are increasingly defined by our consumption? What becomes of enlightened humanism when we persist in dividing our humanity into two – between us and them, the civilized and the barbaric, the West vs. the East, those who have the sanction to use violence and those who do not. The contradictions are rampant, and ripe for thought.

Fast forward to the present, when just last month we learned that Google, the virtual window into the world, might actually be making us stupid – literally incapable of thought. In a time when we have unprecedented access to entire worlds of knowledge, when we are increasingly interconnected and interdependent, and when we have come to realize that our actions have global consequences, where do we turn, or who can we trust when each of us have our own tailor-made news that becomes our own isolated reality. And the contradictions remain: We fight in a perpetual war in the name of peace. We secure our own democratic liberties by denying due process to others. We have all seen the images of torture and humiliation and heard the whispered stories of secret prisons. Fear fighting fear. At the same time, the U.S. remains a land of promise and opportunity; we are still known for our hard-work if not for our thrift; we stand ready to sacrifice whenever called. In the midst of a world in

perennial crisis, we find time to live and to love, to hope and dream and strive.

The future, as always, is uncertain.

Beginning to think is beginning to be undermined.

Admittedly, none of these contradictions are entirely new. Neither are the answers. But who among us has the wisdom? Who has the time, let alone the will, to think when tomorrow promises yet another crisis and still more diversions?

But at least for today, on this day of days that is the official beginning of the long series of tomorrows that is the promise of your future, we may stop, for one last moment to remember. To remember what you have not yet forgotten about the proud and conflicted tradition that we all inhabit. Today, we teachers, administrators, and staff deem you of skilled hands and knowledgeable minds, and as you leave this place, we entrust our future to you. Your challenge now is to turn that hard-earned knowledge and skill into meaningful thought and action.

May you all know the wisdom of Socrates, the Enlightenment of Kant, and the courage of Camus.

As the recipient of the 2005 Thomas Rhy Vickroy Award, which is Lebanon Valley College's highest award given to a full-time faculty member, JEFFREY W. ROBBINS was invited to deliver the college's 2006 Commencement Address. This speech was delivered on May 13, 2006 to the 476 students of the 2006 graduating class, along with their family, friends, the LVC faculty, and various community members in Annville, PA. In addition to being an Assistant Professor of Religion and Philosophy at Lebanon Valley College, where he also coordinates the college colloquium, Robbins has worked as the Associate Editor of the *Journal for Cultural and Religious Theory* since 2002. He is the author of two books, *Between Faith and Thought: An Essay on the Ontotheological Condition* (2003) and *In Search of a Non-Dogmatic Theology* (2004), and editor of the forthcoming volume that will be published by Columbia University Press by John D. Caputo and Gianni Vattimo, entitled *After the Death of God*.

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