

GREED IS NOT ENOUGH

remarks at

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I am afraid my remarks will not be funny for I feel I must at this moment speak to you about something that I can only formulate as the soul of the university. I begin, moreover, with a litany that may not seem entirely appropriate to this edifying setting:

Enron
Arthur Andersen
Dynegy
Qwest
Tyco
Adelphia,
ImClone,
WorldCom
RiteAid,
Xerox.

What went wrong?

Those ten names, and the frauds associated with them, account for a loss of a half trillion dollars in investment value, more than the gross national product of all but a dozen countries on our planet.

That's not the whole story. In 1981 three US companies found it necessary to restate their earnings; between 1997 and 2000 seven hundred companies had to. And clearly a lot more are doing so this year.

The problem goes far beyond fraud in a few highly visible companies, or the criminal behavior, of "a few bad apples", or the half truth, that perverse incentives have led some CEO's to greedy behavior.

Greed is not enough – it's not a sufficient explanation of a problem that afflicts American society at this moment. Greed is a cop out. It lets a lot of us off the hook, including, I am afraid, higher education. Let me explain what I mean by looking at another well known corporation, GE, or specifically the perks a compliant board of directors lavished on the most admired CEO in America. Now, I believe Jack Welch when he says that he could have negotiated cash payments that would have cost more than all the wine and flowers and groceries and sports tickets and free newspapers he got from GE. Was he greedy? Sure, but Why? The problem goes beyond greed: Jack Welch didn't see that he was disgracing his name and that of GE by seeking these trivial status markers.

Fortunately I come from academia, a purified realm into which greed never enters, where status is never in contention, and where vision is never clouded by personal pettiness. It's other folks who lose perspective – CEO's who lead their companies into mega mergers that make no economic sense, foundation executive who spend millions gussying up their offices, a prince of the church who says that he delegated the most sensitive issues of pastoral care to a personnel officer, who happened to look the other way in

cases involving the sexual abuse of children. I ask you, why did they not see what they were doing?

Why do we not all see what we are doing when we hurt people we love, or damage the environment on which we depend? Since 1992 we have ravaged untold acres of farm and wood land – turning much of it into shopping malls and tract housing. The land that doesn't get consumed this way gets scarred in other ways. 800,000 new ATV's each year.

The sea fares little better, fish stocks disappear from overfishing, inshore waters are slick with ooze from jet ski, and that acoustic horror, the cigarette boat.

All of us, I am sure, depending on our personal experience, and whether we own an S.U.V. or not, have a list of our favorite excesses. The fourteen inch dinner plate with strange script squiggled on the mashed potatoes or the cheesecake, mystic runes written with – what is it? gravy? chocolate syrup? barbecue sauce? some new variety of ketchup? And what do these squiggles say?" "No calories?" "Tip Generously?" "Clean your plate, like your mama told you"?

Clearly a lot of people are not cleaning their plates. Food waste has doubled in the U.S. since 1980 to approximately 30 million tons annually. For others obesity has become a problem, indeed a national epidemic.

These and countless other examples suggest that we have become a Culture, not of Greed, but of Excess, that is, a society in which status is conferred by lavish consumption and display. In such a culture greed is not enough, it's just a way of getting status. But status comes at a price, alienation from friends, neighbors, communities and, I believe, nature.

None of this would surprise the early Greek writers who were convinced that there was a sequence in human affairs, expressed through three personifications -- Koros, "Satiety" the translators say. It really means having a full belly. Mr. Bloat is followed by Hybris. "Overweening pride" the translators say. It really means the feeling that you can do what you want and get away with it, even if it is arrogant or violent. And after Mr. Bloat and Ms. You Can Get Away With It, comes Ate -- not "Disaster" but blindness about who you are and where you are. And Ms. Blindside will lead you to ruin.

Silly Greeks to think such personifications represent a universal process! Silly, but I fear we may soon see that they were right. In a time of bloat, we think we can get away with things, and sooner or later we get blindsided. That applies to each of us as individuals, and, I fear, to our nation.

This situation would not seem surprising to these Greeks, nor to William Wordsworth, who almost two hundred years ago, saw what we are talking about quite clearly – affluence, alienation from nature, the inability of traditional cultural norms to inspire restraint, and, not least, blindness to what is around us and could sustain us. It's all in his sonnet:

*The world is too much with us, late and soon,
Getting and spending we lay waste our powers:
Little we see in Nature that is ours;
We have given our hearts away, a sordid boon!*

*This sea that bares her bosom to the moon;
The winds that will be howling at all hours,
And are up-gathered now like sleeping flowers;
For this, for everything, we are out of tune;*

*It moves us not — Great God! I'd rather be
A pagan suckled in a creed outworn;
So might I, standing on this pleasant lea,
Have glimpses that would make me less forlorn;
Have sight of Proteus rising from the sea;
Or hear old Triton blow his wreathed horn.*

It's all there. But what does Wordsworth, or by metonymy (the part for the whole) the humanistic tradition of which he is so important a part, have to offer as a counterweight – a Never Never Land, an insipid, enervated classicism -- old Triton and Proteus dredged up from the depths of that decorative classicism from which Wordsworth had long been trying to escape?

So I ask you, my friends and sometime colleagues, does classicism, do the humanities, does university education have nothing better to offer than this? Can we never stand up and shout Open your eyes, look what you are doing, rethink your obsession with status, examine your life?

We know that many people after September 11th tried exactly that, as we know it not by mushy anecdotes but by tough bottom line statistics from the salesrooms of yacht dealers. Sales boomed. People came in and shared their deepest thoughts with eager salespersons. "You only live once"; "You can't take it with you"; "Carpe diem" – these were the ones with a classical education. Their response to September 11th was to buy luxury goods and display them for all to admire. More of same!

When you set foot on a college campus, do you ever feel as I often do that you are stepping onto sacred ground, into a place that has been set aside for something beyond getting and spending? When I walk through a place such as this I often feel a sense of awe at the research that is going on in the laboratories and the libraries, the scientific and medical advances that are being achieved, the creative arts that are flourishing, the new technologies invented and applied, the economic benefits conferred on graduates and the communities in which they are located.

Sometimes I even think that I am back in classical Athens, where glorious buildings are rising up, (perhaps not the Parthenon, but at least a much needed parking deck),

leadership is at a pinnacle with Pericles in command, intellectuals from all around the world are giving lectures, the fundamental nature of matter is being explored as atomic theory is formulated, everything is there – except, one fat, funny looking old guy, named Socrates.

Where is he in today's university, on this campus? Is he out there, buttonholing young people, challenging them to think through their assumptions, cross examining them about the values that will shape their lives, teaching them the vocabulary and the techniques they need to be effective moral agents, and convincing them of that one ineluctable Socratic truth – that the unexamined life is not worth living?

Where is he? Is he locked out, sneered at as “irrelevant”, or “impractical”, ostracized into some remote curricular corner, asphyxiated with pedantries, forced to drink hemlock lest he corrupt the minds of the young with his incessant questioning and challenging of society's unexamined values? Or does his insistence on the examined life live on, not in a few courses, but in the heart and soul of the place, as the spirit that infuses greatness into a university? Where is he in this university and this country of ours endangered as it is by the drive for status, greed, and bloat, and in danger of being blindsided. Where is he if our graduates, affluent, influential, well intended, on some September morning look up see those planes, watch those buildings crumble, breathe that smoke and realize then that they need to rebuild their lives and have neither the words nor the tools to do the job?

Will Willimon, with your permission I will end with a pagan prayer, one that old Socrates prayed as he headed back to Athens after walking for an afternoon in a grove outside the city walls, talking with his young friend Phaedrus about the things that really matter -- inspiration, and knowledge, and madness, and above all love. But then Socrates turns the talk to wealth, in a self mocking, tongue in cheek prayer, if you can imagine such a thing. Here's what the ugly old guy prayed, and I pray it for you, and for me, for this university and for our country:

Pan, my friend, and all the other gods who dwell here, make me beautiful, – inside. And as for the externals, let them be compatible with what I have within.

Help me to remember that it's the wise person, and only the wise one, who is really rich.

May I have a pile of gold, but no more than a sensible man would try to carry around.

That's all – 44 words -- short and abrupt and Socrates knows it; he turns to his young friend and says “Is there anything else we should ask, Phaedrus?”

Phaedrus says “Just include me in your prayers, for friends have everything in common.”

Socrates must have smiled. Phaedrus got it. He saw that he was not an isolated individual who looked after only his own wealth, status, or self, he was a friend, and part of that wider community to which he was returning, --just as we here today are friends, bound together by our devotion to an institution that has a special place in our hearts, a special heritage from its founders, and a special duty to perform. That's why we are here. Once we understand that, we can move forward.

And Socrates turns to Phaedrus and says, "Let's go".

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