

**A LITTLE LOWER
THAN THE ANGELS**

**Dr. Ernest L. Boyer
President
of
The Carnegie Foundation for
the Advancement of Teaching**

**An Address Given For The
1986 Commencement
of Ashland Theological Seminary**

First, I wish to congratulate the Class of 1986.

I congratulate you for choosing Ashland Theological Seminary and for completing, with success, your academic program.

Many years ago, I decided that commencement speeches are the least remembered utterances on earth. This fact was painfully driven home one day after I had delivered what I thought was a most effective speech. At the very end a graduate met me on the lawn and said my speech was so moving he had actually been inspired to write a poem. I was, of course, deeply touched until I had read his creative and inspired poem. The young man had written:

I love a finished speaker.
I mean I really do.
I don't mean one who's polished,
I just mean one who's through.

Rather than run the risk of being humiliated once again, I've decided that this morning I'm not going to give a speech at all. Rather, as a substitute, I'd like to give the graduates a kind of "pop quiz" before you are handed your diplomas. And incidentally, the rest of you may take the test as well.

I have just one examination question to submit. I'd like to ask the graduates, if during your seminary days you have begun to understand the sacredness of language?

Language is the centerpiece of this examination.

My grandfather, who lived to be 100 years, was a minister of the gospel, and he preached for 40 years. As a boy I used to hear grandpa's sermons two times on Sunday and at two prayer meetings every week. Grandpa loved to read the Psalms and frequently he quoted that poetic passage which reads: "Man is a little lower than the angels, higher than the rest." In my boyish fantasy I saw it spatially with God, the angels, and men and women on the planet Earth.

As I became older I learned a deeper meaning. We are, "a little lower than the angels, a little higher than the rest." We hold a special position among all of God's creations - in our soul, in our intellect, and also in our use of symbols.

Language is a God-given "miracle." Language is imprinted on the genes. The use of symbols defines who we are and gives dignity and meaning to our lives.

Lewis Thomas, from the Memorial Sloan-Kettering Cancer Center in New York City, said it all when he wrote that "childhood is for language."

Language begins without a teacher. It is a lesson learned from God. What sets us apart from all other creatures on God's earth, I believe,

is our capacity effectively to use symbols to capture feelings, nuances, and ideas. This begins not only before the child goes off to school - my wife, who is a certified nurse-midwife, insists that language begins in utero as the unborn infant monitors the mother's voice. I think, in fact, there are data to support that brash assertion. We do know that if you hold your ears and speak you can monitor your own voice through the tissue vibrations of your body. And the child in utero can, I'm convinced, monitor the messages of the mother through the fluid that surrounds it. We also know that the child in utero has a startled reflex to loud noises in the world outside and we also know that the three middle earbones, the hammer, the anvil, and the stirrup are the only human bones that are fully formed at birth.

So I happen to believe my wife is right, as she always is. But for the skeptics here this morning let me say that language certainly begins with the first breath of birth, first with gurgles and then phonemes that are crudely formed and then with utterances that we call words and then sentences that convey subtle shades of meaning. Now that I'm a grandpa and can observe this process more objectively, uncluttered by dirty diapers and burpings late at night, I'm absolutely in awe of a miracle that we take for granted. Exponentially it expands during the first months and years, and to see a little one in the early moments of his or her life begin to shape and form ideas, to me, is the greatest miracle on earth.

Language has a power all its own. It can build and it can tear down as well.

Sticks and stones, can break my bones,
but names will never hurt me.

I'm suggesting that it is language, not just the soul, that gives us a divine place in the universe and makes us a little lower than the angels. And as you serve your fellow human beings you have a sacred obligation to urge Christians to speak and listen carefully to God, but also to consider the sacredness of language - the God-given gift.

The early Quakers would risk imprisonment and even death because in a court of law they would refuse to swear to tell the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth, so help me God. It's not just that they were against swearing - which they were. Their main problem was that by swearing to tell the truth in a court of law they were somehow suggesting that truth was optional in the world outside. Truth, the early Quakers argued, is something that should be assumed, not something that occurs only on a stack of bibles.

The sacredness of language means speaking the truth, but it also means listening as well. Sometimes we can even minister through silence. We live in a world where noise is the norm and we are uncomfortable with

silence. And yet it is the silent spaces that gives meaning to our words.

I've visited Japan on several occasions and been fortunate to see some of the majestic gardens there. I like most the ones where there's a large space, filled with nothing but finely raked gravel and in the middle is a magnificent rock, positioned beautifully in the center. The rock becomes a work of beauty because it's surrounded by the silence of the spaces. Cluttered, it would go unnoticed. In the beauty of the island of the space that's been provided it becomes something to be honored and enjoyed. So it is with words and ideas, too. I say two cheers for silence, which is a means of communication in reverse.

What I'm suggesting is that preparing to minister to others means the discovery of the sacredness of language - the God-given miracle of words. It means a recognition of the need to speak the truth to one another and to listen carefully, as well. This is the ministry of love. It is the key to breeding community in your congregation.

Wayne Booth, of the University of Chicago, wrote on one occasion that all too often our efforts to speak and listen seem to be vicious cycles, moving downward. But Booth went on to say that: "We have all experienced moments when the spiral moved upward, when one party's effort to listen and speak just a little bit better produced a similar response, making it possible to try a bit harder - and on up the spiral to moments of genuine understanding."

I'm suggesting that through language we are a little lower than the angels. And during your ministry it is your sacred obligation to help people listen carefully to each other. I also hope that during your seminary days you have learned the importance of listening, not just to familiar voices, but to cultures other than our own, and to speak your own theory and teaching.

I must tell you that I'm deeply troubled by the harsh, bellicose language in our world today that builds hatred, rather than human understanding.

I do not believe that any of God's creatures, no matter how unloving, should be called a mad or raving dog.

I'm also troubled by the parochialism of the coming generation.

Last year, The Carnegie Foundation surveyed 5,000 college students. Over 20 percent of the students surveyed said they had nothing in common with people in underdeveloped countries, 30 percent said they were not interested in non-western studies, and in our survey of community college students, 40 percent could not locate either Iran or El Salvador on a map.

I'm deeply concerned that our education is becoming more parochial at the very moment the human agenda is more global.

I'm suggesting, in our dangerous, interdependent world it is urgently

important that we learn to listen carefully to others. And those who enter missions have a special obligation - not just to speak, but to listen, too.

Several years ago my wife and I flew from JFK airport in New York to Central America. Traveling to a Mayan village we had traveled a thousand years and a thousand miles. We were visiting our son and his Mayan wife. We spent the evening around an open fire with our new in-laws. I must tell you that during some moments adjusting to that sharp transition I wondered if we had anything in common. What does JFK airport have in common with a Mayan village. But as the embers died I discovered we could communicate with one another, nonverbally in large measure, but verbally as well. We could talk about community since the Mayan villagers have laws and mores and traditions of structure I, too, understood. We could share the beauty of the arts since the Mayan arts have been with us for a millenium or more. We could recall the past - a human characteristic that we assume no other species on God's earth can share - because the Mayans were here a thousand years. We could talk about our relationship with nature because the Mayans live very close to earth and know their dependence on the planet. We could talk about our work, since people all around the globe are engaged in consuming and producing. This was not a foreign land. I discovered another human being with an agenda similar to my own.

Now, it's true the format had its difference to be sure. Take work. My son's father-in-law could explain to me how he walked off into the fields each day and slashed and burned and grew crops and brought them home. It took about an hour to explain how I ran to airports carrying paper from place to place. As he said, "You call that work?" At the most fundamental level we could share our human joys and sorrows, the points at which all humans live.

Can the Christian church bring reconciliation in our country and around the world through our sacred use of language?

I have one final observation.

In America today, it is urgently important that we communicate more effectively. And during your ministry I hope that you will listen to the sacredness of language. In many of the countries where you will serve, the children will be the neglected generation.

During our study of the American high school I became deeply troubled by the malaise among the students.

I was troubled that it is possible for teenagers in America to finish high school yet never be asked to participate responsibly in life, never be encouraged to spend time with older people, never help a child who hasn't learned to read, or even to help cleanup litter on the street. Time and time again, we heard stories about young people feeling unneeded and unconnected.

One student told us that she had a job working at McDonald's. "It's not very exciting, but at least I'm feeling useful."

It's a sad comment that feeling needed is pushing Big Macs.

I was also troubled by the generation gap we found in high schools between the old and the young, and by the sense that we are no longer dependent on each other.

My parents are retired in Messiah Village. The average age is 80 in that community. My father, who is 87, said almost sullenly a few weeks ago, "It's not a big deal to be 80 here." He sort of felt unhonored, like Mr. Dangerfield. No respect. But the beauty of that place is that they also have a day care center there. Fifty 4 and 5 year olds come trucking up each morning, and to add to the excitement the children have an adopted grandparent. They may go in the morning to greet the older person. I think there is something powerful and beautiful about a four-year-old who starts the day by seeing the courage and agony and the determination of someone who is in the sunset of his life. And I think there is something beautiful about an 80-year-old who begins the day by being greeted by a four-year-old who's bright and innocent and filled with vigor for the future. Such connections are vital if the world is to become a healthy place.

In the Carnegie Report we make a very brash proposal. We propose that during their four high school years students volunteer to tutor younger students, to work in the library or in hospitals, museums, nursing homes, day care centers, synagogues or churches. Students could meet the service requirement evenings, during the summer or on weekends.

During one interview I talked to a big six-footer, sixteen years old who said: "Yes, last summer I volunteered in the emergency ward at the local hospital." He said in the evening they brought in a three-year old who had meningitis and the next morning she was dead. Then he looked at me with skepticism and said, as only a grownup can do, "Do you know what it's like to see a little kid die?" He was strong enough, informed enough, emotionally sensitive enough to challenge me on my terms. What he was really saying was, "Have you grown up and do you know what life is like?" I think for teenagers to begin to understand the realities of living is part of learning, too.

I believe a service term for all students is appropriate for college students, too - to help them see connections between the classroom and the needs of people.

Vachel Lindsay wrote on one occasion that

It's the world's one crime - its babes grow dull
Not that they starve but starve so dreamlessly
Not that they sow, but that they seldom reap.

Not that they serve, but have no God to serve

Not that they die, but that they die like sheep.

I believe our young people should know the tragedy of life is not death, the tragedy is to die with commitments undefined, with convictions undeclared, and with service unfilled.

That completes the examination. Pass your papers to the center aisle.

Have you, during your seminary days, begun to understand the sacredness of language? Have you learned to communicate with God? And then to communicate, not just with fellow collegians, but also to speak and listen to other cultures and to a sad, needy world? The sacredness of language means learning to listen not just to ourselves, but to others, too.

Thank you very much.