



Baccalaureate Address – Brian Dunn '89

7th June 2007

This time two years ago, almost to the day, I was preparing for my final exams. It was mid-June 2005. I was nervous and in serious sleep deprivation from staying up late studying. I was heading in for my 3 hour exam on the classical Buddhist texts. I was dressed in a full black suit, a white bow tie, my black graduate robe, and toting a mortar board. We looked like a murder of crows as we filed into the examination school. “No water bottles allowed in the examination halls”, we were told as we sat there, sweating buckets in the sweltering heat and our ridiculous black robes. In years past you could take in a water bottle to the examination halls, that is, until some bright spark got an idea. Apparently someone had steamed off the label of his water bottle. He wrote his formulae and equations on the back of the label and stuck it back on the bottle. The water refracted and magnified the formulae nicely as he cheated his way through most of the exam – until he got caught. Only days away from receiving his degree, he was stripped of his robes and disqualified from any further study at the University, likely disqualifying him from further study elsewhere as well. The moral of that story is this: all over the world in countless universities and colleges there is at any one time no shortage of educated fools. The world is full of clever, sly people trying to get away with something, but Wisdom seems to be in very short supply.

I have had the privilege of teaching many of this motley crew since grade seven. I remember the old gang, Jake Lloyd, Natasha Dubash, Keun Soo Lim, even little Jimmy Kemp – and look at the size of him now. I’ll tell you some stories of one of those seventh graders who is graduating tomorrow. The word pandemonium means literally “many demons”. That’s what this section of grade seven was - pandemonium. I told them to be quiet, there was not to be a word out of them, they were to do the work I had assigned to them. Well, one of the students you see before you decided that that gave him license to be passing notes to the girls. I talked to him after class. “But you said, no talking. I wasn’t talking I was writing.” I tried in vain to convince him to seek the spirit of the law and not the letter. It took him a whole week to finally admit that he had even done anything wrong, let alone to say sorry to me. Yes indeed, there is no shortage of people trying to get away with things in this world. We’ll hear more about that student later.

There is a huge difference between the attainment of knowledge and in this thing called wisdom. Wisdom, according to the Bible, has little or nothing to do with what you know, and has everything to do with character and integrity. Our water bottle cheater was clever, but was he wise? The answer seems obvious. And yet it isn’t a simple “you’re in” or “you’re out”. As with most spiritual attainment, think about the pursuit of wisdom as being something like a journey that you set out on. Or better yet, since most of you are heading off to college, think of the pursuit of wisdom as being like a succession of degrees hard earned in the University of Life. There is no magic moment when you instantly become wise. Rather it is an accumulated building of good character developed through many tough choices that are made over many years.

You all are hopefully somewhere on that journey. Some of you are academically brilliant, scoring perfect scores in external exams. Others of you have struggled more academically. Some of you have made it through by the skin of your teeth. But how many of you are wise? Is it possible to be at the top of your class and yet be totally lacking in this pearl of great price called wisdom? And yet, regardless of your GPA

you all equally have access to this precious treasure. You all can become wise if you will but heed her voice. Conversely, a lack of IQ is not a prerequisite for folly. Some of the smartest people in the world can be among the biggest fools.

What does wisdom look like according to the scriptures? The passage that was just read to you records the words of a Woman called Wisdom who patiently calls her children to herself. It is a description both of what Wisdom looks like as well as the path that leads to it. Where do we begin? Proverbs 3 admonishes us **“Do not be wise in your own eyes; fear the LORD and shun evil.”** This is our starting place. Repeatedly we are told that the **“fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom.”** In fact, those very words are repeated no less than three times in the scriptures, so it is likely an emphasis we are expected to heed. What does it mean to “fear God”? Is it about quaking and trembling at the thought of a cosmic bully out there somewhere who is ready to smite you when you do something wrong? Not at all. Rather, it is a constant acknowledgement of every thought, word, and deed, as being lived in God’s presence. There is a Latin phrase, *“Coram Deo”*, which means “before the face of God”. Every moment is lived out before the face of God. This is what Wisdom means when she tells her children: **“in all your ways acknowledge him, and he will make your paths straight.”** Fear, in this context, means respect. It is analogous to the kind of respect that I give to those little holes in the wall. I don’t stick fingers or foreign objects into the wall socket for exactly the same reason. I have a healthy fear and respect of what could turn out to be a hair-raising experience. And yet I don’t live my day in the fear that that power called electricity is out to get me. Similarly, the same student I told you about a moment ago learned to fear the law of gravity way back when he was in 8th grade. Not respecting and fearing the law of gravity enough, he tumbled 80 feet down the khud. Certain things simply must be respected or there will be consequences. This is the undergrad school of wisdom. A little fear and respect of forces bigger than you is a very good thing and can prolong your life considerably. But as the scriptures say, it is only the beginning. It is not the end.

Fear is a great motivator. It initiates. But it isn’t fear that transforms and matures us in wisdom. And so, we must move on now to our masters degree. Wisdom further admonishes her offspring: **“My child, do not forget my teaching, but keep my commands in your heart.”** Of course it is great fun to break the rules when we are teenagers. Imagine if there was a hidden camera trained on this group you see before you. Imagine that it followed them around for the past week. I wonder what we’d find. But wisdom calls us out of that kind of life and says “Keep my commandments”. There are some tried and tested ethical teachings that you’ll find in all of the world’s great religions. Is it possible that those wisdom principles about honesty, faithfulness, and kindness underlie the great moral codes of the world? Do not commit adultery, do not murder, do not steal, and of course the hardest one of all for teenagers, do not lie. It all sounds so familiar that we take it for granted, but just imagine a world in which such moral codes did not exist. Yet Wisdom must go beyond a mere list of rights and wrongs, virtues and vices, and fear of consequences. There are too many scenarios and ethical dilemmas that don’t have either/or answers. Besides, just because it’s not wrong, that doesn’t mean it’s right. Fear of the Lord was only the beginning, the undergrad degree. Obedience to some good strong moral commandments is like getting your masters. It is the logical next step. But there’s more.

Wisdom further instructs her children: **“Let love and faithfulness never leave you; bind them around your neck, write them on the tablet of your heart.”** This is what I’d call the post-graduate program in Wisdom. The truly wise have internalized the heart and soul behind all the commandments. Jesus did just this when an inquirer asked him which of the commandments were the greatest. His famous response gets right to the point. **“Love the Lord your God with all your heart, soul, mind, and strength,”** and the

second is like it **“Love your neighbour as yourself”**. He transformed, as Wisdom does, the negatively worded “thou shalt not” commandments into the positive – LOVE. By writing these commands in our hearts we find the only true motivation to do right. There is a huge difference between doing the right thing out of a motivation of fear and doing the same thing motivated by love and faithfulness. Not the sentimental, romantic kind of love, mind you, but a sincere compassionate kind of love that is willing to make some very difficult decisions out of concern for God and neighbour. And why love? Because God is love. The goal of Wisdom has, from the start, always been to make us into the image and likeness of the character of God. Wisdom has succeeded in taking what was an essentially self-centred pursuit and turned it, ultimately, into concern for the Other.

In Proverbs 9:10 we are told that **“The fear of the LORD is the beginning of wisdom, and the knowledge of the Holy One is understanding.”** That basic fear and respect must give way to the deeper experience. In essence, to know Wisdom is to know something of the heart and mind of God. Some of the early Greek Christians equated the Proverbs Woman called Wisdom (in Greek *Sophia*) with God. She is the means through whom the universe was created, and the one who continues to call us to a deeper and higher relationship with the divine. More recently a number of theologians have sought to make the case for this being a scriptural basis for the Sacred Feminine. If the early Church writers were open to that then I’m open to that. But that is for Ms. Aoki and the theologians to discuss. For this graduating class it is enough to know that the postgraduate diploma in Wisdom is to know something of the character and the heart of God.

Another story about that same student in his grade 11 year, and you’ll really see the change. I was chaperoning some of our students on a trip to the bazaar to go to the temple for Divali celebrations. The students knew that all the school rules still applied. He knew, more specifically, that he was not to be lighting firecrackers. Well, I caught him red handed, lighting a pataka, and I said “Hey, what do you think you’re doing?” His first impulse was to lie and say, “Oh, it must have fallen down from above this wall.” “I’ll talk to you later”, I said. The next day he was in my office apologizing profusely, admitting his wrong, asking for forgiveness. Why? Because of the relationship we had built over the years. He came to see that his actions were a violation of the trust I had placed on him, and for that he was truly sorry. It was about love - I as his guru, he as my student.

As you leave the confines and comforts of Woodstock and go off to do amazing things bear this in mind. Study hard, play hard, enjoy life. Whatever profession you take up, whether you barely scrape together a living or make a fortune... it is only wisdom that will make you truly a success. Remember this from the same chapter in Proverbs. Verses 13-15 say: **“Blessed is the one who finds wisdom, the one who gains understanding, 14 for she [Wisdom] is more profitable than silver and yields better returns than gold. 15 She is more precious than rubies; nothing you desire can compare with her.”** Or more precious than Rubi as the case may be. By now you’ve probably guessed who that student is. He’s not exactly what you’d call the paragon of wisdom, but he’s certainly on the journey. Like many one of you, he’s on the road. May we meet again further down that road.

In closing I would like to leave the class of 2007 with a promise from James 1:5-6: **“If any of you lacks wisdom, he should ask God, who gives generously to all without finding fault, and it will be given to him. 6 But when he asks, he must believe and not doubt...”** Love and blessings to you all, class of 2007.