

## TJB Banquet Speech 2007

I think Dorothy (Veracka) and Jeff (Arthurs) have beautifully covered the Christian and the classical aspects of why Caritas exists, and I'm tempted to wrap this up with an Amen. But, no such luck. Lately, in my 9<sup>th</sup> and 10<sup>th</sup> grade Ancient History class, we've been reading Thucydides's *Peloponnesian War*. One of the highlights is Pericles's wonderful funeral oration for the Athenians who died in the first year of their war against Sparta and its allies. Pericles laments that the dead will depend to some degree on his speech for their renown and honor. I feel the same way. It's a sobering honor for me to be extolling Caritas and the community of Christian learning that we have all built together. The daily lives of our teachers and students could speak more eloquently.

But I will say a few things tonight, about that wonderful integration of hearts and minds, faith and facts that we call Christian classical education. Some of you know that I've often wished I could do this like Steve Jobs, the CEO of Apple, giving a keynote address. For one thing, then I could wear jeans and a black pullover. I could also dexterously spin the events of the past year to make everything sound perfect. For example, I could say: "We've been working really hard on our integrated approach to education, interweaving the sciences and the liberal arts, all within a Christian world view. We're excited about the product we've come up with, and I'd like to introduce it to you now. We call it . . . iStudent. Now, we've already quietly graduated 14 of these products—which is .7% of the total market in our area—and that's good. But this year we plan to roll out seven more; that's 50% growth in one year."

Well, it **is** true that we'll graduate seven wonderful students this spring, and our enrollment **has** grown again this year. We've also added new courses—Earth Science, 8<sup>th</sup> grade U.S. History, and Advanced Chemistry—and had to split Art, Music, and Drama each into two different classes. We now have 13 teachers, a student advisor, and two office czars, most of them part time, all of them talented, and most of them eccentric. As you could tell from listening to Dorothy, Jen, and Andrew, though, Caritas is far more than a product or statistics. It's a place where students from 8<sup>th</sup> to 12<sup>th</sup> grade mix freely and learn to respect each other. It's a place where a sophomore can lead an archery club and an 8<sup>th</sup> grader can direct a student production of *Arsenic and Old Lace*, where some students complain that they have to dumb down their language outside of school because their friends don't understand them. It's a Spanish teacher with 14 years of experience, a Biology and Anatomy & Physiology teacher with a Ph.D., a French teacher about whom another teacher once asked me, "Do you think she's actually perfect?", and a former-English-teacher-now-pastor teaching Music Appreciation because he loves it—and, let's face it, because the pecuniary emoluments are embarrassingly generous. Caritas is a shy, hard-working student who came to faith while here and became, improbably, a stunning actor. It's a graduate who recently wrote: "Last week I had to write a paper for my Sociology class, and my professor said he

would not accept them without rough drafts. . . . You have no idea how much it pained me to purposely leave misspelled words on the paper, and print it out just so I would have something to correct! It . . . made me realize how well I was trained in grammar, punctuation, and sentence structure at Caritas.”

I could go on and on, but I'd like to give you a few more things to think about. In college, I had a history professor for several courses who (somewhat in the manner of Charlie Brown asking, “Isn't there anyone who can tell me what Christmas is all about?”) used to ask plaintively, “Didn't anyone here have a classical education?” I was so benighted that I had no idea what a classical education **was**, except that it involved learning the cool Latin phrases that he expected us to know. As a classical school, Caritas is definitely a work in progress. It's not easy to reverse the tide of neglect when several generations have grown up without learning Latin and Greek, let alone reading the great old works in those languages. Sometimes it feels as though, to turn back the tide, we have only our fingers to stick in the holes in the dike, but there no longer **is** a dike. In *The Devil Knows Latin*, E. Christian Kopff refers to a G. K. Chesterton story called The Poet and the Lunatics, in which the “poet Gabriel Gale meets a brilliant scientist devoted to the cause of emancipation from tradition and social convention one evening.” Gale sees some goldfish gasping in a puddle on a table in the library, realizes the scientist has “liberated” them, and hurries everyone out of the house just before the scientist blows it up. The scientist's forced emancipations are crazy, of course, but our culture is just as misguided, just as self-destructive, in its rejection of all that grounds us. Too many of us wander through our education like orphans with credit cards in a mall, thinking we're choosing our own values and reality without the interference of authority.

As Chesterton points out, though, there is no such thing as dogma-free education without authority. Everyone who teaches, whether in a school or without, in books or in advertisements, teaches from underlying dogma, or principles. “Dogma,” says Chesterton, “is actually the only thing that cannot be separated from education.” The “one eternal education [is] to be sure enough that something is true that you dare to tell it to a child.” Supreme Court Justice Potter Stewart wrote, in 1963,

A compulsory state educational system so structures a child's life that if religious exercises are held to be an impermissible activity in schools, religion is placed at an artificial and state-created disadvantage. . . . And a refusal to permit religious exercises thus is seen, not as the realization of state neutrality, but rather as the establishment of the religion of secularism, or at the least, as the government support of the beliefs of those who think that religious exercises should be conducted only in private.

Behind every marginalization of religion in the schools is a religious fervor—for the religion of secularism. At Caritas, we are not content to allow religious exercises. We want what we teach, whether it be postulates and theorems or Greek history, scientific

discoveries or nineteenth-century novels, to be so concerned with God's truth that it is inseparable from Christian principles.

Perhaps you've heard it said that our civilization is built on Athens and Jerusalem—on Greco-Roman philosophy, art, literature, law, and political science, as well as on the Judeo-Christian revelations of God. When we deny or ignore those two sources, as much of modern education does, we deny our foundation, our inherited wisdom, our intellectual and spiritual parents. The classical approach, as Dorothy outlined it earlier, represents a humble realization that we do not simply create our own reality, and that religion, culture, politics, and education all thrive when they are built upon the foundations of tradition.

I am not suggesting that we simply recreate the education of several hundred years ago. Much has changed since the days when, as John Byler assures me, Erasmus read everything there was to read. I haven't even gotten around to seeing *Home Alone 3* yet, not to speak of all those novels languishing on my shelves. At Caritas, we are constantly searching for the optimal balance that will ground our students in tradition, teach them the current facts and ideas they ought to know, and help them bring a Christ-centered wisdom to bear on whatever they will encounter in the future. We want to give them, in the words of Christian Kopff, "true education, as distinct from mere training." Both are important in a society, but the "goal of education is to produce thoughtful people who have at their disposal a wealth of general knowledge, and who, in the light of this knowledge and with the courage to face facts, can judge matters of significance in a disinterested manner. . . . A society without educated citizens will collapse in times of crisis and will wither away in times of ease and prosperity."

At a time when many of us deplore the decay of our society and watch with concern a new assault of militant Islam on a Europe that seems no longer even remotely Christian, I wonder what brave 300 will throw themselves into the void of self-indulgence, of dependence on government and goods for meaning and well-being. Something must fill this void of meaninglessness. What will it be? Islam, with its seventh century attitude toward women and infidels, and its harsh, unknowable god? More bankrupt secularism, resolutely shutting its eyes to reality? Or could it be the joy of the Gospel, the exhilaration of freedom and personal responsibility within a glorious tradition? As educated Christians speaking the truth in love, our students have much to offer the world. I hope that you will help them, this evening, with your own fragrant offerings, standing with them shoulder to shoulder.