What are you doing after graduation? It’s often the most dreaded question as one envisions the bursting of the Centre bubble, and plans for graduate school, or work, or moving in with Mom and Dad.

Fifty years ago this month, some students answered that question by getting on Greyhound buses bound for Jackson, Birmingham, and New Orleans. They were called Freedom Riders, and they had purchased tickets for a journey that would change America. Black and white, Christian and Jewish, sitting together, they travelled to the segregated south to test a Supreme Court decision outlawing racial segregation in interstate travel.ii

Despite the ruling, Jim Crow travel laws prevailed in the south, so the simple act of sitting together on the bus was criminal. In Mississippi and Florida, they were arrested and jailed. In Alabama, a mob firebombed a bus and beat up the passengers as they fled for their lives.iii Klansmen mobbed terminals in Birmingham and Montgomery and beat riders senseless with baseball bats and iron pipes.

But the Freedom Rides continued. The buses were waiting, and these riders were on a journey inspired by the vision of a different future.

The south would never be the same.
By that November, ICC regulations allowed passengers to sit wherever they wanted on interstate buses. “White” and “colored” signs were removed from stations. No more separate drinking fountains, waiting rooms, or lunch counters.
The vision became reality. (So much so, that we can hardly imagine what it was like...) So this month, 50-year celebrations are commemorating that journey toward a dream.

And today, we’re celebrating a remarkable journey, too.
Barring any heinous misbehavior between now and 3:00, your four-year journey will end with a trip across this stage, and down those steps to where the buses are waiting.
For the journey, of course, has only just begun.

Today’s readings from the biblical story of Jacob tell an archetypal story of the human journey. So with Jacob as our guide, I want to reflect on how far you’ve come, and where your journey will take you from here.

Jacob’s story begins in Rebekah’s womb, where he and his brother Esau are in a fight. Esau emerges first, but Jacob is born grasping his brother’s heel, trying in vain to be the firstborn! So they name him Jacob, the “Supplanter.” In fact, Jacob journeys through life always grasping for what’s not his, always wanting more.

When he’s older, it’s clear that his brother Esau is not the sharpest arrow in the ancestral quiver. He’s a big, hairy muscular redhead who spends his time in the wild hunting game, while Jacob spends his time in the tent, reading text messages (texts were on scrolls in those days, OMG!), and admiring the picture on his Phi Tau composite.
Esau comes in after a hard day and finds his brother cooking soup.

Esau is big. Esau looks like Bozarth. He’s going to Rave that night. He’s HUNGRY. He wants FOOD. On an empty stomach, Esau is an easy target.
So in no time he has exchanged his birthright for a bowl of very nicely spiced lentils, and loses his inheritance as the firstborn son.

Soon Jacob and his mom cook up a plot to cheat Esau out of his father’s blessing as well. Arms covered in rank sheepskin, Jacob convinces his blind father that he is Esau. He gets the blessing he’s always craved, and sneaks sheepishly out of Esau’s retaliatory grasp.\(^v\)

And now the Supplanter’s journey really begins. From the start, he has striven to be someone he’s not, to take hold of what’s not his, always conniving to achieve a security his grasping could never provide.

His whole life has been a tragic effort to assume someone else’s identity, and because of this, he’s a man without a home; a man not at home with himself.

On the first night of his journey eastward, he has the famous dream — a ladder reaching into the heavens with angels ascending and descending, and a voice revealing to him a reality that transcends his own selfishness. Jacob had never seen anything beyond himself before.

One rabbinic tradition understands this dream as a search for both self and purpose. At one end of the ladder is Jacob as he really is; inhabiting this world of conflict as it really is.
At the other end is Jacob as he might be, ideally — one by whom “all the families of the earth will be blessed.”\(^v\)

The task is to bring the two together; to climb that ladder; to journey toward what God intends him to be, which is also a journey toward what God intends the world to be.

There is something that takes you beyond yourself.
Journey there, and you’ll find yourself.
There is a greater purpose for you. Find it.
A different world is possible. Create it.

So Jacob travels on with new assurance, but not much has changed yet.
The journey toward the Promise will require another boundary crossing.

He sojourns on his uncle’s land, marries both his cousins, and, through long-term genetic experiments, swindles his father-in-law out of most of his livestock! So he flees from there, too, now absconding with the inheritance of his brothers-in-law. This guy’s a scoundrel...

After 20 years away, Jacob heads for home, now wealthy and prosperous, having supplancted all who stood in the way of his grasping, and hoping to reconcile with his brother by offering him a share of the huge surplus he has amassed. He’s still looking for a blessing; still seeking the purpose woven into the fabric of his being.

He sets up an elaborate procession designed to purchase Esau’s forgiveness with a dazzling array of gifts. As manipulative and cowardly as ever, he protects himself from Esau’s men by putting the most vulnerable members of his household at the front of the line!

But first, he crosses a boundary into the land now unfamiliar to him, and finds himself alone on the bank of a river. And there, in his solitude, he wrestles with a mysterious adversary — a struggle that lasts all night.
The struggle is so fierce, it leaves him wounded, but Jacob refuses to let go until he receives the blessing he has craved all his life. So his opponent grants him a new name: “ISRAEL”—“one who strives and prevails”; a purpose long ago revealed, but now perfectly clear — one by whom “all families of the earth will be blessed.”

Jacob is ready to climb the ladder.

Now, Jacob takes his place at the front of the procession, ready to redress an injustice. Esau, the one so wounded by Jacob’s selfishness, runs to embrace him. And Jacob, wounded by his epic struggle, limps forward to receive an unexpected grace— and another vision of a reality that transcends selfishness.

He offers Esau his gift, now no longer to buy him off, but because, Jacob says, “I have enough.” “Enough” is not a word we’ve heard from Jacob before. Everything has changed.

So what does this ancient story of one man’s journey have to say to you as you graduate today?

College, of course, is the quintessential quest for fulfillment. The story of your college years is best told in terms of a journey. It begins with parents who set you on a path and dreamed this day would come, and will fuss over you, and annoy you with incessant picture-taking all day. Humor them. It’s their journey too. (And remember, they’re the ones who purchased the tickets!)

You remember those first steps—that letter from Admissions or Posse or Bonner that said you were accepted, or that call from a recruiter that made you one of the athletes who’d lead Centre to conference championships in basketball or track.

You recall that summer orientation trip in 2007 that lured you away from Harry Potter’s Deathly Hallows to Centre’s Tree-Lined Pathways.

You’ve travelled a long way since then, relationally, intellectually, psychologically.

And, of course, physically.

For you have circled the flame, (and some even achieved the trifecta) and you have circled the globe — taking trains from Strasbourg to the great cities of Europe; the Maglev in Shanghai and a rickshaw in Beijing; that broken bus in Oaxaca, and the London underground; the boat to a village in the Peruvian Amazon, and the overnight train from Calcutta to Varanasi; that walk through a living Catalan manger scene, and that pilgrimage to the Western Wall in Jerusalem; a horseback ride in the Chiapan highlands, or a canoe to a village deep in a Cameroon forest; undersea snorkeling in the Caribbean, and bicycling around Hanoi; the climb to the top of a Nicaraguan volcano, a walk in a Costa Rican rainforest, and a hike on the ridge of a New Zealand glacier.

This amazing list is part of what makes the Centre journey so profound.

And of course, as with Jacob, the sojourn into unfamiliar territory is also an inward journey.

The class motto announced at your first Opening Convo shows that you sensed this from the start. You chose Henry David Thoreau’s insight that “What lies behind us and what lies ahead of us are tiny matters compared to what lies within us.”

So where has the inward journey taken you?

The story of Jacob is a roadmap for the path to fullness:
You see, the journey of Jacob is the road from **craving** to **contentment**. Jacob's journey is the grueling path from **grasping** to **gratitude**. This is the wrestling match that will require all our strength. And it's the only path that takes us toward the Promise.

It's a strange thing to say on the day you graduate, but one can only arrive at this destination if one has also been wounded in a wrestling match with Reality—external reality, internal reality, eternal reality.

A famous story from a different tradition puts this idea another way: According to Buddhist legend, Siddhartha Gautama was a sheltered and wealthy young prince. His father created an idyllic environment to shield him from the tragic realities of life. Then, one day, he went out from his perfect, pampered existence and encountered, for the first time, the realities of **Age**, **Disease** and **Death**.

Nothing had prepared him for the sight of a feeble old man, wrinkled and bent over. Nothing had prepared him for the shock of disease--the wasted body, the cries of pain. Nothing had prepared him for the reality of death--the fact that this life is fragile and fleeting, dust, ashes.

Why hadn't he known? Well-educated Siddhartha had grown up ignorant of the common fate of humanity. The questions had now been posed and he found himself in a wrestling match that changed the world. For in grappling with the **outward** reality of suffering, he found himself in a struggle with the **inward** reality of the self's craving.

Thus wounded, Siddhartha began his journey toward enlightenment. He became the Buddha—the enlightened one. And from that enlightenment came the insight that the root of our problem is grasping, craving, clinging...

You see, the human tendency toward grasping is at the root of the most pressing long-term issues your generation will face:

In the U.S., with less than 5% of the world's population, we account for **one third** of annual global consumption. But at what cost? Right now, 1.3 billion people are living on less than $2 a day. 22,000 children die daily of hunger-related causes. The International Labor Organization reports that there are 12 million slaves in the world. Slaves. Monitors of modern slavery propose that just as we're considering our carbon footprint, we need to think about the “slavery footprint” of our consumption, educating ourselves about indentured immigrants who pick our tomatoes, slaves on West African plantations who pick the cocoa for our chocolate, or Congolese war slaves who mine the coltan in our cellphones.

*If we don’t wrestle with this reality, to the point that we are wounded by it, it will not change.*

Gandhi said “the world provides enough for every man’s need, but not for every man’s greed.” Is it possible that we are among those who need to be freed? That the relentless craving for more is our servitude? This is the wrestling match that will require all our strength.
Perhaps nothing reveals the costs of our craving like the energy crisis bubbling just below the surface of our lives. A year ago the worst oil explosion in our history fouled the Gulf ecosystem in ways still not fully understood. Now, while the price of gas explodes, B.P., Exxon and Chevron are grasping at record profits, feeding the crude craving of an addicted population, while cries for freedom in Arab streets challenge the petty tyrants propped up by our petrodollars.

Closer to home, our carbon craving is defacing the Appalachians, choking mountain streams, destroying ancient eco-systems, replacing green hills with gray mounds of toxic ash and unstable ponds of sludge.

And now, while Japan evacuates its contaminated countryside, our own radioactive waste multiplies like a cancer that can’t be cured.

The proposed solutions address everything but the root of the problem: Oil sands extraction, hydraulic fracturing for natural gas, mountaintop removal, safer nuclear plants, more permits for domestic drilling... Produce more oil (which, of course, isn’t production at all, but extraction; faster depletion of a fixed supply).

Conservation is rarely mentioned. Simplicity and limits are bad politics. Sacrifice is the unpronounceable word in our national dialogue. With each technological fix, we can put off the inward journey to overcome grasping; our craving for more.

In ever-new modern forms, we’re still faced with Jacob’s journey—from craving to contentment; from grasping to a gratitude that can put us on the path to generosity. The ladder is there if we’re willing to see it. There is a vision of a different world. But the necessary detour leads us through an epic wrestling match.

Last fall, some of us got on a bus in Oaxaca, Mexico’s second poorest state. We were on our way to a rural village to meet some farmers struggling for water rights, but the highway was blocked by protestors. So we took a detour. And what we saw that day shook us to the core. A narrow unpaved road took us into a slum populated by a community of pepenadores—recyclers who pick through the refuse of a Oaxaca City garbage dump. Our bus grew silent as we stared down row after row of shacks, barefooted children running through alleys, hopping over ditches flowing with sewage, emaciated dogs lying in the dirt between giant piles of garbage hauled in for sorting. Above the barrio loomed a mountain of garbage, barely visible through the haze of rotting refuse. And suddenly we knew where bottles or cans, freely tossed out after a refreshing drink, would ultimately end up — out of sight, out of mind, a source of income for the poorest of the poor, also out of sight, out of mind; society’s throw-aways picking through the remains of our late afternoon satisfaction.

THIS wound can turn a supplanter into a healer—a wounded healer. What wrestling will wound us deeply enough to say with Jacob: “I have enough?” I am grateful. I am ready to give.

Perhaps you had that wrestling match in class, as you studied the civil rights movement, or the conquest of Latin America, or modernity’s assault on the biosphere.
Maybe it was the haunting realities you saw in the Holocaust museum, or the war museum in Vietnam. Perhaps it was the squatters outside Calcutta’s flower market, or the children living in Managua’s garbage dump. Or your overnight stay in a shelter. It could have been that interview with a Mexican corn farmer struggling to survive, or that stark health clinic in Cameroon that didn’t have running water.

Fr. Daniel Berrigan tells a story about such journeys:
"There once was a child who used to play only in the front yard, where everyone was like himself. One day, he was sent into the back yard. Back yard? He hadn’t known there was one. A revelation! Tanners, shoemakers, alleys, gutters, children, washwomen, markets, flower carts, beggars. The child sat on the back stoop, half frightened, totally fascinated...
His exile ended, as such things will. He was called back indoors, and on into the front yard. He went in with a strange new look on his face. He knew something for the first time. It had come to him with the unpredictability of lightning, with the logic of nature, of water and sun, of the opening of a door.
He knew now, THAT A FRONT YARD EXISTED BECAUSE A BACK YARD EXISTED -- front will have back, rich will have poor, master will have slave, pride will have fall, blood will have blood.*

Here is the wound that leads to life. Fr. Henri Nouwen writes in his book, *The Wounded Healer*, that the outward journey toward healing of others requires an inward journey that recognizes the sufferings of our time in our own unsatisfied cravings, in our own alienation, in our shared human condition. This is the starting point on the journey into service. And only when it comes from a heart wounded by the suffering we seek to heal will service be authentic.**

So the prophet Habakkuk cries, “How long must I look upon wrongs, the wicked swallowing the righteous, justice perverted?” The great wisdom in this Hebrew text is that precisely in wrestling and being wounded by the struggle with Reality, the vision becomes plain and its requirements clear. For a vision without a wound is a fleeting fantasy. And a wound without a vision festers into cynicism. On Jacob’s ladder, wound and vision are the steps that lead to healing.

Class of 2011, the questions have been posed. You KNOW that the front yard exists because the back yard exists. And you’ve dreamed of a better way.

Some of you returned from Cameroon and raised a thousand dollars toward a well that will bring life-giving water to that clinic. You’ve sent students to school in Nicaragua. You’ve funded supplies for a migrant shelter in Oaxaca. You’ve built houses with the poor and playgrounds for kids.

And wounded healers will—they must—find their way to the halls of power as well, to change every policy built on a philosophy of grasping for more and more.

There is a better way. So the choice is yours. Not “Atlas shrugged.”*** But Jacob wrestled, and then took his place at the front of the march to a new reality — because Esau was his brother. We are all connected.
And those Freedom Riders?
They got on the bus, and their wounds healed America. xv

The producer of the new PBS documentary on the Freedom Riders summarized the lesson learned from those epic journeys 50 years ago: “Great change can come from a few small steps taken by courageous people. And sometimes to do any great thing, it’s important that we simply step out....”

Class of 2011. Step out. Step up. The buses are waiting.
The Wounded Healer is the title of a 1979 book on ministry by Dutch-born Catholic Priest, Henri Nouwen, famous for his work with developmentally disabled adults at the L'Arche “Daybreak” Community in Toronto.


Anniston, AL, May 14, 1961

These stories are found in Genesis 25: 27-34 and Genesis 27. On one level, they are about conflict between brothers, and the hope for reconciliation. On another level, these eponymous legends signify the ongoing conflict between Israel and Edom, nations for whom Jacob and Esau are the ancestral figures. Israel’s King David conquers Edom in the 10th Century BCE. The animosity between these nations partly explains why Hebrew storytelling portrays Esau as a dimwitted figure whose own stupidity legitimates Israel’s eventual victory, by which the Israelite monarchy supplants the Edomite kingdom.

Genesis 28:14

Genesis 33:11

World Resources Institute, Earth Trends, 8/31/07. http://earthtrends.wri.org/updates/node/236

UNICEF. See http://www.unicefusa.org/campaigns/believe-in-zero/. UNICEF’s “Believe in Zero” campaign is a call to action that will bring this number to zero.

According to Luis CdeBaca, director of the U.S. State Department Office to Monitor and Combat Trafficking in Persons, this shadow economy turns a $32 billion annual profit for traffickers. About 10% of the 12 million endure “commercial sex servitude.” See http://news.harvard.edu/gazette/story/2010/02/slavery-in-2010/

The April 20 2010 “Deepwater Horizon” explosion spewed over 206 million gallons of oil for 85 days.

Associated Press, “Exxon earns nearly $11 billion in 1st quarter,” The Courier Journal, 4/29/11. Oil prices rose 17% for the first quarter of 2011. Exxon’s profits were 69% higher than the previous year. Royal Dutch Shell was up 60% ($8.78 billion). BP’s quarterly earnings rose 16% ($7.2 billion). A Courier Journal editorial (5/12/11) reminded readers that the industry, which receives about $4 billion in tax breaks and subsidies, has invested $340 million on lobbyists since 2008. This week the Senate blocked a measure to end these benefits.

I found this Berrigan story years ago in Suzanne Toton’s World Hunger: The Responsibility of Christian Education (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1982) but do not know the original source.


This is the title of the famous 1957 Ayn Rand novel. Her newly popular “objectivist” philosophy holds “that man exists for his own sake, that the pursuit of his own happiness is his highest moral purpose, that he must not sacrifice himself to others, nor sacrifice others to himself.” See Michael Gershon, “Ayn Rand’s pursuit of selfishness,” The Courier Journal, 4/22/11.

And the ripple effect reaches all the way to the Middle East. Egypt’s nonviolent revolution this spring didn’t just happen spontaneously. Training sessions in nonviolent resistance had been conducted in Egypt since 2008. And young people all over Egypt had been reading a comic book translated into Arabic called The Montgomery Story about the civil rights movement. See Rose Marie Berger, Nothing Spontaneous About It: The story of Egypt’s long preparation for nonviolent revolution. Sojourners. May 2011, pp. 20-23.