TAKE UP YOUR HARPS
Baccalaureate Sermon—May 25, 2003

Four years of your life in a frame on the wall. This afternoon, you’ll walk out of here with that diploma—well, barring any heinous misdeeds between now and 3 o’clock—and you’ll have the piece of paper that certifies that you’ve done it. You’ve made it through.

But how do you frame the countless memories; the treasured stories that are now a part of who you are? Behind the clear glass over that framed piece of paper you’ll always see a world of unforgettable images and stories.

Students in this class have some great tales to tell. They can tell you the story of the flaming boxcar that caused, on one afternoon during their freshman year, what even the Civil War could not—an evacuation of Centre College.

For years, Tara Metts will tell the story of when she sat in the front row down here as the lone human buffer between the Cheney and Lieberman camps during the Vice Presidential debate.

There’s the story of C25 T21 (and how that homecoming upset got memorialized in spray paint on the side of the post office). Or the story of the caravan to Tennessee to cheer the women’s basketball team in the Sweet 16. Or the bawdier tales of your class’s distinctive contribution to the social scene at Centre College—Buddha’s Hooch party.

We are creatures who remember. We recollect the events of our lives in narrative, and song … and sometimes even spray paint.

Some of our narratives are fashioned to highlight the significance of events in shaping who we are; in giving meaning to our existence. Nick Zilich wrote me about the trip he took to Vietnam with Dr. Wyatt and commented that the experience changed his worldview. “Us,” for him, had always meant Americans; now “Us” means humans.
Our stories also help us find our place in a community. They locate us within groups that share a common history, and they give us a language intelligible only from within that community. “Buddha” means something different here than it means throughout the continent of Asia.

Some stories are so important that they become part of the collective consciousness of a whole people. Like every American, you will recount throughout your lifetimes the single most important event that occurred during your college years—the 9/11 attacks on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon. You’ll tell where you were, what you felt, and how your world changed. We are people who remember.

This morning, I have a story to tell.

It was October 4, 2001. Twenty-three Centre students and I piled into vans for the journey into the mountains of Chiapas to the community of Acteal. Winding roads took us into what sociologists call “deep Mexico”—indigenous Mexico, where ancient cultures carry on much the same way they have for centuries.

The mountain views were spectacular. But, as we got closer to Acteal, we passed trucks of soldiers, and military checkpoints with fully armed troops. When we stopped to let Mitch throw up on the side of the road, we were surrounded by curious Mayan boys speaking an ancient language our Spanish-trained ears could not decipher.

Finally, Acteal. We were silent for a moment as we looked down into the valley below—wooden shacks perched precariously on the hillsides, smoke rising from cook fires, women carrying jugs of water on their heads, barefooted children running after a ball in the dirt. We had reached Mexico’s most famous community-in-exile.

Our group had studied what took place here in 1997—the massacre of 45 men, women and children in a killing spree that was horrifying in its brutality.
After introductions, we gathered so this community of refugees could tell us their story. We heard about the indigenous struggle to keep their land and to get fair prices for the corn and coffee they sell. We heard about their efforts to stay out of the violence that began with the Zapatista rebellion in Chiapas a few years earlier. And we heard about the attack on the church where they were praying; how mothers and fathers knocked out the wooden planks of the chapel and fled into a ravine, where they and their children were gunned down by Mexican soldiers. The bullet holes are still visible in the wood slats of that chapel. None of us will ever be the same.

Remarkably, the people of Acteal told us that part of the significance of the massacre was that it had finally awakened the world to the hidden plight of Mexico’s indigenous population. So Mariano Vasquez pointed to the bullet holes in the roof and told us, “See, even through these, sunlight is shining in.”

These exiles narrated a story that has shaped their very identity, and then they told us, “Don’t forget.” We promised we’d go home and spread the story of their struggle for freedom and justice.

In a sense, that experience made us exiles as well—people who see things a bit differently; people with a new story to tell. We returned to a place where our new language was not the first language of our native land.

Biblical theologian Walter Brueggemann writes that exile isn’t just a geographical, physical or political reality; exile is a sense of cultural displacement: “While…exiles…are geographically displaced…more than that…they experience a loss of the structured, reliable world which gives them meaning and coherence…”

All three readings this morning come from the period of Jewish history known as the Exile. The Jews were in Babylon. In 587 BC, Nebuchadnezzar had conquered Jerusalem.
The city of David and the beloved Temple of Solomon were in ruins. Jewish men, women and children had been taken from their homes and deported to a foreign culture that didn’t understand their language, their religion, or their songs about justice and freedom. So the Jews’ greatest struggle was to retain their unique identity—to *remember*.

Memory has always been *central* to Jewish religion. At Passover, Jewish families ritualized the story of their liberation from slavery in Egypt. They passed on to their children stories about deliverers like Moses. And they sang. You see it over and over again in the Psalms. They reminded themselves of their history by singing songs—
* songs about the downfall of the pharaohs of this world;
* songs about a God who defends the widow, the orphan, the poor, and the alien;
* songs about a God of peace who shatters the spear and makes wars cease.
In the context of *exile* these were songs of *subversive* memory. Subversive *hope*.

Now listen again to the opening words of the psalm Nate read: *By the waters of Babylon—there we sat down and wept when we remembered Zion. On the willows there, we hung up our harps.*
*For there, our captors asked us for songs, saying,*
* “Sing us one of the songs of Zion!”*
*But, “How shall we sing the Lord’s song in a foreign land?”*

The Jews were living in the very heart of a powerful empire led by a military leader who had colonized much of the known world. And the sophisticated Babylonian culture around them saw their odd traditions as a quaint novelty. *“Sing us one of your songs of Zion.”*

It’s a poignant picture.
They sat down by the river and wept.
They hung up their harps in the willow trees.
They didn’t have the voice to sing anymore.
They stopped telling the story.
In their silence, they were in danger of forgetting who they were and where they had come from; in danger of becoming a people without a history; a people without meaning.

In fact, for some of the exiles, life in Babylon was pretty attractive. It was more sophisticated than Jerusalem. They were able to get goods that flowed to Babylon from all over the known world. Some Jews had their own homes, even though they were in exile. *It is possible to become quite comfortable in Babylon.*

The psalm continues, “*If I forget you, O Jerusalem, let my tongue cleave to the roof of my mouth!*” They were in danger of forgetting, and they knew it.

So what does all this have to do with you who graduate today?

In a sense, your liberal arts education has made you *exiles*—quite at home in the culture, but not fully satisfied with it. It has equipped you to be both insiders and *outsiders*; both cultural *leaders* AND cultural *critics*—*EXILES* with the unique perspective that can be offered by people with a foot in two worlds…

Now, some of you may be thinking, “*Exile? My exile ends today.*” At times, you’ve felt that your sojourn at this little college in central Kentucky has been something akin to exile—
—For four years you’ve lived in a place with weirdly pathological gender relations;
—a place where you can be fined for carrying an “*Original Container,*”
—a place where you make weekly runs to Nicholasville for endeavors akin to bootlegging;
—a place where the quintessence of daring entertainment is running naked around landscape sculpture…

Yes, it’s an oddly lovable little place. Off the hook.

But you know that we’re way too connected for this to have been the *exile of isolation* we often complain about.
Your education has taught you two languages.
One is the language of Babylon.
At its best, it’s the necessary language of government and economics, the sciences and the arts, the literary and philosophical traditions of a great culture. And you are equipped to speak it.
At its worst, this language of Babylon is the language of empire.
In this graduating class will be political and cultural and intellectual leaders at the very heart of a global economic empire the likes of which the world has never known. Remember that the unchecked power of Empire has frightening potential. That’s why it’s so important that we know a second language.

In the biblical narratives the other language is the dialect of exiles—
It’s the song of a group of people in tune with a different current running through the landscape of human history; a current of justice rolling down like waters, and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream.
Exiles are conversant with a vocabulary of community and the common good; and in their song is a melody reminding us that the very nature of reality bends toward justice.

The language of Empire; the language of Exile.
This biblical dialectic may describe our reality more than we realize.
Robert Bellah and his colleagues wrote an influential analysis of American society called Habits of the Heart that characterizes Americans as people who also speak two languages. Our “primary language” is individualism.

At its best, individualism affirms the worth of every person and insists on liberties and inherent rights. It values an independent self-reliance that can bring us great rewards.

But at its worst, a more radical individualism obscures our essential connectedness.
It shows contempt for losers in a competitive economy, blaming poverty on personal failings, apart from any analysis of its structural roots.
It thereby absolves itself of responsibility for the welfare of the larger community.
Individualism can also degenerate into a naked pursuit of self-interest at the expense of the greater good.

Like Alexis de Tocqueville, the authors argue that “individualism has been sustainable…in the United States only because it has been… checked by other, more generous moral understandings.”

There is a “second language” common to Americans. Bellah calls it the language of community or civic membership—a commitment to the common good. Here, two traditions within the American experiment merge into a flowing current—the biblical tradition familiar to so many Americans, and “the civic republicanism which guided the nation’s founders.”

Together, these traditions “insist that the American experiment is a project …which places upon citizens a responsibility for the welfare of their fellows and for the common good… Civic republicanism and biblical tradition remind us that being an individual —being one’s own person—does not entail escaping our ties to others, that real freedom lies not in rejecting our social nature but in fulfilling it in a critical… loyalty. (Bellah, et al, 1996, ix-x)

Are we forgetting that language in America today? What happens when those who are in tune with that undercurrent hang up their harps?

Bellah and his colleagues catalogue a troublesome disengagement from civic life—a decline in membership in voluntary associations that contribute to the life of the community (xvi); a deterioration in the public participation at the very heart of democratic citizenship. (Loeb, The Soul of the Citizen, 2).

Here in Kentucky, in the midst of our severest budget crisis in decades, when the issues are deadly serious for our poor people and our mentally ill and our uninsured, we just had a primary election in which less than 20% of registered voters bothered to go to the polls. One reason may be that few of our candidates for public office addressed the most critical issues, choosing instead to spend millions engaging in pre-packaged platitudes or character assassination.
We sat down by the waters and wept. And in the willows there we hung up our harps.

In his book, the Soul of a Citizen, Paul Loeb writes, “By allowing others to set the standards that debase the public realm, we risk passing on a world that’s meaner, more polarized, more desperate, and… more corrupt.”

The examples are all around us:

* Politicians whose actions seem to serve the moneyed interests on whom they depend to finance their campaigns, rather than the common good;

* Fraudulent accounting practices that allow the “professional vandals” at Enron and WorldCom and Citigroup to walk away with massive profits from stock options while thousands of their employees lose their pensions;

* A global economy thriving on the underpaid labor of the seamstresses who make our clothes in Nicaraguan sweatshops, or the survivors of Acteal who pick our coffee beans, or the migrants here in Kentucky who clean and package the chickens we’ll barbecue tomorrow.

Most Americans are deeply uncomfortable with these realities and genuinely convinced that something’s wrong. The question Bellah and Loeb ask is this: Why do so many of us have trouble actually acting on those convictions? Somehow, we feel overwhelmed and doubtful whether our actions make a difference when the problems seem so complex.

We become what Hannah Arendt called “inner immigrants”—disgruntled spectators, privately outraged at what we see happening in society, but publicly silent. Resigned and powerless.

There may be several reasons for this. I wonder if it’s possible that we’ve been seduced by the growing tendency in the media and government to identify us as consumers rather than as citizens?
Consumerism now offers an alternative sense of community—a primary way of belonging in America that rivals traditional forms of civic participation. “I shop, therefore I am” or “I shop, therefore I belong.”

Some writers seriously suggest it’s a sign of global community that we can travel the world and find the golden arches of McDonald’s. (Wallis, 129)

But is this all-encompassing Matrix really genuine human community … or is it economic empire? —An Empire served by automatons…—a Babylon where all memory of Zion is erased…

Think about it—after 9/11, we were told that our greatest civic contribution to the recovery of America would be to go shopping: Individualism posing as citizenship… “Leave your harps in the willows and go to the mall…”

What I’ve been saying this morning is that there is another story, another language, another song. And it is up to those who have heard it, and who have developed the capacity for critical thinking, to take the harps down from the willow trees and “chant down Babylon.” There’s no greater antidote to powerlessness than joining with others for the common good.

In these four years, you’ve been learning that. You’ve had healthy debates on the most significant issues of your day—most recently the war in Iraq. You’ve tutored prisoners at Northpoint, built Habitat houses, donated blood, and taught children how to read. This is America’s language.

The Prophet Jeremiah said something similar to the exiles in Babylon in the passage Meghan read earlier. Wherever you are: Build houses and live in them; plant gardens and eat their produce… bear sons and daughters… But seek the welfare of the city where you have been sent into exile… for in its welfare you will find your welfare.

This is the language of the common good challenging the language of individualism.

There’s always a danger that the worst language of the empire can drown out the unique perspectives of the exiles;
that sense of universal connectedness that is the foundation of the common good.

Recall the last lines of this morning’s psalm directed against the Edomites who had cheered while Jerusalem was being destroyed:  *Happy shall he be who takes your little ones and dashes them against the rock!”*

Here, the exiles’ distinctive song of deliverance has become a song of vengeance and violence—spoken by *exiles* now so accustomed to Babylon that they’ve adopted the harshest language of the Empire itself… *This* was the language spoken by those soldiers at Acteal. Our world desperately needs to hear the stories of the *exiles*.

What if we took our harps from the willows and began to sing a song that challenges what Gandhi called the *worst* form of violence—POVERTY… It’s the hidden terror stalking the majority of the world’s people.

Right now, in Sudan and Ethiopia, seven *million* people face starvation. *And no one is talking about it*...

In Colombia, a million impoverished people have been displaced in an ugly civil war, in which America is increasingly involved. *And no one is talking about it*...

And here in America, 11.7% of our population lives in poverty—about 33 million Americans; 1 in every 5 children. The gap between the rich and the poor is wider than at any time in our history. In this economy, it’s the best of times for some, and the worst of times for others… 40 million Americans without health coverage… Soup kitchens and homeless shelters reporting record demand… *Silence*.

Someone must tell *this* story. This is what Jeremiah was saying to the exiles in Babylon. This is what the survivors of Acteal were telling us when we visited them. This is what the homeless men and women on the streets of our cities are telling us.
Radical individualism says, “These people are not my problem.”

Listen instead to the language of the exiles, in the words of the great first-century Rabbi Hillel: “If I am not for myself, who will be for me? And if I am only for myself, what am I?”

I know you’ve heard that song in these four years. Your liberal arts education has taught you to question; to listen to a variety of stories; to get involved. It has equipped you to be citizens and not just consumers.

I hope you leave this place with that song ringing in your ears.

*Psalm 127
*Jeremiah 29: 1-14

