Subways fascinate me. Not the sandwich shops, but the transportation systems. Those of you visiting Danville for the first time have noticed that we do not yet have a subway system, but many of you who studied abroad have ridden them in Paris or Madrid. Or London—where the underground or the “tube,” as it’s called, is this amazing surreal techno world, deep beneath the streets, carrying thousands of people from one part of the city to another. It’s an engineering marvel, entered from openings in the street where you descend on giant escalators into a subterranean labyrinth with little shops, and newspaper stands, and even musicians serenading you as catch your train.

Underground, I’m struck by something that defines modern London. As each train enters the station, hundreds of people get on. Within seconds almost everyone’s on a cell phone, reporting where they are, finalizing a business deal, or just gossiping. They’re all speaking different languages. You hear some English, but also African and Eastern European languages, Arabic, French, Hindi, Japanese, Spanish, Russian, Bengali. Everyone is talking, but they’re not speaking to one another—so connected by systems of transportation and communication and commerce, yet so strangely disconnected from each other.

For those of us with biblical stories on our minds, one image seems obvious: Babel—the ancient story about the origin of languages, as humans in their pride, forget who they are and lose the ability to interact. It’s a story rich in meaning that can provide useful guidance as you who are graduating make your way in a globalized techno-wonder-world that offers great promise and great peril.

Now, you might have assumed that I’d be speaking about the Brad Pitt movie called Babel nominated for best picture this year. Not because I’m so regularly mistaken for Brad Pitt…but because the movie explores the paradox of an increasingly interconnected world where our inability to understand one another is so painfully evident.

The movie’s linked stories unfold in 4 countries, leaving us frustrated as the dialogue plays out in Arabic, English, Japanese, Spanish and sign language, highlighting the difficulty of connecting with others, even as our lives are inextricably linked.

The movie is a parable of globalization. Globalization can be defined as the “increasing interpenetration of states, markets, communications and ideas across borders”—all the economic, demographic, and cultural developments “that make the world a single place.”

That globalization is a revolution in communication is obvious to all of us. When you arrived at Centre, Facebook did not exist! Now it’s a regular part of your existence. Internet Explorer is actually younger than you are. Now, over a billion email messages cross boundaries every day, and the Internet grows by a million web pages a day. And new computer technologies anticipate chips 100 billion times faster. This is what we now mean by a generation that is “connected.”

The interpenetration of markets is also obvious. We know that the products we consume come from all over the world. Growth in trade is providing jobs and greater prosperity for millions, as trade usually does. It’s connecting us as never before. But the resulting transitions often disrupt traditional cultures, dismantle local economies, and displace small producers from their valued livelihoods. Millions are becoming disconnected from established communities.

Hence, what’s less obvious is that with integration comes fragmentation, as people caught up in the pervasive dynamics of globalization re-assert local identities and cultures. One scholar coined the term “fragmegration” to indicate that integration is accompanied by fragmentation.
Or, as Benjamin Barber writes, in *Jihad vs. McWorld*, globalization is a clash between the integrating uniformity of commercialism and the reactionary forces of disintegration and tribalism. vi

Our new *proximity* to people and cultures once distant, but now close at hand (through media or migration), presents us with a pressing *moral* challenge: *how to live with otherness.* vii

The film *Babel* portrays this reality brilliantly and painfully, and the movie’s title clearly alludes to Genesis. So today we’ll explore how this old Hebrew legend might offer guidance on how to live more fully human lives that can connect meaningfully with others.

Genesis 11 is the climax of the unit of scripture called the pre-history. To get the message, let’s look back at what leads us to Babel.

In chapter 1, a powerful and distant Creator God simply speaks creation into existence. Humans are the culmination of God’s creative work, made in the *very image of God*, the *only* creatures endowed with God-like qualities. We are reasoning, creative, relational, responsible beings—very much like the divine.

But the final editors included a more ancient version of the creation story in the *second* chapter. Perhaps they wanted to guard against the self-satisfied conceit that first story might create. So in the second story, God bends down and scrapes up some mud to form a human, *Adam*. Here, the first human is sculpted out of *dirt*.

There’s an interesting wordplay in that part of the story (2: 7). The Hebrew says, the Lord God formed man (“adam”) out of dust from the earth (“adamah”). *Adam* is made from *adamah*. Humanity is of the earth. In other words, we are “*earth creatures.*”

The balancing of the two stories reminds us that we are indeed unique and god-like—the very image of God—but we are also dust; tied to the earth; terrestrial *not heavenly* beings; finite, and subject to limits.

*Limits*. It’s a word we’ve never liked. Now, I suppose my personal story puts me uniquely in touch with the notion of human limits. You see, I grew up in Chicago, and I’m a lifelong Cub fan. This may explain why I went into the field of Religion. Being a Cub fan requires one to grapple with questions of human frailty, human limitations. Cub fans represent the persistence of hope in the face of existential despair.

Now, scholars have determined that the Genesis narratives must have been written *before* the divine creation of the Cubs. So the rest of the creation story in Genesis shows humans rebelling against limits, trying to escape their finitude, building defenses against the fragility that is part of the human condition. We’re OK with the “*image of God*” part of our nature, but not so keen on the *finitude* and *limits* side of things.

Dissatisfied with the idea that we are tied to the earth, humans eat the fruit of the tree they think will make them divine. God responds (3:22-24), *they are trying to become like one of us, like gods...*

So they are expelled from the garden. Knowing their mortality, and unwilling to accept limits, their quest for *security* gets them exactly the opposite—a less secure existence.

The story of *Babel* is the *climax* of this unit of scripture, and it portrays the same pattern—the story of every one of us. *‘Come let us build ourselves a city, and a tower with its top in the heavens, and let us make a name for ourselves.’* (Gen. 11:3)

The earth creatures try to enter the realm of the divine. Their proud attempt to transcend limits leads to a splintered fragmentation, an inability to communicate with one another. In the story, God knows that this same dynamic plays out again and again. Recall the divine response (v. 6): “*This is only the beginning of what they will do.*”
Now, I realize that Commencement may seem like your own expulsion from Paradise. Certainly, Centre College and the Garden of Eden have similarly dysfunctional gender relations… Perhaps, for you, the Centre bubble may have seemed, at times, like Eden. (And not just because some of you, prior to acquiring the knowledge of good and evil, seemed not to understand as you encircled the primordial flame, that you were indeed naked). Now, clothed with knowledge, you embark on a journey that offers opportunities for a future of great achievement. The question is whether you are also clothed with wisdom. How will you make your way beyond Eden, where you will try to make a name for yourselves? According to what values? How will you connect to the source of what makes you human?

You see, this story reminds us that a danger of the human condition is our tendency to build worlds of security and order, comfort and wealth, thinking these will somehow shield us from our mortal frailty and the anxiety that results. We know from the story, and from our own lives, that these efforts lead to confusion, insecurity, dissatisfaction. The flight from finitude is our fall.

This is where Babel challenges the tendencies of modern society with its rampant consumerism and the relentless pace of technological advance. All around us, towers of Babel are under construction:

*A few years ago, for example, PBS aired a program that identified an American epidemic of “affluenza,” defined as a condition of “overload, debt, anxiety and waste” resulting from the relentless pursuit of more. It’s a state of restless discontent despite an overabundance of material things. They claimed that we are spending more, but enjoying life less, with stress and exhaustion, fractured families, over $1 trillion in consumer debt, and constant pressure to conform to images of the good life in an incessant barrage of advertising. We may be more likely to identify ourselves as consumers than as citizens. At what point do we declare, “enough”?

Just before your Junior year, Hurricane Katrina revealed a profound disconnectedness in the midst of this abundance. The floodwaters washed away our national denial of what life is like for 37 million fellow citizens submerged below the poverty line—1 in 5 of our children. Katrina was a sudden natural disaster, but it exposed a persistent national tragedy. The poor had been forgotten long before they were abandoned to the ravages of this storm.

Has our towering wealth fostered a cruel social fragmentation? Will we re-connect, or keep building—higher and higher?

Likewise, technological advance, even with undeniable benefits worth celebrating, does leave us wondering about limits. Think about developments just since you’ve been at Centre.

*The nuclear genie, out of the bottle for a generation, now proliferates in North Korea and Iran, finding a hospitable medium for growth in the hot cauldron of international tension and mutual distrust. Pandora’s box. Babel. “This is only the beginning of what they will do.”

*We’ve cloned sheep and dogs, and some scientists are exploring the possibility of cloning humans. And just this week, Britain approved human/animal hybrids for the purposes of research.

*We now have a map of the human genome—which holds the promise of eradicating disease and learning the basis of language and intelligence, but also the potential for harm in hands that would ruthlessly misuse this knowledge to discriminate, or worse.
*And while we’re exploring new planets in the far reaches of the solar system, the limitless demands of our technological existence and affluence are actually altering the climate and ecosystems of our planet.

Recall the lament from the heavens as the project of the earth creatures grows and grows: “This is only the beginning of what they will do.”

The claim that technology will save us from the natural limits of the bio-sphere can seduce us with the illusion that there is no need to change the way we live; no need to come to terms with limits. Technology trumps simplicity.

*And now we’ve computerized our entire economy, our transportation and communications systems, and every aspect of our lives. With email, text messaging, ipods and cell phones, we’re always connected, always multitasking, always available, always in a state of “continuous partial attention,” always interrupted.

The irony of the most connected society ever is that we may be as disconnected from one another, and from the earth, as we have ever been. Babel indeed.

What are we building? Where will it end? 25 centuries ago these Hebrew storytellers got it right. “This is only the beginning of what they will do.”

Now, let me be clear. There is nothing inherently wrong with these developments. Technological advance is a reflection of our God-like capacities. Every person in this hall is grateful for the benefits of technology. It is saving lives and can enhance the quality of life. As expressions of our godlike capacity to create, these advances carry enormous potential for good.

The point is that while our technological breakthroughs are celebrated, questioning minds—those seeking wisdom—cannot (must not) accept them uncritically.

If humans are the source of all value, apart from “a more encompassing realm of value and purposes,” we might unreflectively affirm a “rele**lentless extension of human power over all of life**” that is perilous, eclipsing any sense that creation is gift, and that we are responsible to and for something beyond ourselves.

Here, the story of Babel builds to irony. Our efforts to unify the globe through technology, universal connectedness, and a McWorld of consumerist uniformity may unintentionally lead to a more disconnected and insecure existence.

*The choice is ours.* It requires the intentional act of subjecting every development to the test of deeper values. And the outcome depends on who we believe we really are.

Class of 2007, this passage compels us to ask crucial questions:
*Where is the line between our most worthy innovations and the Towers of Babel that might lead us downward into confusion?*

*What will you do with the amazing accumulation of knowledge that is shaping your lives? Your education has equipped you to contribute to the body of human knowledge in ways we can scarcely imagine today. It has also equipped you to evaluate your society critically. Our age calls us to ask, with T.S. Eliot, “Where is the knowledge that is lost in information? Where is the wisdom that is lost in knowledge?”*

If we don’t reflect on these questions, we might be beguiled by “what a name we have made for ourselves.”

Now, we can also read the Babel story on a second level, often missed.

For the original storytellers, this narrative challenged the pretensions of empire. For any Hebrew listener, Babel was a code word for Babylon. The writer erases all doubt by identifying a location for the story—the plain between the Tigris and Euphrates rivers (present-day Iraq, but known to the Jews as Babylon).
Babylon was the world superpower when Genesis was being edited. In the 6th century BCE, the Babylonian empire achieved economic and political domination over most of the known world. In 587 they had secured that control over the Jews. Jerusalem was in ruins and the leaders of Judah found themselves in a foreign culture that didn’t understand their language or their religion.

Babylon’s power was maintained by elaborate economic supply lines. Goods flowed to Babylon from all over the world. The livelihoods of Africans and Syrians, Judeans and Egyptians all depended on trade that served the wants of Babylon. One cannot help but compare the modern global empire, which depends on the underpaid labor of the seamstresses who make our clothes in Nicaragua, or farmers in Colombia who pick our coffee beans, or enslaved miners in Congo who dig the coltan in every cell phone on the subways of London. The world’s wealth flows to the heart of the empire.

The Genesis story also reminds us that empire is always legitimated by means of religion. Babylonians worshiped Marduk, a powerful god who created not only the cosmic order, but also the social order, including the royal family and its military enforcers.

The Babylonians built earthen towers called ziggurats that rose high above the city. Atop each ziggurat was the “gate of God,” (the literal meaning of “Babel”) with an altar to Marduk where priests sacrificed commoners to their deity. The picture is chilling: A traditional clergy in alliance with the political/military establishment; while common citizens are sacrificed at the altar of civil religion for the sake of the empire. “This is only the beginning of what they will do.”

Now, if we know this context when we read the Babel story, it’s clear that the Hebrews were challenging the Babylonian empire, and its religious supports, from the underside. Their alternative version says something startling, consistent with the deepest undercurrents of the biblical worldview, “the security and splendor you’ve built in your presumptions of pride and power, this unified global empire maintained by unchallenged military superiority—all this can lead to a world of confusion, a greater insecurity.”

The ironic Hebrew sub-version of the story of Babylon is that pretensions of empire quickly lead to disaster. The idea that we will unify the world under our way of doing things leads to disunity. In the end, the people scatter, unable to understand each other. Biblical history reminds us that it has always been so.

So the tower of Babel offers a warning for any age in which political, economic and military power tries to remake the world in its own image.

Fortunately, the biblical story offers an alternative to this tale of alienation. Remember, the Hebrew story begins in a garden, where the task essential to our humanity is to “tend and care for the earth.”

And when the Jews themselves become a nation, their covenant is a call to community—a community where the widow, the orphan, the alien, and the needy are included, where the earth is tended carefully and goods are distributed fairly. Ideally, this community is characterized not by its effort to transcend human limitations, but by service to one another precisely because our human finitude requires it. Our security is found in community. Genuine connectedness.

This is what the Hebrews meant by shalom. It’s the opposite of Babel. It requires us to be intentional in creating communities of connection and caring.
Humanity can never return to paradise, but the biblical macro-story is a movement from paradise to communities of shalom.

So the challenges today are profound:
* How will you deal with the moral challenge of otherness in an age of proximity?
* How will you come to terms with limits in a society built on greed and technological excess?
* How will you protect those who might be sacrificed on the altar of global consumerism?
* How will you fulfill the ancient charge to tend and care for the earth?

And here, we can celebrate another side of globalization, an immensely hopeful aspect. Richard Falk’s work emphasizes “globalization below the state.” Globalization from below is the explosion of “civil society” networks that cross borders, a kind of global citizenship made possible by integration, with a global ethic that protects the vulnerable and fosters communities of inclusion. xii After all, it is global communications that have informed us about genocide in Darfur, suffering in Haiti, sex trafficking in Cambodia, and labor conditions in Nicaragua. Global networks are acting to end suffering wrought by tsunamis and AIDS and famine.

If we act as global citizens rather than identifying ourselves primarily as consumers, we may avoid the towers of Babel that lead to confusion.

**In fact, we may not understand the reality of our modern world until we see it from the underside, from below.**

The evidence is that at Centre you’ve been learning this truth. You have contributed to communities of caring, tutoring disadvantaged children, building Habitat houses for the poor, or overcoming language barriers at Centro Latino.

Many of you have traveled to the Gulf Coast to tend the victims of Katrina — the revelatory event that exposed the “other America” submerged beneath the nation’s consciousness. Your efforts are precisely the kinds of connections that can overcome Babel.

In January, some of you stood with me in the largest municipal dump of Nicaragua. In that horrible hellish place we discovered a community of children—children who live in the stench and rot of a throwaway civilization, children discarded by a society caught up in the tasks of building Babel.

We also lived with villagers who pick our coffee beans and visited the factories where the poorest of the poor sew our clothes. And none of us will ever be quite the same. With our own eyes, we have seen the common citizens sacrificed at Babylon’s gate.

But what happened here at Centre during Holy Week revealed that we do not worship at the gate of this god; that Babel is not our city.

500 of our students fasted to raise money for the children of the dump, and donated to a fund that will allow these children to go to school, to wear clothes that are new, to eat cooked food from a table, to sleep in real beds for the first time in their lives.

**And this, THIS, is just the beginning of what you will do!**

This is the work of shalom. It’s the biblical sub-version of the human story; the opposite of Babel. It’s an odd thing to hear on the day of your Commencement, but you should know that it’s not the view from the top that clarifies; it’s the view from the underside: In the subways beneath the empire, in the shelters that house the homeless, in the lower 9th ward of New Orleans, in the dumps where society discards its castaways…

*Here is the fulfillment of the quest that goes so wrong at Babel, the return to our essential humanity, the opening to something beyond the self.*

**Hold on to it.** For here, one discovers not just knowledge, but **Wisdom.**
Class of 2007, we send you out with pride and confidence, convinced that this, *THIS*, *is* just the *beginning* of what *you* will do!

2. Brysk, 6.


5. Benjamin Barber, Jihad vs. McWorld (New York: Ballantine, 2001), xi, xii.


9. Schweiker, Theological Ethics and Global Dynamics, xiv, xv.

