THE ART OF LIFE

A sermon preached by Galen Guengerich
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We've entered the season when commencement addresses have come into full flower once again. From what I've read thus far, the new crop looks a lot like the old crop, with perhaps a touch less blush on the rose of eternal optimism. A typical commencement address interweaves a standard set of exhortations. You've reached the end. You stand at the beginning. The future is yours. You are the future. Remember to be kind. Remember to make your student loan payments. Good luck. Good lord—it's starting to rain.

For students making the transition from school to work, a commencement ceremony stands at the juncture between two distinct phases of experience: the experience we call education, and the experience we call, for want of a better term, life. Strictly speaking, a commencement—the word means "to make a beginning"—marks the start of something, rather than the end of something. The conferring of a degree indicates that a student has the education necessary to begin the next phase, which hopefully involves something other than moving back home.

The aim of education, then, is to prepare for something that begins when school ends. It involves learning some facts, but facts aren't ultimately the point. Students often get confused on this matter. Why do I need to know the rulers of the Mughal Empire if I'm going to be a veterinarian? Why do I need to know the stages of the Krebs cycle if I'm going to be an art historian? The truth is that you probably won't need to know those things—ever again, for any reason. (Unless, of course, you develop a passion for game shows or crossword puzzles.) Besides, in many disciplines, especially the sciences and technology, many of the facts you learn today will be outdated within a few years. So why learn them?

For the same reason that sprinters spend hours running up and down stadium stairs, even though they'll never see a stairway in competition. It's part of the training process. Studying the Mughal Empire will teach you how to assess events you haven't experienced and draw conclusions based on information that you can't view firsthand. Studying the Krebs cycle will teach you how to predict physical changes and how to control their impact. Facts are to students as stairs are to sprinters: they provide an environment for learning what you need to know. In the case of students, facts give us an opportunity to learn how to think.

But, you might ask, what exactly do we need to think about? Though it may sound glib, the answer is everything. Why do we need to think about everything? Good question. It's a question the renowned 20th-Century mathematician and philosopher Alfred North Whitehead addressed in a slim book—only 90 pages long—titled *The Function of Reason*. In it, Whitehead observes that the goal of life for many creatures is simply to survive. If that's your goal, he says, then you are better off not being alive in the first place, because nonliving things tend to last a lot longer than living things. "Inorganic things persist for great lengths of time. A rock survives for eight hundred million years, whereas the limit for a tree is about a thousand years, for a person or an

elephant about fifty or one hundred years, for a dog about twelve years, for an insect about one year."

For anything that's alive, of course, the short-term goal is to survive and reproduce. Over time, the most important factor in achieving this goal is an animal's ability to adapt to its environment. If the air gets colder or the water warmer, or if food sources can only be found higher in the trees or deeper in the earth, the animal has to adapt—or it will perish.

In order for animals to thrive over the long run, however, adaptation must also happen in the other direction. Not only do successful animals adapt to their environment, they also adapt their environment to themselves. Bees build hives, birds build nests, beavers build dams, and humans build houses. Primitive creatures let food come to them—if indeed it does. More advanced animals chase their food and catch it, or plant their food and grow it. Some even store their food and perhaps even cook it before eating.

For humans, the purpose of adapting our environment, says Whitehead, is three-fold: to live, to live well, and to live better. In fact, he says, "the art of life is first to be alive, secondly to be alive in a satisfactory way, and thirdly to acquire an increase in satisfaction." In light of this three-fold purpose, the function of reason is to promote the art of life. Reason is the tool we use to decide how best to shape our experience in order to increase our satisfaction.

The role of education, in this case, is to teach us how to make choices that will increase satisfaction—for us and the people and world around us. Admittedly, it's easy to get off track in the search for satisfaction. Because education prepares us for work, and work usually involves financial compensation, our tendency is to assume that satisfaction increases as compensation increases. This is only true up to a point—and it's a much lower point than one might think. Without a certain number of things that money makes possible—a home, a few clothes, sufficient food, some books and toys, a little music—it's hard to be satisfied with life.

After we have accumulated a modest collection of things, however, the calculus changes. Studies consistently show that once household income passes the $50,000 mark, more things do not yield more satisfaction. In fact, the more possessions we have, the more demands they place upon us—not just for floor space and closet space, but also for batteries, and cleaning, and repair, not to mention insurance. That said, it's probably also true that if you're going to be miserable, you may as well be rich and miserable than poor and miserable.

But the art of life is to be satisfied, not miserable. The aim of education is to learn to think in a way that, whatever else you may achieve or accomplish, you maximize your potential for satisfaction. If that's our goal, then how should we think? What should we think about?

I commend to you a short but brilliant book by the late novelist David Foster Wallace, titled *This Is Water*. I am indebted to a member of this congregation for bringing this book to my attention and sending me a copy. The book is the text of a commencement address Wallace delivered several years ago to the graduating class at Kenyon College. You can read it in 20 minutes. I urge you to buy a copy for yourself and additional copies for every graduate you know. Read it soon and often. It's that good.

Wallace begins with a parable. "There are these two young fish swimming along and they happen to meet an older fish swimming the other way, who nods at them and

says, ‘Morning, boys. How’s the water?’ And the two young fish swim on for a bit, and then eventually one of them looks over at the other and goes, ‘What the hell is water?’”

The point of this story, Wallace explains, is that the most important realities are often the hardest ones to see. Each of us is like a fish in water: there is no experience we’ve had that we were not the absolute center of. Other people’s experiences have to be communicated to us; we get them second-hand, at best. But our experiences are immediate, urgent, and real.

Imagine going to the grocery store, Wallace suggests. It’s the end of an exhausting day in the middle of an exasperating week. You are hungry, tired, and desperate to get home. The store is crowded, the light is harsh, the lines are long, and everyone is annoying. In this situation, Wallace says, “my natural default setting is that situations like this are really all about *me*, about my hungriness and my fatigue and my desire to get home.” And who in the world are all these people, and why are they in my way? That’s what happens, he says, “when I’m operating on the automatic, unconscious belief that I am the center of the world and that my immediate needs and feelings are what should determine the world’s priorities.”

There is another option: “I can choose to force myself to consider the likelihood that everyone else in the supermarket’s checkout line is probably just as bored and frustrated as I am, and that some of these people actually have much harder, more tedious or painful lives than I do.” Maybe the man yelling into his cell phone has a son in prison. Maybe the woman blocking the aisle to the ice cream freezer has just been laid off. Maybe the impossibly slow checkout clerk has just been dumped by her boyfriend. And so on.

Learning how to think, according to Wallace, is about choice. It’s being able to *choose* what you pay attention to and how you construct meaning. It involves “attention, and awareness, and discipline, and effort, and being able truly to care about other people and to sacrifice for them.” This kind of education has nothing to do with grades or degrees, but rather awareness—as Wallace puts it, “awareness of what is so real and essential, so hidden in plain sight all around us, that we have to keep reminding ourselves over and over: This is water. This is water.”

One of the reasons we come to All Souls is to remind ourselves of things that are hidden in plain sight all around us. We all come from the same source. We all share the same destiny. We are utterly dependent on the people and world around us. The art of life is to increase our satisfaction by choosing to live in light of elemental realities. Awareness of these realities doesn’t come naturally. They are like water to us: so pervasive and obvious that we tend never to notice them—unless we choose to become aware.

Worship is a ritual, a practice, whereby we acknowledge these elemental truths over and over again. Worship is the practice of training our awareness, so we are able to recall these truths when it’s time to make choices to about how to live. With practice, maybe we won’t make the mistake of thinking ours is the only experience that really matters. We all come from the same source. We all share the same destiny. We are utterly dependent on the people and world around us. I choose to be grateful. I choose to be compassionate. I choose to be satisfied.

Try this experiment. The next time someone annoys or frustrates you, write a back story in your mind that justifies (or at least explains) the person’s behavior. Then choose to respond in light of the circumstances you imagine for them. Whether you are

right or not (and you will probably be closer than you think), you will feel more satisfied than if you had responded in anger. Remember, whatever the situation, your choice is not about the kind of experience other people have had in the past. It's about the kind of person you want to be in the present.

It's also about the kind of water you want to swim in in the future. Unlike fish, we can change the water—the environment we create for ourselves and the people around us. We have a choice.

The art of living is to be aware of the experiences that shape us and the choices that define us. This is the awareness we choose to declare. This is the freedom we choose to claim. This is water. This is life.