

So What?

Commencement Address

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Like 2 percent of the men here and $\frac{1}{2}$ of 1 percent of the women, I have a speech defect – I often stutter on the word “stutter,” so I won’t use *that* word.

Don’t let it bother you. After 70 years, it’s stopped bothering me!

It’s wonderful to be back at Denison, among my friends at the university perched on its little mountain in sweet Granville. For the honor of speaking here I give thanks to the President and his administration, my old friend Robin Bartlett, the trustees, the students, and above all to the parents.

I’ve been to the University a number of times, the longest being a snowy, nine-week visit in 2003, teaching economics and philosophy and climbing the hill every morning through the snowdrifts with my dog Jane

Austen. It was a crucial time for me, giving me the focus for a book I was writing.

I want you to take away this afternoon a couple of expressions. Two only. There will be a short quiz afterwards, so pay attention. Take notes.

The first is the word “transcendent.” Those who had a course in Denison’s superb Department of Philosophy will be familiar with it. It means “what we believe exists beyond our normal lives.” The essence of your family. The spirit of the University. The historical role of the United States. The ethics of science. The higher meaning of love. God.

We humans need the transcendent. I don’t mean we *should* need it, or that virtuous people need it, or any other conditional need. It just turns out that humans think a lot about the transcendent. A life *without* a belief beyond our normal lives is not fully human. As a theologian put it in the 1690s, “Man doth seek a triple perfection,” by which he meant perfection beyond food and entertainment and even knowledge earned at the University. Humans seek, he wrote, “first a sensual . . . then an intellectual [perfection]. . . . But [the human] doth not seem to rest satisfied . . . but doth further covet . . . somewhat divine and heavenly. . . . For although the beauties, riches, honors, sciences, virtues, and perfections of all men living

were in the present possession of one; yet somewhat beyond and above all this there would still be sought and earnestly thirsted for." The transcendent.

The other and closely related expression I want you to think about is not so fancy. It's the smart-aleck phrase So What. Every language has one. In French, *et alors?* (The French say, "Ay low," French spelling being almost as crazy as English.) In Dutch, *en nu?* (Which is said just as it is spelt.)

I do not mean So What in the junior-high-school version, dismissing this or that tiresome assignment without thought. First-year algebra. "So What?!" American history. "Whatever." Yet even the junior-high-school version has some good uses. When in the eighth grade you dismissed the scorn of the Cool Kids, the So What protected you, usefully.

But the higher use of So What is the adult use, that is, "what's the *point* here? What does it actually *amount to*? Tell me."

"So What" in the adult use is a good little tool for cutting through nonsense in business or law or academic life. A colleague proposes an expansion of the business. You should ask, "So What? How is an expansion going to make us a better company? Or are we expanding thoughtlessly?"

I tell my graduate students that if they ask So What about every thought they have in economics or in history they will become great scholars. Whenever I listen to another professor making an argument the question is right there: “So What?” “Why,” I ask, “does the argument matter to some important question in economics or history, such as how we became so very rich as we now are compared with our miserable ancestors.” When I don’t get an answer – when the professor merely gets annoyed, or says that she’s doing her research “just for fun” – I lose interest.

But the bigger use of So What is to ask for the meaning of what you are doing. As Annie Dillard says, “How you spend your days is how you spend your life.” So What asks what your transcendent is, and how what you are doing right now contributes to it. That’s the connection: So What asks what your transcendent is. It asks for meaning.

Believe me, you will face the question often in your life. Indeed, the meaning of your life as a whole depends on answering it. By the time you achieve the unspeakably elderly age of, say, your parents you will want to have the beginnings of an answer.

In whatever exact form, the answer is that triple perfection which humans seek. There is a negative

answer, which is that our lives are meaningless, that there is no transcendent, that the perfection is not there. In philosophy it is called “nihilism.” I do not recommend it, and in practice it is impossible to sustain. Even people who claim to be nihilists reveal by their proud attachment to the idea that they are not really so. Humans, as I said, just do seek meanings, triple perfections, answers.

One set of positive answers I recommend is religious. I was 55 years old when I became a Christian, a progressive Episcopalian. When I was teaching at Denison I attended St. Luke’s church downtown, and remember the weekly protests in front of the church against the invasion of Iraq – after which we would adjourn to the Village Coffee Shop across the street.

Other transcendents are The Family, The Craft, The Job Well Done, The Career, The Company, The City, The Nation, The Chicago Bears (we say back in Chicago, Da Bears) – anything with those capitals with “The” in front, and some justification for sticking with it.

The answer to So What is not always good news. The transcendent purpose of a human life can be evil. Satan in Milton’s *Paradise Lost* says, tragically, mistakenly, “Evil, be thee my good.” The German pilot who ran his plane into a mountain in the French alps some weeks ago was described by his girlfriend as wanting to do

something that mattered, for which people would remember his name. I have forgotten his name.

A fully human life must answer the So What question, and a good human life must try to answer it well. We are humans, and demand meanings. Dogs don't. They eat and love. Dogs, it's said, have an interest for each of their four feet: food, sex, food, and food. But a human doth seek a triple perfection.

Don't settle on an answer too soon to the question So What, even if you adopt my recommended religious answer, even if progressive Episcopalian, even if at St. Luke's. Even a Denison graduate is not at age 22 fully equipped to answer the question. You need some patient time, some experience of life, some trying out of various versions of the transcendent, and a willingness to change the tentative answer to So What. In my own life I've tried out Profession and Career and Family and Citizen of the World. If you live thoughtfully, asking So What and trying out your replies, without being too hard on yourself, the transcendent will come to you, if through a glass darkly.

Try out the answers. You know by now in your life, for example, that Being Cool is an adolescent transcendent, and you should be getting over it.

A more noble and grown-up transcendent is Helping Others. Some of you will go into non-profit organizations,

which is fine. The desire to “help others” is a good motive, though you might want to look beyond it to a still greater transcendent. But you must *not* think that being in a *profit*-making company is any less serving of the transcendent. The point is one you learned in your course in economics. Making a good chair or IT service or book also serves others. That you get paid for it does *not* mean you are not also serving. They also serve who only stand and wait, and profit.

And I warn you, as commencement speakers always do, against “goals” that do not really answer the question So What. Many of my students will say that their goal is to have a nice car and house and job. That’s fine for a start, though a terrible finish. In the meanwhile it’s harmless, even beneficial for others. Notice again that when you achieve such “goals” you are achieving benefit for others – as the blessed Adam Smith said, it is not part of your intention, but by getting a good salary you must be doing *something* that other people value. The money you make by peaceable exchange does good.

But a human doth seek a *triple* perfection. Beyond a nice car.

In other words, it’s tough, the So-What question. The pre-packaged answers of religion or tribalism or profession are useful. But they grow stale if not asked and asked and asked. Imparting meaning to your life, with all its troubles, is hard. I have come to see my stutter, for

example, as an advantage – as a helpful, if irritating, daily reminder that I am not perfect. With all the advantages heaped on me in my life, it would have been easy for me to fall into a fatal, ill-justified pride.

So go forth, you glorious graduates of Denison, and with proper modesty take to the path with the young person's enthusiasm.

But keep in mind, my dears, the old person's question. So What?