

Remarks of Professor Thomas Pfau  
Faculty Address  
Master of Arts in Liberal Studies Graduation  
May 10, 2008

Dear Graduates, Colleagues, Families, and Friends:

It is an honor and a genuine personal privilege for me to address all of you on the happy occasion of the 2008 graduation ceremony for the Master of Arts in Liberal Studies Program here at Duke. Above all, of course, we convene here today to congratulate our graduating students on their achievements. Yet in most cases, the completion of the Masters Degree in this wonderful program reflects not only our graduates' enthusiasm for the Liberal Arts and for the specific topic on which each of them chose to concentrate in the final phase of their studies. For these last few years have also required much perseverance on the part of our graduates' spouses, partners, and in many cases children. They, too, will undoubtedly recall a host of small and sometimes larger sacrifices and forms of support; it is only proper, then, that our congratulations and appreciation should include them, too. I can certainly imagine how a young child at home might have raised an eyebrow, perhaps even some probing questions, about his or her parent's dubious choice of readings. What, in this time of endless electoral campaigning, might a five-year old make of a book on the kitchen table entitled, say, *Culture and Anarchy*? And how might he/she reconcile the title of *Death in Venice* with that recent promise of a summer vacation in Europe? Still, what S. T. Coleridge two-hundred years ago so self-effacingly called his penchant for "abstruse research" and desultory reading ("I never read except when I am idle, and I *always* read") is truly a sign of intellectual and, I don't hesitate to say, *spiritual* health eminently worthwhile to be witnessed by those close to us. It also constitutes (as I'll try and sketch in a moment) the only genuine experience of freedom ever available to us.

Having by now taught four different courses within this program, I can say that I have been at least as much the beneficiary of this involvement as my students. My first course explored the widening gap between a *vocational* and a *professional* model of learning in the 19th and early 20th century; subsequent classes took up the relation between music, literature, and philosophy from 1800 to 1945, as well as the long and complex role of melancholy in Western literature and culture. Arguably, a significant part of what has made these classes so rewarding for me has to do with the eager and diverse ways in which our truly "grown-up" MALS students manage to relate the topic under discussion to their lived realities. Rather than competing with the volatile seismic activity that describes the late-adolescent brain of our undeniably talented undergraduates, learning and study in the MALS Program have always been experienced as a valuable complement to already complex and demanding lives at home and work.

In this sense, then, the students of the MALS Program may well be said to honor in particularly apt ways the original intent behind the idea of Liberal Studies which, we recall, is a descendant of the seven liberal arts—grammar, rhetoric, and logic (the *trivium*) and geometry, arithmetic, music, and astronomy (the *quadrivium*)—first constructed in the Medieval university. Notwithstanding the profound changes wrought since then in our understanding of what defines an area of inquiry or discipline, the basic intent conceived hundreds of years ago remains alive to this day. That is, even now the liberal arts constitute a curriculum aimed at imparting general knowledge and developing general intellectual capacities. As such, they stand in sharp contrast to the more recent understanding of "knowledge" as mere *information* to be sought and acquired

(for a fee) on account of its projected expediency in some particular corner of the employment market.

A particularly strident and unapologetically partisan advocate of learning “as its own end,” John Henry Newman in 1859 did not hesitate to think of “liberal” knowledge as a condition of soul and, hence, as belonging to an entirely different sphere than mere practical “know-how” and passively accumulated “information.” For Newman, knowledge is nothing less than “a habit of mind” formed to “last through life: its attributes are freedom, equitableness, calmness, moderation, and wisdom.” It is, in other words, an *end* in the strong, Aristotelian sense; or, equally dear to Newman, knowledge “is an object in its own nature ... really and undeniably good.” For Newman, as for his indispensable intellectual guides (Aristotle, St. Augustine, and St. Thomas Aquinas), an unconditional good is that which offers us at all times orientation in our practical and contemplative lives. Absent such a good, one will not be “free” but, instead, remain merely *reactive* and enslaved to a thoroughly commercialized world inundating us with so many ephemeral distractions. In other words, the Liberal Arts put within our reach knowledge as the experience of “freedom.” After all, Newman reminds us that the word *liberal* means, “first, in its grammatical sense” an activity that is “opposed to *servile*.”

Without dwelling further on Newman’s strong views, let me close by saying merely this: in the course of their pursuit of Liberal Studies in the Duke MALS Program, each one of you has undoubtedly experienced many times that unmistakable feeling of exhilaration, of being moved by the sheer dynamics of thinking itself and, suddenly, sensing connections between heretofore unrelated topics and issues. No doubt hard won, as it always is and has to be, such unanticipated *clarity and novelty of thought*—a vista abruptly opening on meanings and significances previously unsurmised—constitutes the only genuine experience of freedom that we can ever have. Freedom, in other words, is not something we possess in the way that we might fancy ourselves to “own” some piece of real estate (itself a troubling metaphor these days). Rather, it discloses itself to us as our capacity for “knowledge,” that is, moments of insight and consequent self-realization that emerge as we explore an idea, a topic, or a problem. The condition for this experience of freedom, meanwhile, is that we pursue our study *liberally*, that is, without reserve and without trying to control where it will lead us. The liberal arts thus are free—not in the naïve, if widespread sense of individuals “choosing” from a menu of identifiable and transparent options or goods. Rather, they are “liberal” in the sense of leading us—each one of us in his or her distinctive way—through “work” in its strong vocational sense as passionate and sustained study and reflection towards ... a deeper knowledge of ourselves.

What all of you are to be congratulated for on this occasion here today is less the sheer attainment of a degree than the way in which that degree attests to a deeper ethos of life-long study and learning. I wish each of you the very best and, especially, that you may have continued opportunities to experience and nurture in future years what Newman calls “real cultivation of mind”—the preeminent good that, I trust, has sustained you throughout your years in this program.