



Spring 1988

Commencement Address: Time, Noise and God

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Recommended Citation

Novak, Philip, "Commencement Address: Time, Noise and God" (1988). *Collected Faculty Scholarship*. Paper 146.
<http://scholar.dominican.edu/all-faculty/146>

The Commencement Tradition



Dr. Philip Novak

Commencement Address:

Time, Noise and God

by Dr. Philip Novak, Associate Professor and Chairman, Department of Philosophy and Religious Studies

Dean Aquinas, Members of the Board of Trustees, faculty colleagues, graduates, and guests:

A few minutes from now, after the graduates have received their diplomas, and are standing together again for the last time, they will, if the past is any indication, reach to the tops of their caps, flip their tassels from one side to the other and, very likely, raise a joyous shout. Their long rite of passage will be over. If, at that moment, we feel a catch in our throats, or a familiar melting sensation in our chests, let us know them as reminders of our humanity. *Sunt lacrimae rerum*, said the Roman poet Virgil: there are tears for things. And one of the peculiar marks of our kind is the tear that ventures forth to greet a triumph of the human spirit.

Let no one scoff and say: "It's only a college degree after all; thousands get one every spring." Such mutterings would betray an enormous lack of perspective. When one realizes how relatively few of the world's billions can avail themselves of the opportunity, how numerous the challenges, how great the obstacles and how profound the inertia which oppose the entire project, one is grateful for every runner who stays the course.

The other day, a number of my faculty colleagues and I got a lovely thank-you letter from a graduating senior and I'd like to share with you an edited version of her opening anecdote: "Yesterday," she writes, "in the supermarket while I was picking through Italian tomatoes, trying to find one that was ripe, an elderly gentleman noticed my college sweatshirt and said to me, 'You lucky woman. When you graduate from Dominican you have the whole world in your hands.' Later, in the express lane, he repeated his statement. 'Four years at Dominican,' he said, 'and the world is yours.'"

My first thought, upon reading these words, was: Find that old man and hire him! But my second thought turned critical. In what sense is the world yours? Certainly not as a possession; if this is what he meant, we can dismiss his remarks as kindly twaddle (nonsense). But perhaps he meant that the world is yours, now more than ever, as a responsibility.

It is customary for a commencement speaker to ponder the possible future and to risk offering a few watchwords to the graduates who stand poised on its cusp. No enemy of custom, I shall try to oblige. But whereas speakers often grapple with the great issues of the day, issues of economic justice, of human rights, of education and of peace, I must limit myself to a less ambitious topic. This is not to deny the centrality of those issues; it is rather to confess a personal limitation. The senior class has asked a philosopher to speak to them today, and, for better or for worse, I am the sort of philosopher who counts among his most cherished mentors the Greek Socrates. When at his trial the gentlemen of Athens charged Socrates to defend the philosophical life, he replied that there was no greater service he could offer his city than to go about persuading people to care for their souls. It is soul-care, then, that will concern me in what follows. The remainder of my remarks bear the title "Time, Noise and God."

It is soul-care, then, which will concern me in what follows.

A few years ago the cover of *TIME* magazine featured a human face, grotesquely contorted and screaming. The accompanying story, simply entitled "Stress," contained the following statistics: a) two thirds of the office visits to United States family doctors are prompted by stress-related symptoms; b) the three best selling drugs in the country are Tagamet, an ulcer medication; Inderal, a hypertension drug; and Valium, a tranquilizer. The article quoted one physician as saying that "Our mode of life itself, the way we live, is emerging as today's principal cause of illness."

What is it about the way we live that causes us to regularly coat our stomach linings and routinely tranquilize ourselves? A good answer would keep us here all day, so I shall zero in on only two: time and noise.

Time

"It is ironic," says Jeremy Rifkin in *Time Wars*, "that in a culture so committed to saving time we feel increasingly deprived of the very thing we value." Surrounded by time-saving products aimed at providing us with increased leisure, we are chagrined to find how little we really have. Leisure itself often seems to devolve into a series of frantic attempts to have fun. Though it is conceivable that as a society we are gaining in efficiency and organization, it is equally conceivable that as individuals we are losing our composure, our patience, and growing more manipulative in relation to others. Once human beings had time; now, it seems, time has us.

Once, human beings had time; now, it seems, time has us.

Until about one thousand years ago human beings marked time largely by reference to natural phenomena: the time of the rooster crowing, the time of the sun's rise and its position in the sky, the time of the phases of the moon, and seasonal time markers like the migration and return of birds.

We owe the beginning of the end of this kind of relationship to time, ironically enough, to Benedictine monks who, no longer willing to rely on human bell ringers to mark the hours into which the monastic day was carefully divided, invented the first mechanical clock. Lewis Mumford once remarked that the clock, *not* the steam engine, is the key machine of the modern age. It is with the clock, and its accomplice, the schedule, that the real seeds of modernity were sown.

The clock soon escaped monastic confines and made its way into the town centers of 15th century Europe. The first clocks had no dials, but merely sounded a bell on the hour. By the sixteenth century, however,

clocks were chiming on the quarter hour and some were being constructed with dials. In the mid 1600s the pendulum was invented, providing greater accuracy. Shortly thereafter, the minute hand was introduced. And in the early 1700s, the second hand made its debut. Well, I think you get the picture: chop, chop, chop.

But this is not the end of the story. We who live in the Age of the Computer are in the midst of another temporal revolution. For the computer's basic unit of time measurement is *not* the second, nor the millisecond, but the nanosecond. A nanosecond, my friends, is one billionth of a second, and though it is possible to conceive of a nanosecond, it is impossible to experience one. What this means is that our lives are closely linked to a machine whose internal tempo is beyond the range of human sensibility. As our society has increasingly emphasized computers, the flow of information in our institutions has quickened. Life around us has accelerated and so have we. Jerry Mander of the Public Media Center worries that our children, raised, as it were, in the time-world of the microchip will grow increasingly estranged from the rhythms of the natural order. Says Mander: "Nature barely moves at all in comparison to the computer time world. It takes an extreme degree of calm to perceive things happening in nature and I suspect we may be producing a generation of people too sped up to attune themselves to slower natural rhythms."

Now *leisure*, as Josef Pieper reminds us in his famous title, is the basis of culture. And since one of the chief functions of the college is to nurture culture, colleges should be places where the rigors of study are balanced by a general atmosphere of leisure. Ideally colleges ought to be places where stress is low, and where students learn to creatively resist the inhuman pace at which our world sometimes runs. But each semester I am dismayed to hear students complaining of stress and tension. By late in the semester, professors too begin to join the legions of the burnt-out. I see the problem yet also admit to contributing to it. If one of the implicit lessons students have learned here is that life is a mad dash, a frenzied paper chase, then we have, in this instance, failed them, and I, for one, apologize. Unfortunately, there seems little hope for change on the macrolevel. Col-

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Sister M. Aquinas Nimtz congratulates Guilio Polldori

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leges, after all, are not islands; they are organs in the larger body of society and are unfortunately not immune to its diseases. If a solution there be to this problem, it will come, it seems to me, in an individual's wise husbanding of his or her own spiritual resources, something about which I will say more in a moment.

Noise

But first a few thoughts on noise, or what some call information.

Look at it this way. The brain our skulls house has remained relatively unchanged for about four and a half million years. For most of that time, let's say up until a mere 75,000 years ago, our gray matter probably handled only a few words a day. Today, however, tens of thousands of words daily pulse through our beleaguered brains, accompanied by a massive amount of other auditory and visual stimuli. Our culture seems to have declared war on silence. Disc jockeys fill the dead air they abhor with incessant chatter and talk show hosts keep it coming. Morning and evening, and, I fear, in the afternoons too, we pin our frontal lobes to the T.V. screen, laying our nervous systems open to stimulation they don't need and information which is, despite counterclaims, largely irrelevant. Sometimes, it seems, noise fills every corner into which silence might creep. It has been estimated that at the end of the Middle Ages, some 800 years ago, it took the average human brain six weeks to encounter the stimuli we routinely encounter in a single day.

The brain, we know, is a network of delicate structures for transmitting electrical pulses. In every moment of the audiovisual orgy of our highly informed days, the brain handles a massive amount of electrical traffic. No wonder we feel burnt. Our nervous systems are, no doubt, remarkably resilient, but one wonders if they are really prepared to digest the sustained overload of information we have gotten accustomed to feeding them daily. No wonder that millions of us come home each evening eager for the potion that will perform a gentle euthanasia on our jangled nerves.

Technological comforts are great until we understand that some produce toxic waste. Superabundant information is grand

until we understand that it can rob us of the peace that is our spiritual birthright. We have only recently realized our need to develop an ecological relationship with the natural world. Perhaps we must also realize our need for inner ecology, an ecology of mind.

Pilgrims of Eternity

I stand before you today as a student of religion, not of this religion or that religion, but rather of religion as a universal human phenomenon. Only in the last hundred years or so has the world gotten small enough and scholarship comprehensive enough for us to glimpse the full range of our spiritual history. It is now possible to begin to speak of a planetary religious heritage, a heritage of vision belonging to no particular culture or time, but to our species and its strivings as a whole.

For many, of course, religion is irrelevant—or worse. The history of religion on this planet appears more odious than glorious, its record replete with examples of inhumanity, persecutory delirium and bloody slaughter. We could spend all morning chronicling its sins. But if religion brings out the worst in us, it is, paradoxically, also capable of bringing out the best. Who among us can deny that amid all the muck there is something that shines like a jewel, something that enables human beings to climb out of the caves of their own petty selfishness and into the radiance of real love, so much so that the best among them beam to us undimmed across the centuries like emissaries of a light still ahead.

I don't doubt for a minute that God is a linguist, but his native tongue, I think, is silence.

What does our spiritual heritage offer us in the face of problems like time and noise?

The basic idea of the great religions, is that the meaning of the world is not contained simply in itself, or in humanity, but in an absolute Reality, or spiritual Presence, often though not always called God, and that human life discovers its full significance in relation to and harmony with this Presence. Religion, as Alfred North Whitehead has said, is "a vision, of something that stands beyond, behind and within the passing flux of immediate things; . . . something that gives meaning to all that passes . . ." That something is the one Permanence within our ever-perishing lives, the mysterious power that gives birth to our timeless and universal yearning for the Beautiful and the True.

Religion and its cousin, philosophy, thus open us to the cosmic view, inviting us to find our place within the scheme of things entire. The Big Picture they present ushers us from the heated rush of the everyday into the cool refreshment of a view over all time and being, reminding us that we are not only travellers through time but pilgrims of eternity. Eternity! Blessed balm for the infection of the nanosecond. "Haste



David Eiduson and Margaret Downey

is of the devil," says an old Muslim proverb, "slowness is of God." If we want leisure to abide in our lives, if we want it to amount to more than moments stolen from time, we must see time itself against the backdrop of eternity's expanse. Leisure is the basis of culture, but the true basis of leisure is the spiritual life.

Now there are many today who speak of the spiritual life as if there were but a single version. They commit what philosophers call a category mistake, attributing to their own specific creeds an absoluteness that belongs only to God. Human beings seem obsessed with squeezing God into containers, then worshiping those containers, and consigning everyone who can't or won't to the outer darkness. But God can no more be caught in a creed than a fresh breeze can be sealed in a box. Grace flows through innumerable channels and that is precisely why it is called amazing. Absolutist creeds are, in the last analysis, but another form of idolatry. Yet let us not make the mistake of vilifying those who hold them. When authentic spiritual joy floods their hearts, as I've no doubt it does, religious enthusiasts naturally assume that something so wondrous could not possibly happen in any other way than it has happened to them. It is an easy and understandable mistake. Fundamentalism is thus born not in any meanness of heart, but only in a certain underexposure of the imagination.

Silence

If the spiritual life offers respite from the ravages of time, it also offers sanctuary from the onslaught of noise. Treading a spiritual path requires familiarity with the language of the realm. Some, of course, will say that God speaks Hebrew and Aramaic; many others will insist that He speaks Arabic; and still others will swear

that God chants in Sanskrit. I don't doubt for a minute that God is a linguist, but his native tongue, I think, is silence. "Be still," says the psalmist, "and know that I am God."

Sometimes one hears people speak of trying to find God—as if God could get lost! It is more likely that we need to find ourselves, but can't, because the din of our daily doings has spread us thinly across the surface of our lives. Our attention is in shards; Humpty Dumpty's problem is ours: how to re-collect our scattered selves. Our spiritual traditions have affirmed as if with a single voice that the royal road to recollection is silence.

Humpty Dumpty's problem is ours: how to re-collect our scattered selves.

In ages less noisy than our own, these traditions began creating spaces in which human beings could retreat from the buzz and holler of the marketplace. In so doing they were following the leads of their founders: of Mohammad who retreated to a mountain cave, of Jesus who took to the desert and of the Buddha who sought the silent grove. Traditions like those of the Native Americans which never had to confront the clang of urban civilization felt no need to enshrine silence in brick or stone. For these peoples found silence in the virgin wilderness which surrounded them and into which they retreated alone in quest of vision.

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Claudine Naganuma (L) and Cynthia O'Rourke
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More important, perhaps than, the architecture of silence is its psychology. I am referring to our rich inheritance of practices for cultivating inner silence. Various—called prayer, meditation, and contemplation, these spiritual strategies have as a common aim the stilling of our restless minds so that we may remember who we are, so that latent capacities of wisdom might arise, so that hidden resources of compassion might be tapped. These practices are a special part of our planetary spiritual heritage, for they not only testify universally to the salutary effects of silence on our inner ecology of man, but also contribute richly to the development of a science of the inner life which is yet in its childhood. Taken together, they are harbingers of our possible spiritual evolution.

Perhaps one of the most important skills one can take into the world today is that of knowing how to make room for silence and how to enter it. For there we find rest from both outer and inner noise long enough to rediscover our natural gratitude for the sheer fact of being. "Silent music," said John of the Cross, "sounding solitude, the supper that refreshes and deepens love."

*There are livings to
make, children to
love . . .*

Forgiveness

What I have said here today will not keep us from plunging busily ahead with our projects come tomorrow morning. And this is as it should be. There are livings to make, children to love, further education to begin, justice, peace and ecological sanity to fight for. If I have spoken of eternity and silence, it was not to ignore these pressing duties but only to invoke a need for balance in their pursuit. But there is a final reason I have chosen these topics this morning. It is because I believe that from such things as eternal perspectives and quiet hearts there comes a quality without which a truly human, human life is hard to live. That quality is forgiveness.

Commencement is indeed a beginning but it is also an end, an end, among many other things, of a year of hard work by students, by administrators, by staff and by instructors. In an atmosphere of such intense activity, it is inevitable that we hurt one another. Hurt is unavoidable, but our reaction to it is not. Unfortunately, we often choose to hold our hurt, to brew poison resentment in our hearts. But the poison petrifies the pot. The hard heart becomes its own hell, and, unable to forgive, it projects its bitterness into the world around it.

The thought of eternity, however, softens the heart. Who can remain steadfastly sour when they hear the story of the Emperor who sent messengers to all corners of his enormous Kingdom to find the wisest man alive? When he was found and summoned to the royal court, the Emperor beseeched him to compress into a single sentence the vastness of his wisdom. Un-



Credentialist Nancy Weninger, Dr. Barry Kaufman, Dr. Mary Crosby

Education Department Creates Tradition

The Education Department of Dominican College initiated a new tradition on Sunday, June 4, with its own version of a commencement ceremony. The event honored fifty students who have successfully completed studies in preparation for elementary and secondary teaching credentials. All have been recommended by Dominican College to the State Commission on Teacher Credentialing.

Because the students must receive this official recognition from the State of California, rather than from Dominican College, they do not participate in the traditional Dominican commencement ceremony and do not receive diplomas.

"So we're creating our own tradition," said Dr. Barry Kaufman, Chairman of the Education Department. "Many of our students have asked for a special ceremony which would recognize their achievements."

Approximately 250 people, friends and families attended the ceremony in Angelico Hall and saw the future teachers receive special certificates. The group also heard an address by Herb Kohl, prominent educator and nationally known author of several books on education.

The following education "graduates" received certificates:

Jill Abram, Diane Allen, David Ariola, Lynn (Joyce) Banks, Cora Baron, Jeff Brant, Susan Bridges, Tom Brockbank, Carol Burns, Kay Camozzi, Anna Marie Con inón.

Julie Derby, Jill Kickerson, Catherine Dixon, Kristen Elliott, Corinna Fisher, Kathy Fischer, Carolyn Hoy, Ann Marie Hughes, Kathleen Kahl, Mary Keñnee, Katharine Klevinskas, Claudia Leithe, Ann Marie Lillenstól.

*. . . students have
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Cecilia McNeil, Mimi Melodia, Laura Mentjox, Pauline Nacmuli, Caren Nelson, Jens Oetiker, Tim Parsons, Elyse Pasha, Sally Pennypacker, Madelene Potter, Marilyn Pozas, Timothy Quinn.

Amy Richmond, Cathy Serpa, Mary Sheeline, Robert Soper, Joe Story, Gail Stoltz, Christina Stroeh, Elizabeth Tarr, Deborah Thompson, Marie Tomlinson, Keith Warren, Margo Weksler, Nancy Weninger, Periann Wood.

fazed by the challenge, the wise man spoke four words: "this too shall pass."

And who can remain chronically cranky in the face of the Buddha's reminder: "There are many," he said "who forget that death will come to all; for those who remember, quarrels soon cease." "Look upon the world with forgiving eyes," says the Course in Miracles, "for forgiveness literally transforms vision and lets you see the real world." This message is contained in many of our spiritual traditions but nowhere more conspicuously than in Christianity, which, so far as I can tell, has made forgiveness its central teaching. Christian theologian Reinhold Niebuhr once called forgiveness the final form of love.

On this auspicious day, then, let us forgive others, and as we do so, let us not forget to forgive ourselves. Some say that human beings are beset with self-love, but the older I grow the more I think that the bigger problem is self-contempt. So, let us forgive ourselves and then rejoice with the poet Yeats who sang:

(I) Measure the lot;
(and I) forgive myself the lot!
When such as I cast our remorse
So great a sweetness flows into the breast
We must laugh and we must sing,
We are blest by everything,
Everything we look upon is blest.

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*" . . . forgiveness
literally transforms
vision and lets you see
the real world."*
