

The Uncommon Good
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President Zaki, Dean Scanlon, esteemed colleagues, proud family and friends, and, above all, you, the students whom we honor here tonight:

It is *my* great honor to be a part of this evening's festivities in recognition all of your remarkable achievements from the past year—which, for many of you, represents a worthy culmination of the past four years. You have so much to be proud of.

And yet, as I stand before you now, I can't help but be reminded of the immense privilege we share in partaking in this joyous ceremony while the world out there, by all metrics, hangs in the balance. Out there, old ghosts continue to haunt us, while new terrors emerge on the horizon every day.

Under the circumstances, it would be easy to *not* celebrate. The South Korean author Han Kang, whose works bear witness to the quiet triumphs of human dignity and resilience in the face of systemic violence, did not celebrate when she won the 2024 Nobel Prize in Literature, on account of the atrocities being perpetrated in Ukraine and Gaza—and this, despite being the first in that small nation's history to have been given this most prestigious honor; and this, despite overcoming the deep-seated misogyny festering within Korea's own, highly patriarchal literary establishment; and this, despite the insistence of her own father, who, as any proud parent would want for their special child, just wanted to throw her a party. Han Kang chose not to celebrate.

What, then, of us? Why do we celebrate when others do not, when others cannot? Writing in early years of the Second World War, the British literary theorist and critic I. A. Richards put such concerns in starkly Neronian terms: “Are we fiddling in the burning city?” he asked, and “Could our fiddling really make any future city less inflammable?” Are we, in the more familiar idiom of the Internet, that little cartoon dog with the googly eyes and the little hat, oblivious to the raging flames engulfing his house, saying to ourselves, “This is fine”?

I will say right now that I will not be offering any good answers to these questions. But, I am a scholar of comparative literature whose entire discipline has been driven by the “*indiscipline*” of asking impossible questions and offering perhaps even more impossible answers. So, I consider it a matter of professional responsibility (or irresponsibility) to risk the felicity of this occasion to dwell briefly on the problem at hand in the time I have this evening. To those of you who are eager to get the celebrations underway, I am sorry: Bolos will have to wait.

Questions of timeliness often serve as screens for questions of perceived value. In Richards's case, his questions were really about the perceived value of education—and more specifically, about the study of literature and language: do they “have any effects commensurate with the needs of the world?” he wondered.

For Richards, this was not a rhetorical question; his answer was a resounding yes. Earlier in his career, against the pervasive mood of disillusionment that had descended on society in the wake of the First World War, Richards had found a reason for hope in poetry. It served a special social

and psychological purpose: to read a poem meant feeling the imprint of another mind on your own, through which you came to understand “how life seems to another” and by affording you a chance to “try how [another’s] attitudes suit us.” As a transformative exercise in empathy, poetry was thus “capable of saving us.”

While the jury is still out on whether poetry can indeed be our salvation, we have much more confidence these days in the good that reading can do more generally. This was part of Richards’s immense legacy, which began with his experiments in what he called “*Practical Criticism*.” From these, he pioneered the idea that reading could be a teachable skill or technique. This is why “close reading” has become a staple in literature classes today—including my own.

And so, if reading is to be our deliverance, perhaps it can also lead us out of the untimely meditation we find ourselves in right now: our entire evening is on the line.

Looming behind this question, of course, is the lofty ideal of the common good, which asks us to always keep sight of the world around us. Yet when we examine more closely the primal scene of the common good in Joseph McKeen’s inaugural 1802 address, we can begin to appreciate the redemptive potential of its modesty and equanimity of its ambition.

His speech makes clear that the expectation for the student was never one of quantifiable impact: McKeen is careful to emphasize that the kind of intellectual, physical, and moral cultivation students that are to undergo at Bowdoin are preparatory: your education, he says, is not meant for you to *be* useful so much as it is for you to “*qualify* [yourself] for usefulness.”

What, then, does this process of qualifying yourself for usefulness entail? For McKeen, the key lay not in the anticipation of one day just applying the knowledge you gain—that is, as a purely transitive activity. Rather, it lay in the embrace of learning as a certain kind of *labor*, as an *intransitive* activity directed inward toward self-expansion. To this end, he warns us against the “impatience of application, and an aversion to every thing that requires labor” that an instrumentalist approach to learning would otherwise encourage. Education forgoes “optimizations” and “efficiencies” in favor of the slow struggle that emerges out of “an attention to order” and “habits of industry and investigation.”

More than a century before digital technologies began selling us on the idea of making learning as smooth and as seamless and as efficient as possible, Natsume Sōseki, who is often hailed as Japan’s greatest novelist, speculated that modern civilization was the product of two opposing but entangled forces of human motivation: one force that sought the aid of technology to minimize the time and effort we spent doing work we were otherwise loathe to do; and another force that sought to maximize the time of our immersion in the activities that we loved to do, which extended from our hobbies to the high arts of literature, science, and philosophy. My esteemed colleagues are surely aware of the unfortunate reality that some dread these noble pursuits enough to outsource them to the machine. But, Sōseki noticed that no matter how much technology was able to minimize the duration of our suffering, it didn’t seem to make us any happier. In that way, Sōseki and McKeen seem to be saying the same thing—that it is not the labor that is the problem.

But to the extent that it might be, labor is nevertheless our best training ground for meaning. In the agony of the writer, there opens up the capacity for care and the qualification of oneself for a usefulness to come. If we listen carefully, we might hear its echoes in Kafka's writing journal:

January 20: The end of writing. When will it take me up again?

January 29: Again tried to write, virtually useless.

February 7: Complete standstill. Unending torments.

It is only by way of the caustic friction between the intimidating blankness of the page in front of us and the terrifying blankness of our minds that the sparks of our thinking, our imagination, and our learning can ignite into beacons of meaning for ourselves and for others as we navigate the murk. State of the art machines can provide us with startling images of the brain; but writing remains the best (or perhaps most honest) image we have of the mind. To rely on tools and technologies that remove the friction—and the anguish—of writing is worse than throwing a digital filter on a selfie; it is a betrayal of that fundamental tenet of Western philosophy that says, “Know thyself.”

Perhaps it is also fitting, then, that McKeen's prime example of this kind of intellectual labor is none other than the study of what he calls “the learned languages.” In our contemporary age of global English, such languages might as well extend beyond Greek and Latin to encompass the modern languages—Spanish, Arabic, French, German, Italian, Russian, Chinese, and Japanese. As some of you know, the virtuous struggle of language learning at Bowdoin begins with having to wake up every day at the crack of dawn to make it to your 8am class. But for McKeen, the “advantage” that language learning offers is not the one “Offered” by the College—that is, “To be at home in all lands.” Rather, its advantage is precisely in the noble spirit of intransitive usefulness that embiggens the smallest man, which he says, “*inur[es]* a youthful mind to application, *even if* no advantage arose from the knowledge of them.” The study of a foreign language distills the paradoxical essence of a liberal arts education: its usefulness lies precisely in the student coming to understand *how* to apply knowledge properly *without* the attending guarantee of its usefulness or success.

What you have done here—and what is worth celebrating—is how you have immersed yourself in the kind of laborious learning that McKeen originally envisioned for Bowdoin. Your coursework, papers, independent research projects, and works of art and performance are proof of this. In that sense, yours might not rise to the status of a “common” usefulness, but neither has it been solely for your own private advantage. For the good that you have done here has nevertheless meant something to a smaller, more exclusive circle of professors, instructors, advisors, collaborators, and readers: yours is the good that celebrates both the legitimacy *and* mutual illegibility of projects like “Examining the Singlet vs. Triplet State Reactivities of Bromonaphthol Isomers” or “The Shifting Rural Identity under China's Hukou System.”

How could we describe such forms of the good as anything but *uncommon*? A good that at once embodies the extraordinariness of your minds and, at the same time, the untimeliness of their potential application. By knowing the uncommon good, you have come to know the profound truth that it has never been about the usefulness but about qualifying yourself for the greater

common good that is to come. So that you might major in Africana Studies—and one day become the mayor of New York City.

And that, to me, is reason enough to celebrate.

Thank you, and congratulations.