

CHAPTER 3

Education as Sabbath

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I have a text. I am in good company to do that because most universities have a text, found most often in the school's emblem and symbol. It often surprises people to learn that even the great public universities often have biblical texts. For example, the symbol of the University of California has the Bible right in the middle of the university crest! Then, around it are the words, "Let there be light." That is right out of Genesis! The University of California even has a hymn, "O God, Our Help in Ages Past." Or another example is, "Ye shall know the truth and the truth shall set you free," the motto of Columbia University's emblem.

Therefore, it is only appropriate to have a text as we think about Christian higher education. However, one might be a little surprised with this text. It is an Old Testament text about me, about man/woman, my relationship with the earth, my relationship with God, and my relationship with myself. And certainly that is what the university is all about. Without question that is what a church-related, Christian college or university should be about: my relationship with God, my relationship with the earth, my relationship with myself, and my relationship with my neighbor. There are four great relationships in this text.

Because this text has been difficult to interpret in its journey through the Old and New Testaments, it might surprise you. It happens to be the Fourth Commandment. I call this "a Commandment for the Christian University."

Observe the Sabbath day by keeping it holy, as the LORD your God has commanded you. Six days you shall labor and do all

they took from their college education a sense of rhythm, balance, boundary and equilibrium. It would serve them their whole life!

At the heart this commandment are three mandates for church-related higher education. The first mandate has to do with the first part of the commandment: "Six days thou shalt labor." The first task of a Christian university — of any university — is the work task. The work is to help men and women become prepared for a lifetime of work. The university is where they begin to discern the contribution they can make and where they are equipped to do it.

You have to feel good about your head, and you have to feel good about your hands if you work. And a college or university has an unforgettable, nonnegotiable mandate to help a man or woman find work. In other words, the first task of a first-class liberal arts university is to train people to think clearly, to use their brains, to express and write down what they think, i.e., be able to do something well with their hands, minds and hearts.

I love C.S. Lewis' wonderful little book, *Experiment in Criticism*,³ which is probably the best book about a liberal arts education ever written. He wrote it just a year before he died. It's not a religious book. It is a book about how to read a book.

In it he draws a distinction between two kinds of people : the serious man who plays football and the serious football player. The serious football player plays football not so much for the calories it will burn and not so much for exercise, but for the love of the sport. "I *want* to play football." That is a serious football player. On the other hand, the serious man or woman plays football in order to get exercise, in order to use up calories, or for some reason other than the joy of the sport itself.

Lewis takes this little parable and relates it to being a literate person. A serious reader is a person who has been brought into and under a book, reads a book, lets the story flow over him/her, engages the story and the book, and becomes genuinely literate, reading books because he/she loves them and the ideas within them. That is what a liberal arts education does. It gives you a love of books, letters and ideas, so that you will know how to

think clearly, write clearly and speak clearly. As a result, others will understand what you believe, think and how you live.

Therefore the university's task is to help you put it all together and integrate it with your hands and feet so that you can do something with it. So for six days of each week you are doing something that you can do, that you want to do, and that makes a contribution to our world.

Several years ago Stephen Hawking spoke on astrophysics at the University of California. Four lecture halls were filled with listeners. This professor, the Sir Isaac Newton Professor of Theoretical Physics at Cambridge University, will probably someday win the Nobel Prize for Physics by creating a unified theory which pulls all of physics together.⁴

The story of Stephen Hawking's life is a very interesting one. He contracted ALS, a muscle disease, in the middle of his adult life, and it progressively weakened him to the point that he now cannot speak. He has to type out his words, and a synthesizer voice speaks for him. When he was a younger man, he was not physically impaired in any way. He attended Oxford University and quickly became bored. Hawking tells the story of how in that boredom he became addicted to alcohol, drinking heavily every day and losing all interest in school. He began to fail in his grades and in his schoolwork. In fact, when he took exams, he would mock professors by creating questions they couldn't answer to go alongside the questions they were creating for him. His mind was absolutely brilliant, but he was bored.⁵

Hawking, whose life was beginning to fall apart and literally spin out of control because of alcohol and boredom at Oxford, was turned around by one professor. As the story is told, this professor called him into his office, realizing that Hawking had no direction and was not being challenged.

"Hawking, I have a project I want you to do," the professor started. "I want you to solve for me black holes."

"Black holes?" Hawking replied.

"You could be the one, now go to it," the professor concluded.

Stephen Hawking has committed the rest of his life to trying to solve black holes.⁶

Hawking's book *A Brief History of Time* is stunning. I still do not have the slightest idea what the chapter on black holes means, but I have read it three times! It is known as the book that has made physics accessible, a physics user-friendly book. Hawking tries to explain his unified theory and black holes. It is his passion and consuming desire.

But you I now something, that young mind was about ready to be a wasted mind until a first-rate professor had a first-rate idea. He gave that young mind a challenge of a work to do that was just so big that from that moment on it so captivated Hawking that he was never bored another day.

Soon after, he contracted ALS, but still it did not stop his dedication. Colleges, universities and professors should be about the business of helping students to find a problem and identify a "work" that can capture their life's energy.

The second mandate, antiphonal to labor, is to help one find rest. If there's a straining at the boundaries, a need to know, a need to learn and a need to do, then the flipside of the fourth commandment is one of peace and rest. It was Saint Augustine who fully understood this when he ended his great confession by saying, "O God, Thou Who art ever at work and ever at rest, may I be ever at work and ever at rest." There is an antiphonal balance in the fourth commandment. This must never be trivialized by little tricky hoops about what constitutes work and what constitutes rest. That is where previous generations of Christians, like the Pharisees, have often gone wrong. In every week we need a rhythm of work and rest.

A great university needs rhythm. If one side of the rhythm is the intensity of giving oneself to work ... the other side is learning how to rest. It's the friendship building. It's the relaxed, *sheer fun* side of the rhythmic balance present in every great school.

Every school should not only be a hard, salty, tough workplace; it should also be fun. Students are going to like this part, and I hope faculty and staff do too. Because today one of the great tasks of a great university is to help young men and women find friends, friends that will last the rest of their

lives. People who they can settle down with in a friendship where they don't have to play any games. Unlike T.S. Eliot's line, "to put on a face to meet the face that you meet."⁷ You can be at peace with these friends, and there can be a kind of peace and gentleness in your soul. And here's a place where you find and reveal the real you. I know many faculty also in need of this. In fact so do administrators, staff, trustees. We all need it.

There's an intense loneliness in our culture. In fact, there are many kinds of loneliness. There is a loneliness because of discontentedness, a lack of a sense of being part of something bigger than one's self. That is part of what institutions can provide. Even the technology of communication can make us lonely! Do you realize one can live a whole week, and because of voice mail never have one conversation with a living human being at the other end of the phone? Do you get the message?

My wife got a message on voice mail from a friend the other day. Her friend said, "Now Shirley, you and Earl are going to come over to dinner and I'm going to make the steaks. You bring the salads. No, no, no, no, don't, don't do that. No, you bring the desserts, I'll take care of the salads. Well, no, that is not right. You and Earl are going out afterward to another meeting where they're going to have dessert, so, hey, cancel that. Don't bring dessert. Just bring salad. We won't have the dessert at all. Is that OK? 'That should be fine.'" It was like a conversation! She just made up a conversation with the voice mail! Technology can lead us to a certain kind of loneliness.

Peaceableness with friends is a key ingredient to discovering what it means to be at rest. That is why I favor students settling into a college, spending four years there if at all possible, and not living at home. (I realize that because these are ideals, sometimes finances, family or other circumstances may prohibit.) Most of us do not make lifelong friends in weeks; friendship takes time and energy.

Great colleges and universities care about the kind of settings where friends can be discovered, nurtured and built. This requires reasonable workloads. Faculty are wrong to think that academics is all that education

is about. Colleges need to have the kind of housing that encourages real friendship building, and loads of on-campus jobs that enable students to work, study and play together. A great university will create the kind of atmosphere where you can fraternize, where you can sit around and exchange ideas, test out personal goals, reflect on what is being learned. These can be important ingredients in an institution hoping to create an environment where people's lives are impacted and changed.

The third mandate of a great university is to help students remember. The command in the fourth commandment, the big command, is "you shall remember!" Remember, God made the earth well and God redeemed us. Creation and redemption.

It is no small challenge to suggest that institutions be Christian without apology. Don't be a college with just a dose of religiosity thrown in. Too many church-related schools act as if religion is just one more phenomena to be studied. Don't do that. Don't just be a cafeteria of ideas. It is far better to have professors who feel keenly and intensely about ideas, even ideas which produce tension, than to act as if all ideas have equal merit. One can do so much of one's ideological, theological and spiritual formation in an atmosphere where one really has to think through ideas while being related to honestly and allowed to struggle with the great ideas of human history.

But, do you have convictions? Is that text at the heart of the institution's emblem? Christian colleges should have convictions and honestly affirm them. Affirm them with respect for young men, women and colleagues inside and outside the university. We're in a pluralistic society. In a pluralistic society, the only kind of tolerance for other people that really matters is a tolerance that comes from a person who has convictions.

When you have convictions and a mission you believe in, and you seek to adhere faithfully to that mission, then you can be tolerant and respectful of people with whom you don't agree. That is a tolerance that means something. Not tolerance that says, "Hey, you just do your thing; I'm doing mine ... nothing really matters that much after all, does it?" That kind of vapid

relativism is not a tolerance of any substance. We need people who have strong convictions. We need institutions where there is a commitment to share at the center ... to work from a shared purpose. Christian colleges must not assume that the students from churches have any sense of our great Christian heritage. We must seek to share that heritage, to acquaint them with the great history of our faith and to remember God's faithfulness throughout the generations.

About four years ago, our family had a tremendous lifelong dream fulfilled. We took a trip across Russia on the Trans-Siberian Railroad. When we got to Leningrad the big thing that I wanted my family to see was the Hermitage Museum — the greatest museum in the whole world — a thousand-room palace that Katherine the Great had built. There are more Rembrandts in the Hermitage than any other museum in the world. Everything is there ... Renoir, Monet, El Greco ... many of the world's greatest works of art.

So we went to this museum. We had a little guide who was very militant. Our family was her only group ... just our five. Still, she held up a card to show where we were going! She whipped us into shape and gave us lectures on all of the art. It was wonderful! She knew everything! She showed us these different paintings and commented on this and that. It was an education because she had been a guide for eight years and knew every single painting. She saved the Rembrandt Room for last, and I was glad because Rembrandt is my hero.

We looked at the paintings as she explained them. She was proudest of the Rembrandt collection, especially the great Rembrandt painting titled, "Return of the Prodigal," which was found in his room at his death. She showed the hands of the father, pointing out that art critics around the world would probably call this the greatest portrayal of hands in all of art ... the father's hands on the shoulders of the boy. The hands were liberating hands, not gripping or clutching hands. Absolutely marvelous! Then we saw this strange unfinished figure standing to the side, gripping a staff. Though we are not sure, it was most likely the elder brother.

Then she said, “Notice the blind father as he blesses his son.”

I said, “*What?*”

She said, “Well, notice the blind father as he blesses his son, because you see the painting is the father down here blessing the boy.”

So I said to her, “No, that’s not right.” Now this took a lot of courage! It took a lot of courage in my blood because, to remind you, she “knew” these paintings. But I said, “No, no, that’s not right.”

Then I dared to recite to her the parable of the prodigal son, the basis of this painting. Knowing that Rembrandt was a great biblical expositor in his paintings, I said, “This is the parable of the prodigal son.” I told her the parable ... how the boy went away and then the boy came back. While the lad was a long way away, the father saw him, and had compassion on him (I said this very slowly to her) and he ran to the boy and embraced him. In fact, the good eyesight of the father is very critical to this parable, because if the elder brother had seen the boy first, he’d have never made it home! That’s the whole point. The father’s eyesight is so good, he sees the boy a long way off. We later discover the elder brother doesn’t think anything of this younger brother.

The father goes out into the dark to find the elder son hiding in the darkness sulking with self-righteousness — self-righteousness puts you in darkness, too. When he finds him he says, “Son, all that I have is yours, and you will always be with me. But this is right that we have this party, because your brother was dead and now he is alive.” What an amazing parable!

I told it to her, and then she said, “Oh.” She did not argue with me. She said, “Oh,” and that was all.

My children, two college students and one high school student, and I talked about this guide. Her English was flawless, and she was brilliant, and her specialty was American student groups. I imagined that if she took one tour a day for these eight years and American student groups were her main group, and she always saved the Rembrandt Room for last because she held the most pride in the Rembrandts ... then probably for eight years

... every day to a group of students ... she said, "Now look at the blind father as he blesses his son." For at least eight years she got it wrong to hundreds of people.

She didn't know the parable of the prodigal son. She probably got it mixed up with another account in the Old Testament of a father who was tricked by his son into blessing him. Can you see what a tragedy it is that for eight years these students have been coming, and she has been saying, "Look at the blind father as he blesses his son." Evidently no one has countered her. And then we figured out why. Do you know why? *Because no one in those groups of students apparently knew the difference! They didn't know!* Allen Bloom says so in his *Closing of the American Mind*. "American students don't enjoy the art galleries of Europe because you have to know *the Bible* to know the art galleries of Europe!"⁸

They didn't know. And because they didn't know, they missed the most incredible truth about the gospel of Jesus Christ, that *God* has good eyesight. He isn't tricked into blessing us. He knows all about us. He knows about a boy who's hurting and wandering out there, wondering if he's worth anything. And then he's found and is blessed. He knows about a sulking, self-righteous boy, and He finds him. That's the Father that Jesus is describing.

What a tragedy for students and others who mix up the parable of the prodigal son with the Old Testament story of the blind father Isaac and his sons Jacob and Esau. What else did they miss in their education because they didn't know the basic stories of faith?

We have a task at a Christian university to teach people the truth about God's redemption and God's creation ... the goodness of creation. It is a tremendous challenge to teach about the earth and to teach it accurately. There are no advantages to ignorance. At a Christian university one should hear about God's love so that we can remember it and know it. It certainly will not be a part of the educational experience at "State University" even if they do still have the Bible in their emblem or motto!

I recently read a review of a book by a Yale ethicist, who took 25 stu-

dents into a room. (They were all college freshmen at this Ivy League university.) He asked them one question: “Can you construct for me the Ten Commandments?” These 25 students (you can imagine what their SAT scores are) could not reconstruct the Ten Commandments. They simply didn’t know them.

He was pointing this out as an example of why there is a kind of ethical vacuum in our culture. It is because no one knows these things anymore. We don’t remember them. I believe one of the great mandates of a church-related university is to help us remember the truth which is at the foundation of every unique institution.

Perhaps the best way to communicate the point I am making is in a poem I wrote for our youngest daughter when she went away to college. It is called “Remembering.” I offer it as a kind of statement on what higher learning should be.

Remembering my friends, who I loved in the simpler times
of youth, will help me be a friend;

Remembering the songs and the shows that they go with
(my daughter loved musicals) makes new songs easier to learn;

Remembering my home as the place always for me makes
me more at home when I’m away;

Remembering my name and the dreams I made my own
gives me strength when people wonder who I am;

Remembering the love that found me before I could
remember keeps life alive while I am remembering.

A considerable challenge and a substantial mandate is before those colleges and universities that aspire to true greatness. Those institutions that help us learn to work, rest and remember will be recognized as places that have an eternal impact on people’s lives. Let those who have ears, hear.

ENDNOTES

1. Holy Bible, *New International Version*, Deuteronomy 5:12-15 (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1984).
2. Edward Mendelson, ed., *Collected Poems of W.H. Auden* (New York: Vintage International, Vintage Books, 1991).
3. C.S. Lewis, *Experiment in Criticism* (Cambridge [England]: University Press, 1961).
4. Vicki Braden, prod. "Stephen Hawking: The Universe Within" (Burlington, NC: Cardin Biological Supply Co. videorecording, 1989).
5. Ibid.
6. S.W. Hawking, *A Brief History of Time* (Toronto/New York: Bantam, 1988).
7. J.L. Dawson, ed., *The Complete Poems and Plays of T.S. Eliot* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1995).
8. Alan Bloom, *The Closing of the American Mind* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1987).