

## SENIOR SYNTHESIS: UNDERSTANDING SEEKING FAITH

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I come to this Baccalaureate Mass with great joy. I've decided that I would like to put this homily in the form of a "Senior Synthesis", my own way of summing up, putting it all together, looking at the whole of an undergraduate or graduate education at Seattle U and trying to say what it all really means. Most of you have been asked to do your Senior Synthesis as you move toward completing your education with us. I've seen you walking along the mall, final paper in hand, held out carefully, afraid to drop or shake it in case the spell-check reverses itself and all those spelling errors reappear, heading for the office of some fortunate or unfortunate professor to drop it off and be done with it, to leave to him or her to savor, sniff, relish, or rale, grade with glow of satisfaction or grimace. Here's my Senior Synthesis of a Seattle U education. It's in the form of a homily with one digression.

Your education is like the young Samuel we read about a minute ago. He kept being called in his sleep, waking up and going by mistake to the prophet Eli, thinking it was Eli who had called him, till at last the prophet directed him to stay put, and when called, to say "Speak, Lord, for your servant is listening". You are like Samuel. Your education is like that call in the night that wakes you up and asks you to listen to someone, someone other than your professor.

Then you are like Peter, sitting in a boat in shallow water, listening to Jesus of Nazareth teaching the crowds on the shore, till he directs you to put out into deep waters and to let down your net for a catch. Your sitting and watching in your own boat as Peter did is what you have been doing in these years, but like Samuel, you—Peter—are directed to go to deep waters and to find what is in them for you. Your education, the whole of it, and particularly your major, is an invitation, a call, a pointing toward something more. In this "more" is the synthesis of it all.

Let me explain. The classical purpose of what our kind of university and universities like ours going back a thousand years is expressed in the phrase "fides quaerens intellectum", "faith seeking understanding". That's Anselm of Canterbury from the 11<sup>th</sup> Century. That was on the mark, what a university education was all about, persons of faith seeking an understanding of their faith. It was on the mark, that is, for Anselm, and the Middle Ages and a culture steeped in faith. It does not work for today in our secular culture, with the scientific revolution and the Enlightenment and our knowledge-based society, nor for who most of you are as students and what you are seeking. Anselm's classical phrase needs to be turned right around to be "intellectus quaerens fidem", "Understanding seeking faith". That, I believe, should be the title of your Seattle U education and your Senior Synthesis: "Understanding Seeking Faith".

My contention is that each of you in your own proper major or area of study, where you have spent the majority of your time simply because it most appeals to or calls you, have been directed by the understanding of your subject itself to something more, something beyond the edges of your major, some deeper water, some staying put as you are awakened by what you have learned to say "Speak, Lord, for your servant is listening". Your understanding itself beckons you "Put out to deep water and let down your nets for a catch". Your whole education, your understanding, is like a prophet directing you to listen not to it, but to what it points to but cannot itself explain. This something more, this deep water, this listening as a servant, is faith. Thus the Senior Synthesis is "Understanding Seeking Faith".

Let me give you some examples of the understanding and the Other to listen to, the deep water of faith:

- Exploring literature points you to the mystery that literature evokes, but cannot say;
- Poetry asks you to listen to the inexpressible;
- Science directs you to sit as a servant and to listen for a Creator;
- Psychology is a boat to fathom the deep water of the sacred integrity of the person;
- Mathematics is a prophet of the beauty of the mind beyond all calculation or formula;
- History asks but cannot answer what is the goodness that keeps humanity together in spite of so much evil and war;
- Education leads to the sense that unless you become like little children you cannot know life;
- Sociology and Social Work suggest a community beyond human construction;
- Nursing leads to silence before suffering and a Healer beyond hospitals;
- Criminal Justice points to the worst criminal as a child crying in the night for a mother who is no more or to a fulfillment of a crazy desire;
- Communication always leads to the edge of the incommunicable;
- International Studies, Business, Law beckon to a human solidarity that is inviolable;
- Philosophy drops the net into the deep waters of life and waits;
- even Theology bumps up against a boundary of understanding and needs to surrender its understanding to a Lord.

Yes, the Senior Synthesis of each of your majors, if you have been true to them and taken them as far as they go, if you stayed in them like boats, stayed put and listened when they've disturbed and awakened you to listen to something more, the truest synthesis of what's really gone on in these years is "intellectus quaerens fidem", "understanding seeking faith". Your education has taken you to the very edges of your minds and invited you to a Mystery beyond which you know is there but cannot understand, because it is beyond knowing.

Getting to this more, this Mystery that is beyond is called faith. You don't do it, but are invited or directed to it. Faith is on the edge of and is the deeper water of what you've been most passionate about. We used to call it the "leap of faith", but that was for a time when God was supposedly the answer to all gaps in our knowledge. Thankfully those gaps have been or quickly are being filled in. The more we know the more we come to true faith, which is not a leap, but an allowing, the heeding a call, an invitation, a responding not to more knowledge but to encounter, meeting, listening to a Lord speaking in the night, or a kneeling waist deep in fish caught from deep waters and saying "go away from me Lord, for I am a sinful man, a sinful woman". The faith that all of your education has led you to is not more knowledge but is a surrender in mystery to an encounter with God who hovers beyond the edges and reach of your mind.

Now the digression. As I was thinking through this Senior Synthesis homily I was hiking up a mountain trail in the Cascades. It's a mistake to let me do that because of what comes to me. A couple of miles up I spotted, nearly stepped, in a huge pile of fresh bear scat. I thought: "This is

like a Seattle U education!” This kind of education of our graduating students doesn’t just prove that God exists as the scat proves that there are such things as bears, for that is easy, and dull, and dry, and means little. 98% of Americans say they believe God exists! No that is not how fresh bear scat on a mountain trail is like a Seattle U education, but rather it shows a bear—that God—is in the vicinity, is close by, is near, walks this terrain, even crosses this path of my education, and leaves a sign of his presence, not the tame belief that God exists, but sign of the wild, untamed-in-mercy God, to be encountered at any moment around the bend where I walk in his woods and on his mountain. This is understanding not only seeking but finding faith. Please don’t try to tell me that it was some other kind of scat: elephant, rhinoceros, gerbil, cat, dog, cow, horse, sheep. You know when you see it! You should know from your education that it is none other than God who is roaming around the vicinity of your knowledge, or more truly that your education has taken you into his territory untamed by knowledge, wild, ready for encounter.

Now, if you want me for a moment to stop being a Jesuit and to be fully honest, then I should tell you one more thing. When I was driving up to the trail head an hour earlier I saw from the security of my car a huge black bear, all glistening black shoulders and haunches, scrambling from the rutted road up into the woods and up the mountain where I’d be walking later and would come upon the scat. So I had extra reason from experience to know it was bear brand. So too in my own life I “saw”, so to speak, but at a safe distance, God at age 17 and once again at age 28. I have not seen since, I don’t need to, I live in God’s wild woods and God is all around, met in everything, untamed in love and mercy and wonder. I hope and am confident that it will too for you if you but allow yourself to surrender to what is beyond the edges of your education, listen to the prophet or to the companion in the boat, so that you may seek, encounter, and be found.

Twelve years ago a great poet, Denise Levertov, received an honorary doctorate at the Seattle U Commencement—as Fr. Gary Smith, who represents faith seeking justice and justice finding faith, will receive at your commencement tomorrow. A poem Levertov wrote at that time says well what I’ve been trying to say in my Senior Synthesis about the more of faith beyond the edges or the field of mind. I don’t know if your profs allowed you to end your Senior Synthesis with a poem, but I shall: “Beyond the field” by Denise Levertov,

The mind’s far edges twitch, sensing  
kinships beyond reach.

Too much unseen, unknown, unknowable,  
assumed missing therefore;

shadings, clues, transitions linking  
rivers of event, imaged, not imaged, a flood

that rushes towards us, through us, away  
beyond us before we wheel to face what seems

a trace of passage, ripple already stilling itself  
in tall grass near the fence of the mind’s field.