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What Will You Name it?

Dordt College Commencement Address, May 9, 2008



by Jeri Schelhaas

Dear graduates of Dordt College, 2008, and your family, friends, professors, staff, administrators, and members of the board of trustees of this college who have worked for these graduates these past four years, or in some cases two, or maybe six, it is my privilege to speak to you this morning.

In the spring of 2008, Jeri Schelhaas retired from 20 years on the Dordt faculty. Her years at Dordt included teaching in the English, Theatre Arts, and Communication departments and directing main stage theater productions. She and husband, David, also a Dordt emiritus professor, are spending their first retirement years, as she says, “figuring out how to retire.”

Forty-one years ago I graduated from Dordt College. At my commencement ceremony a very important man said something very significant. I don't remember his name, and I don't remember a thing he said. I'm well aware that 40, 15, five years, one year from now, the same thing will happen to you. But for the moment, I have the honor of speaking to you one more time.

You know, the next time we hear from many of you, it will be when you write to Sally Jongsma at the *Dordt College Voice* to announce the birth of a child, and you will tell us the child's name. Let me forewarn you that naming a child is a real task. Finding a name that sounds good, fits the child, and means something is difficult to do. Our two daughters' names mean “white wave” and “bitter.” We didn't do so well there. Our daughter Rebecca and her husband Laremy De Vries are expecting a daughter in June. Right now we are all calling her “Junebug” but trust that her parents find something more fitting when she makes her appearance AND that we can pronounce it without too many lessons in Dutch pronunciation.

Naming anything is a real task, one given to us by the Creator. A lot of your education at Dordt has been learning what to name things:

Gnosticism, scholasticism, neo-platonism,
pragmatism, existentialism
Adenosine triphosphate, deoxyribo--nucleic acid
Macaronic text, hocket, hemiola, klangfarber-
melodie
Elliptic curves, modular forms
Respiration, phonation, resonance, articulation
Transcription, translation, and signal
transduction

Periaktoi, ellipsoidal, chiaroscuro
Red herring, slippery slope and straw man
Synecdoche, metonymy, hyperbole, hegemony
Pistic, trophic, kinematic

And that's not even that group of distinctive words that many of you claim you are tired of: Dordt words, Dordt talk, Dordt speak, words that some of you told me not to use in this speech today. But I must say that an institution that doesn't have a language interwoven into its course material is not worth your money. If we talked here the same way the world talks, you could have just as well spent your money somewhere else. "Religious orientation, creational structure, creational development and contemporary response" are important words to help you take your place in God's world.

It's hard to talk about something unless we know what to name it. It's hard to even think about something unless we know its real name. You know the story of Helen Keller, who was unable to speak, hear, or see, after a childhood sickness. But the world was opened to her when she came to understand what's in a word, in a name. In this scene I want to read to you, Annie Sullivan, her teacher, pleads with Helen's father to let her have more time to teach Helen that everything has a name. This scene is from the play *The Miracle Worker*:

"Captain Keller, she has to learn that everything has its name; that words can be her eyes, to everything in the world outside her and inside too. What is she without words? With them she can think, have ideas, be reached. There's not a thought or fact in the world that can't be hers. She has eighteen nouns and three verbs in her fingers now. I need only time to push one of them into her mind. One, and everything under the sun will follow. Oh Helen, reach! I wanted to teach you—everything the earth is full of, everything on it that's ours for a wink and it's gone, and what we are on it, the light we bring to it and leave behind in words; why, you can see five thousand years back in a light of words, everything we feel, think, know—and share, in words, so not a soul is in darkness, or done with, even in the grave. And I know, I know, one word and I can put the world into your hand."

The rest of the story, you may know, is that Annie Sullivan does succeed in getting into Helen's head the awareness that the water she felt coming out of the pump was represented by the combination of letters

pounded into her hand. And once she got that, Helen Keller went on to learn much, to graduate from Radcliff, to write books which included thoughts that inspire and instruct yet today. Graduates, we also wanted to teach *you* how to name things so that knowledge of the world, God's world, was put into your hands to better work in His Kingdom.

Another thing about naming is that when you name something, you bring it into significance. You know how worthy you feel when someone calls you by your name. But the greatest significance we can have is that given us by the God, who calls each of His creatures by name. Listen to some of these verses:

"Look at the night sky," says the Holy One. "Who do you think made all this? Who marches this army of stars out each night, counts them off, calls them by name, so magnificent, so powerful, and never overlooks a single one?" (Is. 40:26).

It's not just the stars. It's his human creation as well. Is. 49:16 says "Look, I've written your names on the palm of my hand." And in Rev. 2:17, "To everyone who conquers I will give . . . a white stone, and on the white stone is written a new name that no one knows except the one who receives it." God has a name that captures you more than you even know yourself.

He names us into significance, and he calls us to do the same. Rainer Maria Rilke, a poet of the late nineteenth century, wrote a set of ten long poems called *The Duino Elegies*, in which he poses the idea that humans are here to find the value of ordinary things and, as you see in this poem, to name them to show their value:

Maybe we're here only to say: house,
Bridge, well, gate, jug, olive tree, window—
At most, pillar, tower . . . but to say them,
remember,
Oh, to say them in a way that the things themselves
Never dreamed of existing so intensely.

That's what we wanted to teach you—that an object, a person, a place, a well thought-out idea becomes worth something when you call it by its right name. What is a right name? It is the name that best corresponds to reality—God's reality and not our own clouded view of reality. It is accurate and specific, and it tells the truth.

Sometimes naming the right name is beautiful, and sometimes calling something by its right name

draws attention to a truth which is anything but beautiful. Walter Wangerin—Lutheran pastor; author of novels, plays and short stories; and a campus guest of the Dordt English Department some years back—wrote a book some of you may have read in English 200, *The Book of the Dun Cow*—a fable, allegory, fantasy, story about a rooster and the flock of chickens who live in his coop. It is a story that has an amazing resemblance to our world of creation, fall,

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redemption. The story concerns a time when the sun turned around the earth and animals could speak, when Chauntecleer the rooster ruled over a more or less peaceful kingdom of assorted animals. But what the animals did not know was that they were the keepers of Wyrms, a monster of evil, long imprisoned beneath the earth. As the story unfolds, Wyrms is breaking free, and his servant Cockatrice reveals himself as the archenemy of Chauntecleer's peaceable kingdom. The time comes when Chauntecleer rouses his humble friends to battle Cockatrice and his snaky fellow fiends, the Basilisks. After the day's vicious battle, the animals sprawl inside the camp exhausted, wounded, or dead. At night Chauntecleer walks outside the walls that surround the camp beyond the dead who have fallen there and contemplates the next day when he fights Cockatrice alone. Pertelote, his wife, sees him leave and goes to find him, for she knows that his pride will not let him give up what looks to be a losing battle.

As Pertelote wanders in the dark outside the walls, she slithers and trips in the bloodied mud and falls down next to the open mouth of a fallen Deer. "The mouth was open as in a scream, but it screamed no sound at all. The deer was dead . . ." As Pertelote plunged away from the sickening sight, Chauntecleer grabbed her.

"Now," he said. "You tell me what you're doing out here."

For one moment the Hen was rigid. In the next she seized Chauntecleer and drove him with an incredible force back toward the Deer. Loneliness had split open in rage.

"What's his name?" she demanded.

"What?" Chauntecleer was overwhelmed. "I don't know," he said. "I can't see."

Pertelote pushed him closer. "Touch him. Feel his face. Tell me his name!"

"But he's dead."

"I don't care. I want to know his name."

Chauntecleer reached through the darkness and felt the Deer. He drew back, then, until he was standing right next to Pertelote. In a stricken voice he said, "Nimbus."

"Nimbus!" cried the Hen. "His name is Nimbus! Nimbus, too, is dead!"

That's what we wanted to teach you—to be honest in your naming of the things that will be affected by what you do, by the choices you make, to not use dishonest words that hide responsibility or outcomes. So when you talk about abortion or capital punishment or war, you learn to name those affected by such things as baby, human being, neighbor. And you learn to sadly call what your actions bring about—"death." And you review that "death" is an enemy, not a friend, not a solution, not an instrument of peace. It is the last enemy, no matter who brings it about. It is something to feel rotten about. It itself is an enemy to be conquered. What we name things matters. In a culture that spins words and creates euphemisms to serve personal gain and individual choice, we need to call a spade a spade.

Remember the story of the Golden Calf from Exodus? Moses is taking too long up on the mountain, talking to God, so the people demand a god they can lay their eyes on. So Aaron uses a tool and makes a golden calf from their rings and earrings. When Moses comes down the mountain with the two stone tablets of the covenant, he is furious at their idolatry and demands an explanation.

And they all claim “the fire did it.” In one of the great spins in the Bible, Aaron says, “I threw the gold in the fire and—out came this calf.” Right naming counteracts our tendency to blame others and to call our disobedience something else.

In an article in *Capital Commentary*, a publication of the Center for Public Justice in Washington, D.C., James Skillen, who taught a few years at Dordt and went on to head that organization, reviews the following statistics about the US economy: “In the 26 years between 1979 and 2005, the pre-tax income for the poorest households grew by 1.3 per cent a year, middle incomes before tax grew by less than 1 per cent a year, while those of households in the top 1 per cent grew by 200 per cent pre-tax, and more strikingly, 228 per cent post-tax.” Skillen quotes John Plender, of *Financial Times*, who says that income inequality in the U.S. today “is at its highest since that most doom-laden of years: 1929.” That statistic is staggering, and what is impressive is that Skillen dares to call the governmental policies that precipitated that statistic not natural outcomes of an established system, not even mistakes, but immoral injustice on the government’s part. That puts the discussion on a different plane, one perhaps that matches God’s reality.

During Justice Week at Dordt, on November 2, 2006, John Hiemstra, a Dordt alumnus and Professor of Political Studies at The King’s University in Edmonton, Alberta, Canada, spoke on the topic “Hypnosis, the Myth of Progress, and Our Christian Scholarly Calling,” a speech that focused on the development of the oil sands in Alberta. The speech was reprinted in a recent Dordt *Pro Rege*. In his speech he demonstrated how a Christian scholar approaches major cultural problems of our times—in part by looking at the language and metaphors that are used in the discussion and asking for more accurate names. Hiemstra showed how a writer for the *Edmonton Journal* used the metaphor of “an economic superhighway” with a few “potholes” in describing the oil sands. Here is Hiemstra’s analysis of the language: “Potholes may cause inconvenience and discomfort, but they are not understood to signal any fundamental problems with the superhighway itself. The metaphor of potholes in a superhighway implies that the highway itself is sound and heading in the correct direction” (*Pro Rege* 36.3.18). Hiemstra ends his analysis in a call for Christian scholars, especially in Christian higher education, to work out biblically

inspired approaches to major cultural situations, which include the accurate use of language. When we talk honestly about an issue, sometimes we realize that the supposed progress, as in this case, may need to be stopped altogether.

We wanted to teach you how to courageously, insightfully, and truthfully name reality from a biblical point of view, and we wanted to caution you with the words of Isaiah 5: “Woe to those who call evil good and good evil. Who put darkness for light and light for darkness. Who put bitter for sweet and sweet for bitter.”

Our son, Luke, a Dordt grad, writes for television. He has found that even within the constraints of team writing and quite prescribed story lines, there is often an opportunity to call dark “dark” and light “light.” One year Luke was writing for *Smallville*, the story of the high school days of Clark Kent, Superman. Lex Luther is his eternal enemy in the disguise of a friend. Here is one scene between Lex and his father, Lionel, who at one time was as evil as Lex is becoming, a scene in which Luke had an opportunity to call dark “dark” and light “light”:

LIONEL: Listen to me, Lex. I know where you’re heading. I see the enemies you’re making. You can’t live your life as though your actions have no consequences.

LEX: You did, Dad.

LIONEL: Yes. I did. I’ve been on the path you’re on. I’ve seen where it ends. You go down that road far enough, there’s no safe return.

LEX: You seem to have managed to find your way back.

LIONEL: No, son. Something found me on that road and brought me back. I was rescued. I only hope you can be rescued, too. Before it’s too late.

You will all have opportunities. Don’t chicken out. Don’t fool yourself. Name it right.

The final thing is this: we tried to teach you to name the only name that saves. That’s tough in an academic institution where we are teaching *you* to develop culture, *you* to help the square inches reconnect and behave themselves normatively. But if we taught you that it was up to you, up to us, then we let you down. Yes, we do scientific analysis and develop technologies that ease life’s challenges, and we must, but Jesus saves. Yes, we do demographic studies of enrollment trends and make adjustments so that we don’t go broke, and we must, but Jesus saves.

Yes, we write poems and stories and put on plays to share insight into the human struggle to be who God created us to be, and we must, but Jesus saves. And He sometimes saves in ways far beyond our smart calculations. So when we go to bed at night or turn on our computers in the morning, our work and our hope for that day and the next is built on nothing less than Jesus' blood and righteousness.

A year ago in April, thirty-one students were killed in a classroom building at Virginia Tech. There are now thirty-one stones bearing the names of each of those victims. And in the center of them all is another stone which says, "We will prevail. We are Virginia Tech." As much as we sympathize with the students, faculty, and friends who are trying to come to terms with what happened there, we can not help but realize the empty hope that stone represents. It

sounds like a cheer at a football game. Instead, as we part today, we claim that we will prevail, not because we are Dordt College, not because we are Reformed, not because we are Christian, not because WE are. We will prevail because HE is and HE is Lord. That's the name we must proclaim.

In a few minutes, you graduates will take on a new name, Dordt College Alumni. We will teach you no more. Our prayer now is that your education here has helped you to find your voice in this world, to serve it well for the sake of Him who owns it, naming it truthfully, responsibly, and appreciatively. We pray that you shout out His name in the language of your calling, and, now and then, may you be struck utterly silent in the presence of the marvelous grace of God.