

Welcome to the Battleground

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It's an honor for me to welcome the Class of 2021 to Chapman and a special privilege to present to you our annual aims of education address... an address that, I guess, represents yet one more attempt by a speaker to figure out what those aims are. And I'm the first speaker in 25 years to have a second chance at it.

Let me begin by dusting off that early attempt of mine to explain the aims of education.

It was titled "Welcome to the Fish Pond" and used a fish pond as a metaphor for Chapman. It was based on my experience throwing small goldfish into a backyard pond and watching them grow prodigiously in size as I fed them every day. The behemoths, behemoths at least for goldfish, reached lengths of 10 inches.

This was amazing to me. You leave a goldfish in a bowl and it stays pretty much the same size. You put it in a pond, and it starts growing. I concluded from observing this transformation that a goldfish is programmed by some force of nature to grow in ratio to the size of its environment.

I hope you get the metaphor. Just as goldfish grow as the size of their environment expands, so too Chapman students will grow as their environment expands. That expanding environment, in turn, as articulated in your "Fenestra" orientation theme, will open "windows of opportunity" for you.

Well, that was then, and this is now. So what is it that I've learned in 25 years, serving almost all of those years as president of this university, that might have given me a different perspective or perhaps greater clarity to my views on the aims of education?

What I've learned is that our university is anything but a fish pond. When you conjure up images in your mind of a fish pond, it's a peaceful, quiet and restful place. A place to kick back and lie down. It's a place not unlike Henry David Thoreau's Walden Pond, where one can escape from the pressures of real life to be engaged with the life of the mind.

That's not Chapman, not even close! This isn't a quiet place far removed from the rigors of the real world. Quite the contrary, this place is more like a battleground. But it's not a battleground for winning a war whose combatants are in a battle over turf but rather it's a battle over ideas about life, beauty and truth. It's a battleground whose victors are unshackled and set free.

I'm not speaking here of the cultural battles now being fought in the halls of academe where speakers have been booted off campuses because of strong objections to their political and social views. It's as if the people making these objections feel that others need to be protected from the views they consider objectionable. That way, I guess, we can all preserve the peaceful equanimity of our campuses. But it's exactly those views, the ones that may be the most biased, hateful and prejudiced that should be tested on the battlefield of ideas.

There will be times, of course, when your Chapman is not a battleground but is a quiet, peaceful place... a sort of tranquil fish pond. Perhaps you'll stretch out on a shady knoll overlooking the beautiful Attallah Piazza and watch the parade pass you by. Perhaps you'll spend all of your afternoon playing "Halo" or "Left for Dead 2." Or perhaps, as I did as an undergraduate student, you'll catch a few winks on a comfortable chair in the student union.

But those kinds of things are at the periphery. They're not at the heart and soul of the real Chapman. The real Chapman is not about spoon feeding preconceived ideas but rather about revealing new ideas and new ways of thinking about them. The real Chapman is not a place that indoctrinates you into being a liberal or a conservative but rather is a place that helps you understand the elements of your own socio-economic values and which political philosophy coheres to them. The real Chapman is not a place that dictates to you what your tastes in art and literature should be but rather is a place that helps you develop the elements of your own aesthetic vision.

For those of you majoring in film, I suspect the moment you are on the battlefield will be when you least expect it. It may happen, for example, when arguing with fellow members of your film crew over things like the dialogue, the set or the angle of the camera. I'm not talking about some ego-ridden argument. I'm talking about the epiphany you experience when you feel so passionate about your film that your only route is to convince others in the most compelling way that you can the value of your artistic vision.

I can relate similar examples about students pursuing other majors. Maybe you're a business major analyzing the best way to market, finance or lead a successful entrepreneurial venture; or maybe you're up at 2:00 in the morning writing a poem and thinking long and hard about the perfect word that would give that poem vibrancy and life; or maybe you're part of a team of science students trying to figure out the best way to test a theory in a laboratory environment; and maybe you'll even use tools you learned in my statistics class to perform your empirical tests. And who knows? Maybe your laboratory will be located in our incredible new Center for Science and Technology.

But no matter where or how you discover your passion, the real Chapman is not a place for students who stay at the sidelines bored, uninvolved and dispirited with their academic journey. The real Chapman is a place electric with ideas that will excite your hearts and minds... if you open your hearts and minds to it.

I recently had lunch with one of our superstar professors in the history department, Professor Robert Slayton, where he related to me a story about one of those students that started out on the sidelines.

Professor Slayton explained that he met with this student to discuss the topic for his thesis paper. When asked what he'd like to write about, the student only mumbled, "I dunno."

Professor Slayton continued, "There must be something you're interested in writing about."

"No, not really."

"Oh, come on, there must be something," Professor Slayton asked.

The student thought about it for a while and finally answered, “I like comic books.”

“Good! That’s good. But do you have anything special about comic books that you’d like to write about?”

“Nah,” the student replied. “Not really... but I do think Superman’s stronger than Batman.”

“Okay, okay... that might very well be,” Professor Slayton responded, “but I’m not sure that’s the kind of topic that will work here.

Since he knows just about everything there is to know about 20th century history, Professor Slayton came up with an idea: “How about writing about the ‘Great Comic-Book Scare’ of the 1950s, when comics came under severe public censorship for their violent stories and images?”

The student thought about that before answering, “No. I don’t think I’m comfortable with that.”

Professor Slayton, keeping his cool, responded, “This is not about your comfort. It’s about you writing an interesting and significant paper.”

The upshot to this true story is that the student not only wrote the paper, he became so passionate about the topic that his research carried him in directions he never anticipated. He actually uncovered a fact about the 1950s comic-book scare that no previous historian had found.

What happened was that this student left his comfort zone and joined the fray. He was transformed from a lackadaisical student to one who couldn't wait to come to class to talk about what his research had uncovered.

Epilogue: The student went on for an advanced degree and is now teaching history.

I hope there will be times at Chapman when you, like this student, struggle with an idea and through that struggle find your way. So embrace the struggle, don't shy from it.

Speaking of struggle, I imagine most of you, like me, have been dismayed by the violence that wracked our nation last week in Charlottesville. You may have views and strong opinions on what happened. I hope those views may be changed, may be reinforced or may be given a different perspective as a result of your time at Chapman. Perhaps it will be a course in Holocaust Education that provides important historical perspective or maybe it will be a debate on campus about free speech and the significance of that freedom to our fundamental liberties. Whatever it is, your views regarding what took place in Charlottesville will rest on a stronger intellectual foundation as a result of a broader and deeper perspective gained on the battlefield of ideas.

My favorite quote from Robert Bolt's play, *A Man for All Seasons*, is uttered by Sir Thomas Moore, the man who sacrificed his life over his principled stand against King Henry VIII. That quote is: "When a man takes an oath, he's holding his own self in his own hands like water, and if he opens his fingers then, he needn't hope to find himself again."

I interpret that quote to mean that to be true to ourselves, an adherence to our core values and beliefs, must outweigh the consequences. And when you can hold on to those beliefs firmly in your hands rather than let them slip through your fingers, then Chapman's aims of education will be fulfilled.

Twenty-five years ago, I concluded my Aims of Education address by welcoming the Class of 1996 to the fish pond we call Chapman.

Now, to the newest generation of Chapman students, the Class of 2021, I welcome you to the battleground we call Chapman.