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Freshman Convocation "Aims of Education" Address
Chapman University
Fall 2022

Hello everyone! Welcome to Chapman! Thank you to the President and the Provost for inviting me to be here with you tonight. The title of my talk is "The Unknown Island." And so it begins. Once upon a time, "[a] man went to knock at the king's door and said, Give me a boat" (1). Such is the opening line of the modern fairytale, "The Tale of the Unknown Island," published by the Portuguese writer, Jose Saramago in 1998, the very same year in which he won the Nobel Prize for Literature. Why, we might ask, did this man have to ask a king for a boat? Why did he not, like Huckleberry Finn, just throw together his own raft and sail on his way? Well, because, as Saramago tells us, when you live in a world governed by kings, then "all the boats in the kingdom belong to [the king]" (12). Theoretically, some would say, that means boats for everybody! Practically, others would respond, it means that the man, like everyone else who needed something, was forced to knock on a castle door that was specially designed for these so-called petitioners and, when the cleaning lady answered, to plead for an audience with the king. The cleaning lady did not even bother to consult the king, she knew the man's petition would be denied, for many such petitions are in lands where rulers jealously guard their possessions, even if they themselves don't need or want them. And anyway, as she told the man, the king far preferred standing at the door where people come to give him gifts. That was a door the king very much liked to open. But the man wouldn't give up. Instead, he threw himself across the thresh hold and refused to leave until the king agreed to see him. The king didn't budge of course. But neither did the man; in fact, he stubbornly remained there for three days, blocking

access to all others and finally forcing the king to avoid "social unrest" by opening the door and asking impatiently, "What do you want?" "Give me a boat" the man demanded.

So, I will pause here for a moment to explain that I taught this story last spring in one of the "Humanomics" courses sponsored by the Smith Institute here at Chapman. As the name suggests, Humanomics courses are co-taught by one professor from the humanities and one from economics, and they explore how these two seemingly-different disciplines actually share common concerns, even as they often come at those concerns in very different ways. So, for example, in our session on Saramago, we not only surveyed statistics that chart the impact of state ownership on individual freedom and collective prosperity, we also shared *both* the quite personal frustration that Saramago's man experienced when he had to beg a ruler for a boat, *as well as* his fierce determination to overcome that obstacle in order to satisfy his desire.

The students in the course drew a moral from this story that its author would have appreciated. As a writer who came of age during the brutal dictatorship of António de Oliveira Salazar in Portugal, as it lasted from the 1930s through the 1960s, Saramago was not very fond of political regimes that, in the name of taking care of people, reduced them to child-like states of dependency and supplication. He himself was a member of the communist party, and so likely envisioned a society in which everyone who could build boats would do so for themselves or others who might need or want them. Either way, as one student put it, we learn from this story that "it is not good for progress when people have to depend upon the whims of people in power to provide them with such things as boats." Or, as another student added, with such things as a college education, since, as he explained, he came from a country in which college was free, or subsidized by tax-payers, but only a very small percentage of young people was allowed to attend. And so, I think that these students would join me here tonight in expressing deep

appreciation for how hard all if you have worked to make this next four years possible, and how incredible it is that we are free to do so. Therefore, one of the aims of education, I would argue, is to continue cultivating the kind of free society which acknowledges and protects such liberties.

But my students' time with Jose Saramago's story did end with this pithy conclusion, nor will it end *just yet* for us here tonight. As we recall, the title of the story is not, "The Tale of How to Get a Boat," but rather, "The Tale of the Unknown Island." So we can rejoin the man where we last left him. As we might expect, after the man demanded a boat, the king posed the obvious follow-up question. "And may one know," he said, "what you want this boat for …?" Now since we have been treating the boat as a kind of metaphor for the latitude we need to improve our lives, we might expect that the man would reply with such practical answers as, "I need the boat to catch fish for my dinner" or "I need the boat to start a water taxi service." But the man said nothing of the sort. Instead he said, and I quote, I need the boat "to go in search of the unknown island." Perhaps at this moment you are thinking what the king was thinking as he exclaimed: "What unknown island?" After all, as the king himself pointed out, if an island is unknown, then how do we even know it exists? But the man actually offered a quite compelling answer to this question. "Simply because," he said, "there can't possibly *not* be an unknown island" (12). Why is this? Because as the man later explained to the cleaning lady, we have been told that we no longer live in an age when the sea is dark and therefore full of things that are yet to be discovered, but this is not true, for "the sea is always dark." In short, the unknown is all there is.

And so, I asked the students, tell me about all the unknown islands you have found here upon the dark and teeming seas of Chapman, or about those you still hope to find. The students went completely silent. Their faces registered consternation, even confusion. Their silence and confusion silenced and confused me. We all stared at one another. Finally, one student said,

“well we didn’t buy our boats to search for unknown islands. We bought them to get the practical skills we need to get good jobs.” “Yeah,” agreed another student, “We already know our futures; we have to graduate, find jobs, buy cars and houses, maybe start families, pay off loans – because even if we don’t need kings to give us boats, we sometimes need banks to help us pay for them.” “For sure” concluded another student, “the truth is, we’re not allowed to have unknown islands.”

At that, I must admit, I was rather shocked, although it’s certainly not the first time that I have had to remind myself that pretty much every conversation I have with students in the classroom is an unknown island. “I certainly understand all that,” I finally managed to say to them, “I have a job, a car, bills, a family, it’s all good, it’s wonderful in fact. But let’s recall what the man told the cleaning lady when she asked him *why* he wanted to find the unknown island. He didn’t answer, as Peter Pan would have, that he wanted to search for the island so that he could avoid growing up. Instead, he said that you *have* to search for the island *in order to grow up*. Or rather, as he put it, ‘when you find an unknown island, you will find out who you are when you are there.’” “That’s so true!” a student burst out, “There was so much that I didn’t expect about college. I had to adapt and change, especially when it came to living with other people.” “I agree,” said another, “I had to take classes outside of my major and I thought that I didn’t need them but I now wish I had taken even more of them.” “Yes,” said another student,” my roommate changed her major and was so much happier and I kind of wished that I had done the same. Our lives will be long, if we’re lucky, and we should try to love what we do.” Another said, “well, even if you aren’t searching for unknown islands, the unknown islands will find you! Think of COVID. Who could have expected that?” Another said, “I think now that I need to follow my dream of going to Africa.” Another said, “I always wanted to be a ski bum. Maybe I

should take a couple of years to do that before settling down." ---- *I need to pause by the way to apologize to the parents of that student* ---- Another student said, "I did change my major after taking a class where we read Darwin. What he said was so different from what I was told."

I could go on and on with such quotes, because once the students realized that the ships they had worked so hard to acquire had in fact provided them with the most practical skill or aim of education of all – that is the ability to map and remap and remap again the relationship between the unknown islands of themselves and the unknown islands of a dynamic world wherein the sea is always dark, they found that they had so much to say about their time at Chapman, including what they would do differently if they could do it all over again. In that spirit, I will share just one more comment from that conversation. Towards the end, a student said, "I will always remember the last line of the story." And then she read it: "As soon as the sun had risen, the man and the cleaning lady went to paint in white letters on both sides of the prow the name that the ship still lacked. Around midday, with the tide, the ship called The Unknown Island finally set out to sea, in search of itself" (51).

And so here tonight, I bid all you unknown islands out there *bon voyage* as you set out to sea, in search of yourselves in an ever-changing world. I invite you to remember as you sail, that you are not alone, that you should not be afraid for more than one unknown island has been discovered by a shipwrecked sailor; that you do not travel empty-handed but rather that, unlike the king, you bring many gifts with you to give to those who are also doing everything they can to give to you the things that will enrich this journey; and, finally, that you will indeed encounter the unknown. The question is, who will you be when you get there?