"Seeing Through"

Honors Day Convocation Address, St. Olaf College
May 5, 2006
Edward Langerak, Professor of Philosophy

Mr. President, honored students, proud parents, generous donors, colleagues, friends: I am both humbled and honored to be invited to speak at this honors convocation.

I congratulate you honor students. When I started teaching here in 1972, the annual comprehensive fee was 3400 dollars and the grade of C was defined in the catalog as "average." I've been told that the fee has since changed a bit, and I know that definition of C has changed, because in 1974—which happened to be St Olaf's centennial year--the faculty debated it. Since students then as now need a GPA of C or higher to graduate, the observation was made that the catalog by definition insured that virtually every St. Olaf graduate was above average. And this was before Prairie Home Companion; some of us think Garrison Keillor described the children of Lake Wobegone only after reading our catalog. The proposal to the faculty was to change the definition of C to "good," which was the then current definition of B, and change B to "very good." Surely this would motivate faculty to give more Cs and thereby reduce grade inflation, which was just starting to be perceived as a problem. However, the majority of the faculty, while we agreed that we could not look students straight in the eye and say that C was *average*, we also could not with a straight face say that a C was *good*, even though it would mean that most of our graduates were better than good. So that is why, since then, the catalog has defined C as satisfactory, and also why the leap to B is one from satisfactory to, not just good, but *very* good. And that's why you honor students are--every one of you—not just good but very good students. And actually, I think you are, which is why I congratulate you.

Of course, you would be the first to agree that your achievements involved the contributions of many others. The late and great philosopher John Rawls argued that few if any of us deserve the personal talents with which we were born, or deserve the character traits that were nurtured in us as children. All honor to those of you who bootstrapped yourselves out of an unfortunate genetic endowment or self-helped your rise above a lousy upbringing, but most of us have to admit that our intelligence and even the gumption we have to use it well are at least as much luck as pluck, and probably more grace than works. Still, you could have screwed up and you didn't, or at least not too much, yet. Most of you can probably be classified as gifted. I recently read that while only 3-5 percent of the nation is classified as gifted, in the prison population 37 percent fit that same category. So, given the gifted temptations you have resisted, congratulations. Of course, if it is true what I said about gifted persons being literally gifted by others, you will also feel not just pride, but also gratitude, and with the gratitude a sense of responsibility, responsibility to live a life of worth and service. Oh, oh, I hear you think: here it comes—vocation and calling. This guy must have gotten some Lilly money. Well, I did; you've seen through me; now see me through.

My title comes from the Dutch American novelist Peter DeVries, who has one of his characters say, "We are put on this earth primarily not to see through one another but to see one another through." Please underscore that word *primarily* because I want to affirm that seeing through one another, which honor students are usually good at doing—particularly regarding their teachers and administrators--is an important part of a liberal arts education, including, nay, *especially*, at a liberal arts college of the church. Before I elaborate on that point, let me admit that the DeVries quotation has the classical Greek bias (perhaps more broadly, the Indo-European bias) toward the physical sense of sight, and its associated cognitive metaphors of insight, foresight, hindsight, and so on.

The Hebrews (and Semitic languages in general) placed much more emphasis on hearing; instead of seeing God, much less having insight into the person of God, they typically referred to *hearing* the Word of the Lord. For that matter, Psalm 34:8 invites us to "*taste*, and see that the Lord is good," a delicious metaphor that continues in the New Testament as, Hebrews 6:4&5, for example, refers to those who have tasted the heavenly gift and have tasted the goodness of the word of God. And, of course, the Hebrew scriptures are full of references to how burnt offerings bring a sweet *smell* to the Lord, though that's clearly a matter of taste. On the human level, Jacob used both touch and smell to deceive Isaac, so that in Genesis 27 the first line of the blessing that Isaac thought he was giving Esau goes, "Ah, the smell of my son is like the smell of the field that the Lord has blessed." Finally, the biblical patron saint of philosophy, doubting Thomas, at first insisted that only the sense of *touch*—not sight or sound, which too often are deceptive--would satisfy his epistemological demands. The point is that we could also, with biblical justification, talk about hearing, tasting, smelling, and touching one another through, but this morning we won't go there.

Instead, I'll just grant that philosophers have a bias toward the Greek tendency to talk about sight and alleged insight. So let's consider the metaphor of seeing through. When we juxtapose "seeing through one another" with "seeing one another through," the latter probably smells better because "seeing through people" seems to connote unmasking our pathetic hypocrisies and exposing our self-serving rationalizations. Actually, it is sometimes important for us to do this to

each other. Juries and judges are routinely obliged to do it, and sometimes parents, teachers, and even friends can best serve us by not only seeing through our subterfuges, but, sometime gently, and other times sternly, forcing us to confess our lies or helping us see through our own self-deception or false-consciousness. Of course, time and place matters; this need not be done in public, and when it is, it's usually generates more heat than light.

Keep in mind also that seeing through each other need not detect only our dark sides; it can give us an appreciative understanding of the problems, even the demons, that others confront, an awareness of extenuating circumstances that elicits empathy, sympathy, and, when necessary, a willingness to excuse mistakes and forgive sins. Thank God that God does this, the One who sees through us perfectly forgives us even without the human motivation of seeing the log in our own eye while noting the splinter in another's. The latter point underscores the value of our seeing through *ourselves*. It puts into context and balance the issues we see when we see through others.

Honor students are applauded in part because of their ability to see through each other, see through themselves, and to do it with the appropriate nuances. And we hope this is true especially at a college that emphasizes not just intellectual achievement but also the costs and the joys of discipleship.

If we let "seeing one another through" be a metaphor of caring for one another, I would like to juxtapose it with "seeing through one another" as a metaphor that includes not just seeing *through*, but also seeing *with*, seeing *past*, and seeing *into* one another. Or at least, when we combine the two types of *seeing through*, we must admit the need for these additional metaphors, and others as well.

Let "seeing with" connote the friendly phenomenon that when we try genuinely to understand one another—carefully listen and not just look for chances to refute the other (admittedly a professional hazard for philosophers)--we often find unexpected common ground. And what a delightful thing consensus can be, especially when it is newly discovered. Psalm 133 is a celebration of agreement: "How very good and pleasant it is when kindred live together in unity!…It is like the dew of Hermon, which falls on the mountains of Zion." The reference to Mt. Hermon in the north and the mountains of Zion in the south alludes to the reunification of the northern and southern nations, and thereby also reveals, in hindsight, that the celebration was premature; the consensus did not last, and the tribes saw *past* rather than *with* each other.

Still, I think there is a lot more room for agreement and seeing with than we often realize, partly because in our contentious, litigious, and argumentative culture we try harder to see *through* than *with* one another. That is one reason why, for the past decade, my research and writing has focused of issues of toleration and respect for difference. In a pluralistic society, even careful communication often leads not to agreement but to clarity about how deep and wide are the differences between us. The 19th century philosopher John Stuart Mill thought that if we would just engage each other in free and frank conversations, the truth would eventually emerge, and naturally, so would agreement. He actually worried that his successfully opposing censorship would lead, down the line, say by the end of the 20th century, to unanimity. He even thought philosophers would have to be hired to play the devil's advocate, to argue heresy just to keep the population on its cognitive toes and keep healthy disputation going. I know that some of you think that arguing for heresy is precisely what philosophers do, but it turned out that Mill didn't have to worry about too much agreement. Good conversations tend to raise our awareness, not just of common ground, but even more of sharp disagreement.

And this awareness can be healthy; apart from the fact that disagreement is interesting, and probably necessary for progress, it is the case that too often the hope for consensus can overlook otherness and try to homogenize into a melting pot what should be seen perhaps as delightful differences or, sometimes, as difficult conflicts. That's why some of my articles been claiming that we must distinguish toleration from acceptance or even indifference, since it connotes the enduring of something we find disagreeable. Moreover, I think we must distinguish toleration, which involves not coercing one another's behavior, from the question of whether we can respect a position with which we disagree. Although sometimes we can and should attribute our disagreement with another to the inordinate ignorance, stupidity, or depravity of at least one of the parties (and don't we tend to know which one that is), in a pluralistic world we must also recognize that sometimes the disagreement, though very real and important, involves reasonableness on all sides. I argue for an outlook that I think avoids both rigid dogmatism and shallow relativism, an outlook I call "perspective pluralism." (I know, dear colleagues in the English Department, that I shouldn't line up two nouns in row, but just try to get people to say "perspectival pluralism.") This is the view that sometimes it is appropriate to say to someone else, "I do think you are wrong, but I also think your position is reasonable, and it's one I respect." This is not a post-modern relativism of truth; you do think there is a right and wrong and you—perhaps with appropriate intellectual humility—think that you are right. But it is a relativism of justification; what is reasonable to believe is much wider than what is true.

I began thinking about this in the 1980s after Allen Bloom famously claimed, in his book *The Closing of the American Mind*, that the one thing liberal arts undergraduates believe or say for sure is that truth is relative. My experience is that Bloom is wrong. Rather, most students are trying to cope with the conflict of convictions, and trying to

do so in a way that allows them to be true to themselves and still be appropriately open to the differences they experience all around them. Indeed, my experience in teaching ethics is that the most difficult problem for students is not arriving at their own reflective view about hot-button issues such as abortion or gay rights (though that can be hard enough); the most difficult problem is how to respond to the fact that others flatly disagree. If we could dismiss those who disagree as comparatively ignorant, corrupt, or unintelligent, the cognitive dissonance could readily be resolved. But the problem is that, too often, we have to admit that those who disagree seem to be as informed, good-willed, and smart as we are, and sometimes, to our chagrin, even more so. And when students struggle with this, they sometimes say things that sound to Bloom like mindless relativism.

On terms abroad, this problem is underscored for students. We faculty usually encourage them to be broad-minded relativists on all sorts of issues having to do with cuisine, etiquette, and teaching styles. But students also encounter some moral and religious differences such that their own integrity and identity requires something other than light-hearted acceptance. But dogmatic dismissal won't work either. When students abroard study other religions, for example, they tend to get taught by committed practitioners of them, rather than by their opponents. So the courses are not catechisms of how heretics, infidels, and the deluded can go wrong, but loving portrayals of respectable viewpoints that, on at least some crucial matters, contradict students' own deepest moral and religious convictions. What's called for here is an appropriately nuanced perspective on pluralism, and I think that recognizing the category of "probably wrong but definitely reasonable" helps us see with one another even as we are obliged to see past one another. It allows us to *engage* disagreement in frank but civil ways, to have open-minded respect for a view without broadminded approval of it or a shallow-minded dismissal of whether it is true.

Let raise just one more metaphor: seeing into one another. Because when we look into one another or even into ourselves, what we see more often than transparency is depth, even mystery. And I don't mean mere murkiness, the dark stains that indicate confusion. Of course, we have to acknowledge that often we cannot be seen through just because we are all mixed up, and our motives are not even clear enough to be seen as either good or bad. Now, confusion can also be healthy; it's a complex world and the human condition is complicated. We sometimes envy those who always seem confidently to know what's up, but we should be suspicious also. The mark of a liberally educated person is to recognize and admit uncertainty, even when one is required to take a stand.

Thus sometimes lack of transparency is due to clouds of confusion, and sometimes confusion is precisely what a "whether" man should predict. But there can also be an impenetrable depth to humans that indicates, not confusion, but richness of personality and mystery of spirit and soul. Someone once said of a former US president—civility prevents me from publicly naming him—that he suffered from the disadvantage of being mysterious without being fascinating. So I'm not talking about simply being unpredictable, strange, or weird, though admittedly one can do worse. Instead I'm gesturing toward the fact that persons cannot be summed up into a set of problems that can be solved; in philosopher Gabriel Marcel's distinction between problems and mysteries, human problems are questions that we may hope to define well enough that we can investigate them and answer them scientifically, while human mystery is such that even when we treat it as a problem, its data encroaches on itself in a way that the more we understand the more elusive and enigmatic it becomes.

Some scientific optimists think that science will eventually turn all mysteries into problems, and we cannot deny that well-placed NSF funds have done exactly that with, for example, the human genome project. I doubt that we will reduce all mysteries to problems, however, and I was glad to see at yesterday's faculty meeting that we approved, without a dissenting vote, a science course which, for the first time in my memory, has the word mystery in its very title. But I must hasten to add that, as some of you know, a year and a half ago I acquired an extremely good reason to be grateful for scientific problem-solving. Without any warning or symptoms, my heart stopped one Sunday morning after Lois and I went for a walk and while I was doing my easy version of sit-up. First it fibrillated, which means it went lickety-split, and then it got tired and, as I understand, arrested itself. Fortunately, Lois happened to hear me gurgle and came running downstairs and saved my life. She had just attended—somewhat begrudgingly--an evening long workshop required by her profession of Dental Hygiene, a workshop that updated how to define and then solve the problem of using CPR correctly in such cases. What happened to me is called Sudden Arrhythmia Death (SAD), but in my case is called Aborted Sudden Arrhythmia Death, which somehow sounds lovely to me. Only five percent of people are fortunate enough to have their SAD become their ASAD, and only one or two percent avoid serious brain damage (which I claim not to have, though I admit there's some epistemological circularity in believing me). Apparently it's almost unheard of for a spouse to save a spouse; even when they know CPR they tend to panic and cannot define much less solve the problem. At any rate, there was also the almost immediate help of others, including a neighbor who is a St Olaf nursing graduate and another nursing student just about to graduate, all of whom were able to see into me, define the problem quickly and precisely, and then solve it. Now the nursing faculty here will agree that for a long time I have appreciated having nursing students

in my ethics classes; they have always seemed to me to be models of combining the science and skill of seeing through and into people with the vocational call of seeing people through. But now I have a new reason to want them in my classes. What if my newly implanted defibrillator kicked off in a philosophy seminar? I can just imagine the dialogue between philosophy majors: "To be or not to be; that is the question." "And who knows what the answer is." "But, notice that there's a very interesting sense in which the 'or' in 'to be or not to be' is the inclusive and not the exclusive 'or'; isn't the human condition a fascinating mystery." All of which is true, and deep, and wonderful, which is why I love teaching philosophy students. But I also thank God for those who have the training to see and define the problem and the skill and calling to solve it.

Obviously this business with my heart caught my attention. I have a cartoon of a man in his office and the figure of death appears; you know: the grim reaper--the skeleton in the black robe with his scythe and all--and the man says, "Thank Goodness you're here; I can't get a thing done without a deadline." Well, for years I had been teaching a course on "Death and the Meaning of Life," so I was well acquainted with theories about how our awareness of our own mortality gives an edge to the human way of existing. I've never thought it was a good idea to follow the surprisingly common advice to live each day as if it were your last. I don't even know how one could do that day after day, apart from the joke about not buying your bananas green. However, my experience with my heart really brought home to me the wisdom of living each day as if it *might* be your last. This allows you to savor each day—and its activities and relationships--as the gifts they are, and also engage in long-range planning. Yes, students, this conceivably could be your last day on God's good earth, so rejoice and be glad in it; but your parents are right, it's not too soon to start that 401(k) retirement fund. Trust me, in hindsight, there's an astonishingly short psychological time between getting established in a career and then hearing an administrator ask, "Now when is it you are thinking about retiring." The upshot is that I think the certainty and uncertainties flowing from our mortality and, more importantly, from our existential imbedding of it in our living, are some of the most important features of our existence that envelope us in mystery and not just problems. In fact, knowing that about one another is one of the most important ways we see depth in each other. And don't you think it is also one of the most important motivations for seeing one another through?

So far I have suggested the wisdom of combining seeing through, with, past and into one another with seeing one another through. Two points remain. First, this applies not just to people but also to creation generally. The universe is not just about us. Indeed, an increasingly tiny fraction of it is about us, though, of course, the tiny-ness of our fraction doesn't make it any less precious, or any less worthy of care. This year's emphasis on sustainability reminds us that understanding creation is part of the stewardly responsibility of seeing it through, at least to the extent that we can recognize our own wear and tear on our dear old mother nature. Second, there's more to life than knowing about each other and creation or even caring about them in the sense of seeing them through. There is also sheer curiosity, wonder, awe, and enjoyment.

For example, I find it awesome that 65 million neutrinos pass through our thumbs every second. Or that the Department of Energy's Brookhaven laboratory operates a Relativistic Heavy Ion Collider (known fondly as "Rick') that shoots gold nuclei at each other, causing then to crash and to reach a momentary temperature of trillions of degrees and then divide briefly into 500 elementary particles—including quarks, anti-quarks, and gluons--that, after 50 trillionists of a trillionist second later, recombine into hadrons. Wow! Sometimes just being wowed into wonder and amazement is a healthy and reverent alternative to sticking only to what's useful for our agendas, no matter how caring they may be. That's why I love the hymn we sang, which not only calls on us to help our neighbor in the world-wide task of caring, but also celebrates the wonders that astound us. Plus it sings thanks for the good we all inherit, good that we are invited to enjoy.

I think there's a thin line between astoundment and enjoyment. Not long ago I gave an after-dinner talk to a St. Olaf Father-Son Banquet about whether parents can be friends with their children, friends, that is, in the Aristotelian sense, which you will be relieved I'm not going to tell you about now. I did claim that there's an important sense in which friendship could come only when parents did not primarily have a caring agenda for raising their children, but had reached the point where they could mainly simply enjoy them. So I think we should not just see through or into one another, and not just see one another through; we should also simply enjoy one another. One of the many things I've appreciated about President Thomforde's last year here is his emphasis in his chapel talks on Sabbath, which he interprets as taking a break from all our busyness and simply enjoy, like God did on the seventh day—hey, it's good! Nay, it's *very* good. I won't forget when he even enjoined the squirrels outside Boe chapel to stop scurrying around so much and just take the time to be laid back. So sometimes—not all times—it's good to remember; don't just do something: stand there; better yet, sit there. And enjoy. We're through. See you.