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A Time to Scatter Stones and a Time to Gather Stones Together

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The following excerpt is adapted from a Convocation address delivered at Hillsdale College on April 6, 2017. The Convocation was held in conjunction with a groundbreaking ceremony for the College's Christ Chapel.

Shortly after this Convocation is over, we'll go to the site of what will be Hillsdale College's new building, Christ Chapel as it's to be known, and with all due ceremony various people will pick up a spade and lift a small pile of earth from one place to another. When all that's done, a sliver of dirt, a little gash of brown, will lie freshly exposed to the sky. New ground will have been broken. And so the College will have formally declared the start of its latest and in some ways perhaps its greatest enterprise: the building of a chapel to the glory of Christ. This chapel will be built—not to the glory of Hillsdale (though it will redound mightily and rightly to the credit and renown of the College); nor to the glory of the benefactors (though their generosity and public spiritedness can hardly be saluted with sufficient gratitude); nor to the glory of the students who will worship there, graduate there, perform music there (wonderful

though all those things most certainly will be). It will be built to the glory of Christ, who Himself glories in our educational endeavors, our philanthropic benefactions, our pupillary activity. For God is no man’s debtor.

Hillsdale College, as you know, was founded in 1844. Article 6 of the College’s Articles of Association states:

Religious culture in particular shall be conserved by the College, and by the selection of instructors and other practicable expedients, it shall be a conspicuous aim to teach by precept and example the essentials of the Christian faith and religion.

“Religion” tends to get a bad rap these days—and from two directions. On the one hand, we hear people say that they’re spiritual not religious; they may be interested in Christianity, but not religiosity. “Religion” here has come to mean ritualism, the externals of faith. On the other hand, some people take “religion” to mean superstition, even fanaticism,

as when Richard Dawkins says that “religion flies planes into buildings but science flies rockets to the moon.” That is surely one of the most fatuous things I’ve ever heard said by an Oxford professor. Why is it fatuous? Firstly, because religion and science—being abstract nouns, not people—don’t actually do anything, good or bad; they’re not agents. And secondly because, if we’re going to play that game of ascribing agency to abstract nouns, one might just as well say “religion gives us Mother Teresa but

science gives us mustard gas.” Much better simply to say there can be bad religion and good religion; bad religion done well; good religion done badly; mediocre religion done well or badly—just as is the case with science.

So for many years now I’ve been on a mission to reclaim the word “religion” from this verbicide it’s been suffering. It doesn’t mean formalism or fanaticism. Etymologically, it means rather something like tying back together—re-ligion: re-ligamenting, re-ligaturing, finding the unifying reality behind disparate appearances, seeking oneness, integration, wholeness, “a theory of everything” (as Stephen Hawking might say). Religion in this sense is the opposite of analysis—from the Greek *analysis*: loosening up. There is a place for analysis, of course: we do often need to loosen things up, pull things apart, dissect. But analysis serves synthesis, doesn’t it? It’s not an end in itself.

You disassemble the engine of your car when it’s malfunctioning in order to find out the problem and then put it back together in working order. It wouldn’t run more smoothly if you just left it in pieces on the garage floor.

You cut open the human body to remove the tumor or the bullet or whatever it may be. Then you sew up the incision, religiously, to bring back health to the organism, health that depends on integration, health that won’t survive perpetual “loosening up.”

You break new ground for a similar reason. You dig up a load of earth and rocks and roots. You loosen it and scatter it about, removing some bits, relocating other bits. And not only

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[Latin]: in the first place

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physically with earth, but intellectually with architectural principles: you analyze what makes for a good building; you analyze what makes for a good building in this particular place; you analyze what makes for a good building for this particular body of people. All this analysis takes a long time. There's mess and noise and expense and disagreements. The interruptions to normal life go on for years. All sorts of unexpected problems crop up along the way—and this is when it's going well!

But as Hillsdale's motto has it, *virtus tentamine gaudet*—strength rejoices in the challenge. And the true crop is not these disturbances, these echoes of primordial chaos, when the earth was formless and void. Rather the true harvest of all these efforts will be a noble building, a thing of beauty and a joy forever, in which Hillsdalians shall flourish both individually and corporately, and from which the God who's given us everything in Christ can be given back the best we have to offer, which is all too little, but in which offering we transcend ourselves and therefore most truly find ourselves.

So analysis, I maintain, is not an end in itself. But is religion an end in itself? Isn't it possible to be too religious? To be so interested in unity and oneness that you never look for change? Can't the religious impulse devolve into a kind of frigidity or frozenness, a paralysis in which the way we've always done things must be the way we always do things, forever and ever, amen?

That is a danger, yes: obscurantism, the Luddite impulse—tying things back together so tightly that life becomes one big strangulating corset.

True religion should always be corrigible: both self-critical and open to criticism from without, open to revision in the light of new knowledge and in response to new situations. Not cramping in on itself, or incessantly ratcheting up the interior tension, but periodically relaxing, taking stock, surveying new horizons. Like the beating human heart that now contracts, now expands.

In the history of Christianity, Saint Peter and Saint Paul are the great archetypes we'd do well to have in mind when we think like this.

Peter is the rock. That's what the name Peter means. You don't have to be a Catholic to recognize that Peter was the first bishop of Rome, and the defining function of any bishop is to sit, rock-like, stationary, in a chair, a cathedra, to be a focus of unity for the flock, which he regulates with his shepherd's crook. "Thy rod and thy staff they comfort me" [Psalm 23:4]. The Petrine principle provides for fixity, certainty, a still point in a turning world.

Paul is the missionary, the apostle to the Gentiles, who travels all over the Mediterranean, spreading the Word, founding new churches, tackling practical problems, developing new theological understandings, firing off letters, and once even challenging Peter to his face.

The Pauline principle is important because I recognize that not all those at Hillsdale call themselves Christian. Some may not be much interested in the life of the new chapel when it comes. Some may even wish respectfully to challenge this or that aspect of Hillsdale's priorities. That's a good role to fulfill in a community. Every human organization needs Pauls as well as Peters, Paulas as well as Petras.

If it was all about Peter, things would petrify. If it was all about Paul, things would be appalling. You need both. The rock in Rome, and the one who roams and rocks. Two principles, in tension with each other, respecting each other, but both seeking one ultimate goal, serving the same beating heart. The heart itself is more important than whether the blood within it happens to be ebbing or flowing.

True religion therefore needs to be understood in two senses: it both *does* and *is*. There's the particular religious impulse, the specific function: the tying back together. And then there's religion itself: the overall pattern in which the religious and the analytical impulses alternate, the continual, rhythmic,

regular process of now tying back, now loosening up.

Neither Peter nor Paul was an end in himself. Each was a servant of Christ. The two pointed to the One, the unity beyond themselves. And that greater unity, that final or ultimate re-ligamenting, is why it's so fitting that Hillsdale's new chapel will be known as Christ Chapel, for Christ is the one in whom "all things hold together" [Colossians 1:17], both the tightening and the loosening, both the rock and the rocking.

Today we break new ground. We challenge the rock, so to speak. We do something very Pauline, very analytical, scattering earth this way and that. But we do so with an aim in mind: to develop and extend that ground into a new unity, an enlarged oneness. We have a Petrine end in view.

"There's a time to scatter stones and a time to gather stones together" [Ecclesiastes 3:5]. May earth be better and heaven be richer for the life and labor of Hillsdale College. Amen. ■

Frederick Douglass, American

LUCAS E. MOREL

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The following excerpt is adapted from a speech delivered at Hillsdale College on May 12, 2017, at the dedication of a statue of Frederick Douglass on the College's Liberty Walk.

Frederick Douglass, a former slave and a leading abolitionist writer and orator, was the most photographed American of the 19th century. And as you at Hillsdale College know, one of the most famous photographs of Douglass was taken in this town, just a few weeks after President Lincoln issued his Emancipation Proclamation. At the invitation of a ladies literary society, Douglass came to Hillsdale and spoke in the College Chapel on January 21, 1863. The title of his lecture was "Popular Error and Unpopular Truth." As reported in the newspaper, Douglass said: "There was no such thing as new truth. Error might be old or new; but truth was as old as the universe."

A "popular error" of our own day is the idea that because Thomas Jefferson owned slaves, nothing good could come

from him. Douglass surely knew that Jefferson owned slaves, but he knew as well that Jefferson was the author of the Declaration of Independence, which supplied for Douglass and for all Americans the key to political progress: the principles that "all men are created equal"; that they are "endowed by their Creator [not by government] with certain unalienable Rights," among which are "Life, Liberty, and the pursuit of Happiness"; and that "to secure these rights, Governments are instituted among Men."

Douglass called these "saving principles," and he devoted himself to convincing white Americans "to trust [these principles] operation." In this he foreshadowed Justice John Marshall Harlan's lone dissent against the Supreme Court's infamous *Plessy v. Ferguson* decision, which produced



the nefarious doctrine of “separate but equal.” Harlan wrote: “Our Constitution is color-blind, and neither knows nor tolerates classes among citizens. In respect of civil rights, all citizens are equal before the law.”

Thirty years before *Plessy*, Douglass observed that the Constitution “knows no distinction between citizens on account of color.” The “burden of our demand upon the American people shall simply be justice and fair play,” he said. “We utterly repudiate all invidious distinctions, whether in our favor or against us, and only ask for a fair field, and no favor.”

Douglass was no fan of “race pride,” counting it “a positive evil” and a “false foundation.” For the better part of American history, black Americans wanted nothing to do with a color line that set them apart from other Americans. “It has long been the desire of our enemies,” Douglass wrote, “to deepen and widen the line of separation between the white and colored people of this country.” For Douglass, the only relevant minority in America was the

minority of one—the individual. The government of all should be partial to none.

The politics of identity make the present a prisoner of the past, with individuals viewed chiefly through the lens of race or other arbitrary characteristics. Douglass argued for identifying with *America*—with the nation founded on “human brotherhood and the self-evident truths of liberty and equality.” He saw that the protection of specific groups or classes would lead government away from protecting individual rights and towards assigning benefits and burdens. “I know of no rights of race,” he said, “superior to the rights of humanity.”

A few months after Lincoln’s assassination, Douglass remarked that the American people saw in Lincoln “a full length portrait of themselves. In him they saw their better qualities represented, incarnated, and glorified—and as such, they loved him.” In future days, may those who look on this statue see in Frederick Douglass a full-length portrait of themselves, and be reminded what it is to be an American. ■

You Are Not Generation Z

PATRICK L. SAJAK

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Vice Chairman, Hillsdale College Board of Trustees

The following excerpt is adapted from an address to the first graduating class of Founders Classical Academy in Leander, Texas, on May 27, 2017. Founders Classical Academy is one of 16 classical K-12 charter schools currently operating under the auspices of Hillsdale College’s Barney Charter School Initiative.

When you’re asked to give a commencement address, the first thing you think about is, what can you possibly tell these young men and women that they don’t already know? Especially here at Founders Classical Academy, where simply because these students chose to be educated in this particular way, I already know a great deal about them. I have a sense of their ambition and of their standards. I have a pretty good idea of where their moral compass points. And

I know they’re not afraid of challenges. I know they have people in their lives who care deeply about them. And I know that their futures will be filled with accomplishments and good works.

In short, I’m not sure there’s much need to try to inspire a group like this. So let me instead suggest a pitfall to avoid going forward, a pitfall not only for this year’s graduates, but for everyone in every corner of American society today. It has altered the way we

talk to one another and perceive one another. It has perverted the notion of free speech and poisoned the academic environment. It has turned the American political system on its head, creating a situation where opposing views are not only unwelcome, they are deemed to be signs of evil intent. It has pitted friend against friend and has caused rifts within families.

I'm talking about identity politics, the attempt to divide Americans and set us against each other. The attempt to classify and categorize us by all sorts of measurements and standards. To a great degree, those who are making these attempts are succeeding. And their efforts are changing our country in fundamental ways.

We are all members of groups. I'm of Polish descent. I'm a Baby Boomer, one of those tens of millions born in the aftermath of World War II. I'm a male. I'm Caucasian. But while all of these facts helped shape me to varying degrees, I am mostly Pat Sajak. I am a unique individual, created by God and blessed to be born in a country whose founders believed that our creation endowed us with unalienable rights.

I grew up in an industrial area of Chicago. My parents were divorced. We often struggled to make ends meet, but our struggles were no greater than millions of others. And I always believed that I could and I would overcome them. It never occurred to me that I was the hopeless victim of a system or that the success of others was inhibiting my ability to succeed. Envy, anger, and resentment were wastes of time and energy. I always believed that an individual by the name of Pat Sajak would make something of himself. And I don't mean becoming a TV personality—I mean improving my life, making a difference in the lives of others, and growing up to become a contributing citizen of this great country.

Today, this graduating class is made up of individuals who have worked hard to be in this place and in this situation. They come from various

backgrounds. Each of them has had to deal with a unique set of challenges. But they did it. They were helped by parents, teachers, friends, supporters of the school, and a host of others. But they did it.

As you graduates move on, you will find a world all too eager to diminish your accomplishment and minimize your individuality. Some of you will find yourselves in colleges that will try to define you and separate you by race, religion, politics, and social attitudes. You'll be exposed to the notion that the truths you learned here at Founders Classical are...well...*sort of* truths, subject to prevailing winds; that good character and civic virtue are flexible terms, open to interpretation and alteration.

You'll be courted by interests trying to establish an us-against-them mentality. Some of you will encounter disdain because you allegedly benefited from privileges, while others will be encouraged to embrace victimhood. You'll be approached by political organizations who will try to convince you that, because of your age or race or gender, you must think and act and vote in a particular way, and that those who don't share a defined set of views and attitudes are for that reason evil and malicious. Just as they try to diminish your individuality, they will try to discourage you from looking at others as individuals.

The media is complicit in this effort to label people—sometimes entire generations. As I've said, I'm labeled a Baby Boomer. And you've heard a lot about Millennials in the last few years. You're the next group, and they haven't figured out your name yet. Maybe it will be Generation Z. Once they settle on naming you, they'll tell you how you act and what you wear and how you think.

I prefer to think of this group as the first graduates of the Founders Classical Academy. And I don't think you need to be told about yourselves. I think you know how to measure your



success and define what brings you a sense of accomplishment.

The problem with identity politics is that it reduces us. We are no longer human beings with individual hopes and dreams. We are commodities. We are groups to be labeled and courted and pandered to. We have no shared values as Americans, because we are a series of interest groups. We're told what it's thought we want to hear, and we divide ourselves into pockets of groupthink. We begin to speak only with others in our group, and we begin to believe that the only valid and true way to think is the way we think.

To the contrary, as you've learned here at Founders, the good and the true and the beautiful are not negotiable. They cannot be bent or shaped by political or social means. On the Hillsdale College website, you'll find the following:

How do we measure good? Is it defined by the majority? Is it measured by self-satisfaction or personal fulfillment? The good of anything is found in its ability to accomplish what it was created for, to realize its purpose for existence as intended by

its maker. Only in this realization can something truly be called good.

The good is possible only in the light of truth. Not truth as it is often defined today by personal preference or popular consensus, but truth as it is, independent from opinions and emotions. And where goodness and truth exist, there you will find beauty.

We were created for a purpose. That purpose is not left to chance or whim, but was determined by our maker and written in our nature. Our purpose is to seek truth in order to discover and to act on what is good and beautiful in this life.

I urge you to resist those who would try to undo the basic truths you learned here and to say no to those who try to classify and divide you into opposing identities. You are not Generation Z or whatever they want to call you. You are Bianca and Colton and Chase and Ashton. You are Claire and Ari. You are Jasmine and Rae and Emma. You are Basil. You are Natasha. You are the first graduating class of Founders Classical Academy. I congratulate you, and I thank you. ■