

Convocation Address**August 2005****Trinity College****Astronauts Bowling and Raphael**

Convocations are, for me, the most magical of moments. Like many of us who wear chalk dust on the sleeves of our souls, I have always loved the beginning of school each fall. A new academic year, new students, returning colleagues on the faculty and staff of our College, new colleagues, the beginning of another school year with all its hopes and promise dawning upon those of us privileged enough to be here at Trinity College. Schools like Trinity are about human connections, about belonging to something much greater than anyone of us, to something almost ethereal. Daniel Bell, from whose work I have learned a great deal about the essence of colleges and universities, once wrote that a school is a place where people feel an attachment to something beyond themselves: an attachment to scholarship, to learning, to books, to ideas, and to the past, to the many venerable traditions of this very special place, as our newest students join us today to prepare for your futures.

I would like to speak especially to those who are our newest fellow learners about astronauts bowling, a subject about which I am completely and woefully ignorant. I do not know if the majority of astronauts bowl for their respective hobbies, but as a cultural historian thinking about those students in the Class of 2009 for whom this convocation is truly *their* beginning at Trinity, I think that there might be some important lessons to be gleaned from thinking about this oddest of admixtures, that of astronauts and bowling, on this particularly important day of beginnings anew. Now, it is true that better than four decades or so ago, my brother and I did go bowling from time to time, and he trounced me royally, as he always did in our competitive athletic contests. Since the age of twelve or thirteen, however, I have not set foot in a bowling alley, although several of our students frequently asked me last year if I would join them for an outing at the local AMF

establishment. While few things are harder for me than turning down invitations from our students, so far I have been unable to accept the invitations to go bowling, although it is probably all for the better since I fear my bowling abilities would only bring athletic dishonor to my family.

My newfound enthusiasm for thinking about astronauts and bowling is somewhat disingenuous, a rhetorical flourish, if you will allow me the liberty, since what has of late fascinated me about the sport is a book published some years back by Harvard professor Robert Putnam entitled *Bowling Alone*. Professor Putnam is not himself an aficionado of the sport as much as he is a keen observer of current societal mores in American life: specifically, the increasing rejection of significant community involvement on the part of those of us who are citizens of this country at this particular time in our history. Putnam notes that we Americans seem to be disassociating ourselves in large numbers from communal groups of all kinds: thus his ingenious choice of title, *Bowling Alone*, with concerted emphasis on our isolation from each other, our aloneness, our obsession for choosing to do things singularly rather than commonly, our rejection of any activity that might be described as a fellowship of kindred souls.

As the space shuttle Discovery set out into the skies above the Earth in late July, I again thought of the astronaut as a signal topos, a sweeping metaphor for our time. Consider Stephen Robison, the astronaut who valiantly went out in his spacesuit to repair the spaceship. There he was, alone, dangling in space, repairing away, as the Discovery circled the planet Earth, able to exist there in outer space solely because of the technical marvels of our advanced age: all sorts of gadgetry of the most complex sort: computers, automatic controls, navigation devices, all these technically advanced connections to NASA control in Houston, but hermetically sealed from all human contact, in his cocoon-like spacesuit, connected to other human beings by means of the marvels of our time, cut off, isolated, attached to others only by means of the communicative magic of the technological age in which we live. The *New Yorker* magazine for June the 6th this past summer carried a prescient cartoon: here the artist Diffie sketched a work environment in our time: all these people studiously working away in their little cubicles, seemingly

permanently isolated from one another, transfixed in front of their hypnotic computer screens, toiling away alone. The caption to the cartoon read “40 days without an on-the-job conversation.” It’s all there, isn’t it, the perfect depiction of our time? The isolated human being, dangling in space outside the spaceship Discovery, the isolated human being bowling alone, the isolated human being sitting in an office cubicle. Perhaps salient metaphors for our time, in the post-modern, technological ethos of the 21st century.

This acceptance of post modernity’s abject isolation, however, goes against the grain of American life. As far back as 1835 Alexis de Tocqueville pointed out in his *Democracy in America* that Americans are great joiners: he found our commonplace associations ubiquitous as well as remarkable all across the land. Americans, he noted with considerable envy, admiration, and delight, loved to bind themselves together into groups where human relationships were most germane. De Tocqueville in the nineteenth century would not have understood Professor Putnam’s thesis in the late twentieth at all, for part of America’s very fabric is our tendency to seek out those with common interests, to join groups, to spend time not bowling alone but rather bowling together in leagues, in seeking out and then appreciating our several fellowships of whatever kind.

Trinity College is a small, intricately woven liberal arts college. In this community of fellow learners, faculty, staff, and students see each other all the time. Our campus is not connected by bus routes as are the campuses of the megaversities across America, but by pathways that join us all together. We eat together in Mather Hall or in the Bistro or the Cave. We go to theatre and musical performances, athletic contests, lectures, and presentations. Faculty, staff, and students will inveterately speak to each other on the Long Walk. Al, the hero of the Cave staff, will remember what you asked for when you last ordered lunch and then he will astonish you by handing it over to you again. Surely, we are connected to each other by the miracles of the modern age. I receive e-mails from past and present students seven days a week, and I cherish the messages from my student friends, but those e-mails do not ever take the place of our stopping to chat with each other, of those close interactions between professor and student here, of

conversations with the members of the faculty who are faculty sponsors of our various athletic teams, or who work with the editors of *The Tripod*, or who serve as advisors to fraternities or to our cultural houses on campus. Here at Trinity our students are not relegated, for their brief four years on campus, to a pin number, or a Social Security number, or to a computer password. The astronaut bowling alone does not characterize what is most special about this most special of academic villages.

As I imagine to be the case with most of us gathered in this pristine quadrangle today to welcome our newest fellow learners, I worry considerably about the human isolation, the human anonymity of our time, about what has been subsumed in such a short time in human history by the voice mail, the e-mail, by the blackberry, by the computer screen asking us for our name, our password, and what it is we wish to purchase at 3:00 AM, with all round us asleep. The ubiquitous instantaneous communications can never take the place of a face-to-face conversation, a wide-ranging discussion between a faculty member and a student in a laboratory or seminar room, or those late-night “solve the riddles of human life” conversations that undergird intellectual life in the residence halls of Trinity’s campus.

All of which brings me by perhaps the most circuitous of imaginable routes to the great Italian painter Raphael. I never think of academic convocations without thinking of Raphael, as my faculty colleagues know, for Raphael dominated my own college convocation four decades ago this month, which was yesterday or the day before but certainly no farther back than last Tuesday. The Class of 1965 was gathered in Sanford White’s monumental Cabell Hall Auditorium on the grounds of the University of Virginia, a site almost as aesthetically stunning as this quadrangle on Trinity’s campus. Someone, I have no recollection who, droned on and on from the podium. I was just like our entering students right this very minute, like the members of the Class of 2009 today: adrenalin racing through my body and mind, excited beyond words at being “an adult” and finally away at college, more than a bit apprehensive about the rigors of the academics, social expectations, and the like, lying in wait for me. Behind our convocation speaker and

assembled deans and faculty members, all garbed in academic dress, loomed a massive copy of Raphael's "The School of Athens" painted by the American realist George W. Breck. Raphael via Breck captured my attention far more successfully than did the convocation speaker. In the painting, students are assiduously reading the *Timaeus* and the *Poetics*. Heraclitus, Archimedes, Ptolemy, Euclid, Diogenes, Pythagoras, and a host of other scholars are vividly portrayed. In the very center of the painting, Plato and Aristotle are deeply engaged in conversation. Many of you will study the original painting in the Vatican's Stanza della Segnatura while on study abroad at our Rome campus later in your undergraduate careers here at Trinity.

Each of the individuals depicted in Raphael's painting wears a long robe. All of Raphael's characters are white, few are young, and all are male. Diversity in the School of Athens probably meant hiring a young scholar from Philippi or, Heaven forbid, perhaps even from warring, supposedly barbarous Sparta. Diversity at Trinity College means that intrinsic acceptance of difference and the intrinsic value of perspectives not our own, the brutal absence of which is tearing much of the civilized world apart as you begin your undergraduate studies here at Trinity. At Trinity we value differences of color, nationality, religion, socio-economic background, sexual orientation. We value diversity because the world you young women and men are going to have to lead is not one-dimensional, not all white, not all East Coast or even American, not all affluent, not all Christian, not all English speaking. Whatever else your world may be, the world you are going to have to lead, it will be transnational, global, vastly complicated, and acutely complex. The world you are going to have to lead cannot be led by individuals trapped in their own astronaut cocoons, bowling alone, cloaked in self-aggrandizement, intolerant, and capable of viewing realities only through tunnel vision.

Now, it may shock you somewhat to imagine that Raphael himself may indeed have gone bowling, especially since the Italian game of bocce, still played all over Italy, is somehow connected to an ancient game that seems to have begun in Egypt 7000 years ago and that moved through Babylonia to Northern Italy around the time of Julius Caesar. In Raphael's masterpiece depicting his view of the

fellowship in learning that was the School of Athens, the school itself is not defined by walls or buildings but rather by those gathered—the gathering together of the fellow learners, a true convocation from the Latin verb *convocare*, to call together—who constitute the school itself, the discussions between the older learners and the younger ones, the common texts read and studied together, the ideas argued and debated, the passion for learning the unknown and discovering the new as something shared and cherished, what the French term *le feu sacré*, “the sacred fire” best conveys about the essence of schools. In the painting, we are metaphorically light-years away from a medieval monk toiling over a manuscript in meditative isolation in a lonely, cold cell or from one of you hypnotized by the images as you sit alone before your computer screen.

Today, those of you in the Class of 2009 joining this fellowship in learning have an unparalleled opportunity, one of the unique opportunities life will ever afford you. Trinity College can provide you the canvas upon which you must paint your own rendition of Raphael’s “School of Athens,” your own “School of Trinity College.” We can provide you with faculty members who will transform your lives in ways inconceivable to you today, sitting in this quadrangle on this August afternoon. We can provide all sorts of programs on campus, in our neighboring community of Hartford, and in global sites all over the world. We can provide you with opportunities for scholarly research supervised by actively engaged scholars who are my distinguished colleagues on the faculty.

But, we cannot, we cannot, paint your rendering of Raphael’s masterpiece for you. Only you can paint your own version of Raphael’s “School of Athens,” your own rendition of what your four years in this most special of places will entail. Recall Mary Ann Evans, who felt that she had to don the masculine pseudonym George Eliot in order to be accepted more fully as a novelist in nineteenth-century England. Eliot who quipped wondrously, “It is never too late to be who you might have been.” “It is never too late to be who you might have been.” A wonderful line that one, from a brilliantly talented female author who thought she had to masquerade as something she was not, as a male, in order to be accepted as an author in her own time. The Class of 2009 processed today through the ranks of the

faculty, welcoming each of you into this particular academic village that we all hold dear. You will once again process through the ranks of the faculty, along the Long Walk, as you process into your own Commencement in May of 2009. The flag of the Class of 2009 now flies from the flagpole to your left as you sit in this quadrangle today as you begin your undergraduate journeys with us at Trinity. In the blink of the proverbial eye, it will fly again, four years from this coming May. The four years will pass at warp speed. Take advantage of every minute to paint your own "School of Trinity College."

Your parents, your grandparents, your brothers and sisters, your elementary and high school teachers have all brought you to this defining moment, right in front of the blank canvas of the next four years that is yours to paint. More than twenty years ago, one of my seminar students, who then became a lifelong friend, wrote on the last page of his journal the following lines:

"Come to the edge," he said.

But they said, "We are afraid."

"Come to the edge," he said.

They came, he pushed them, and they flew.

As my colleagues on the faculty and staff here at Trinity know, I have long been in the habit of quoting my young student friend from decades past at each convocation address I have been privileged to give over the course of my career in higher education. Your parents are sitting here in this idyllic setting, exceedingly proud that you are beginning your college career at a school as distinguished as Trinity College but also completely baffled that the time has so suddenly and so unexpectedly arrived for you to start college. Yesterday or the day before, your parents were holding your hand, teaching you to look both ways for the traffic, as you were learning how to cross the street safely with the light. Now you are taking your first steps crossing the street from adolescence to adulthood in this place. Your parents can no longer tell you not to stay up partying all night; or to eat a proper breakfast rather than to get by on Coke and candy bars; or to pick up your clothes; or to get started on your term paper; or to keep up with your daily assignments lest you fall woefully behind. Your parents can no longer make your decisions for you.

Nor should they. As the old dean was wont to say, “Which parent wants to have spent eighteen years rearing a child only to have that child call up from his basement apartment at the age of 35 demanding to know when dinner will be ready?” Your parents want you to fly on your own. They wish for you a worthy adulthood, a life that makes you happy and a life that also, in ways great and small, blesses the many wider communities—up to and including the world—of which you will become a leader.

And you never know what contributions those around you here at Trinity will make to your life, probably when you least expect any contribution to be made at all. Professor Putnam offers the following example, one drawn from Ypsilanti, Michigan:

Before October 29, 1997, John Lambert and Andy Boschma knew each other only through their local bowling league at the Ypsi-Arbor Lanes...Lambert, a sixty-four-year-old retired employee of the University of Michigan hospital, had been on a kidney transplant waiting list for three years when Boschma, a thirty-three-year-old accountant, learned casually of Lambert’s need and unexpectedly approached him to offer to donate one of his own kidneys. “Andy saw something in me that others didn’t,” said Lambert. “When we were in the hospital, Andy said to me, ‘John, I really like you and have a lot of respect for you. I wouldn’t hesitate to do this all over again....’” This moving story speaks for itself, but the photograph that accompanied this report in the *Ann Arbor News* reveals that in addition to their differences in profession and generation, Boschma is white and Lambert is African American. That they bowled together made all the difference. [Concludes Professor Putnam] In small ways like this—and in larger ways, too—we Americans need to reconnect with each other.

I do not know how important reconnecting to each other may have been before September 11, 2001, but I do know for certain that now more so than ever before, being connected to our fellow human beings is a state of grace needed by

each and every one of us on this fragmented planet of ours. Andy Boschma was vitally connected to John Lambert. Andy Boschma saved John Lambert's life with the gift of his kidney. He transformed John Lambert's life quite literally. Your lives will be transformed by your experiences with the faculty and the staff of this college, starting this very day, starting right this very minute at this, your first-year convocation. Go forth now to paint your own canvas, with all of our best wishes and our heartiest of welcomes. Godspeed to all those who join this fellowship in learning today.