

Wilderness House Literary Review 7/3

Luke Salisbury

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at Bunker Hill Community College by Luke Salisbury

Honors Banquet Speech 2012

Chairperson Boylan, President Fifield, Vice President Caniff, Deans, administrators, faculty, guests, Commonwealth Honors Scholars, honors students, prize winners, it is indeed an honor to be elected by colleagues to speak on this night. A particular honor particularly as I am retiring. Welcome and congratulations. Welcome to friends and family who have such good reason to be proud tonight.

When I learned I would speak, I thought I might list all the things that pissed me off in twenty-seven years, but I was told I only had five minutes.

The Bible tells us our days pass as a tale that is told. The older you are, the more you appreciate those simple but beautiful words. They tell you all you need to know about time.

I won't tell you the future is yours because who else does the future belong to? The hackneyed phrase implies the future is yours by right, entitlement, or because the world sees how smart you are. That's not happening in 2012. The world is a tough place. A messed-up place.

I'm not going to tell you to work hard, take advantage of opportunity, or not shy away from difficult challenges. You already know that, or you wouldn't be here. I know many of you. You are outstanding. Smart. Dedicated. Students who will do what needs to be done, in Malcolm X's fine words, "by any means necessary."

At some point in the semester, I ask, "What do you have that no one can *take*?"

What is the most *important* part of you? The part that drives you? Makes you who you are? That you fall back on when life falls apart?

What is your center?

The part of *you* can't fool.

You need to know your center. Interrogate it. Define it. Nourish it.

What is it?

Your soul? Values? Memories? Knowledge? What you love? Who you love?

Perhaps your center/my center/*the center* is as *ineffable* and *nameless* and *essential* as the Hebrew God who has no name, no face, no body, no image—who is not findable, destroyable or tangible—but whose *indescribable* essence has lasted three thousand years—and remains at the center of Western and Middle Eastern culture.

So. When I ask you to find your center, I'm asking you to find God.

Ah.

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God is a monumental proposition. Whether you consider God the ruling metaphor, the ruling Presence, or a key to the deepest and best part of yourself—the notion of all Power, all Goodness, the Source of life Itself—incarnated in one Word, one Idea, one Being, one immensely familiar Concept—*He, She or It* must be reckoned with.

Amen.

God is a tricky proposition. God has been called the original conspiracy theory, the Prime Mover, the Unknowable Explanation of Everything Unexplainable. *He/She/It* is Everywhere and Nowhere. Infinitely simple. Infinitely complex. As ineffable as spirit; as potent as hell fire.

I say it's all these wrapped up in a part of you *you* need to know.

What am I doing talking about God? *Because* I can find no better word, no stronger concept, no more powerful metaphor *—to approach the center.* To approach that important, ineffable and difficult place. That place you must find. That place you create because God helps those who help themselves.

Don't get lazy with your soul. God helps those who help themselves.

How do I, alleged non-believer, work on my soul? How do I find entry to the sacred place, the inner sanctum.? The place no one can *touch* but allows me to touch others?

I do it through art. The world has made its own soul and that soul is called art. Literature is the art I know best. The one I've tried to share. The one I use to understand myself and life. No one can take literature away from me.

Spouses leave. Relationships end. Books don't.

For me literature is the miracle. Literature can describe life at its most meaningless and terrifying, and yet make that moment *meaningful*, even gorgeous. Shakespeare created a villain, Macbeth, a truly awful man, who utters words that shake the foundations of the English language. This murderer, assassin, usurper, child-killer, tyrant, fiend, devil, tells us:

*Life's but a walking shadow, a poor player
That struts and frets his hour upon the stage
And then is heard no more. It is a tale
Told by an idiot, full of sound and fury,
Signifying nothing.*

For many year I thought this was the greatest use of the English language because of its extraordinarily clear vision of life, death, and the meaninglessness of life. Now I say the opposite. I say the very existence of these words makes life meaningful. Genius has transmuted evil into poetry. The words don't make evil good, or understandable, or rid the world of evil. The words show, demonstrate, to our very eyes and very ears, that at the epicenter of evil—the destructive vortex of nothingness—imagination still exists. Shakespeare shows us imagination transcending evil. He doesn't tell. He shows. Evil, nihilism and horror are used to make beauty. To make truth. This is the ultimate triumph of being human. This is a miracle.

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This is what you must learn to do. You must find a way to transmute the bad, awful, the tragic—*which will come to your lives*—into spirit. You must be able to respond spiritually. To disaster. To evil. You must. To survive.

To do this, use your soul. Strengthen your soul through art. Learn how to use the worlds, painting, and music, of the great dead. Use genius.

Use it to understand, deepen, and protect your soul. Trust your soul. Grow it. It is what *lets* you be the person *the people who love you*, think you are.

Pray to it.

Thank you.

And good bye.