

An Intellectual Itinerary

- *New Student Academic Convocation*
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Welcome to Seattle University and welcome to this Academic Convocation for new students. We hold this ceremony in this formal way—introducing you to your professors and them to you—in order to highlight that the academic journey ahead of you is the most important dimension of your university experience and that it is different from anything you have so far experienced. Welcome to this new world of university learning and thank you faculty for accompanying and leading these new students in their learning.

What is the journey ahead of you? How will you develop intellectually? What difference will your academic courses and programs make to you in how you think and in the decisions you make? Each of you will travel a somewhat different intellectual path because you start from different places, have different academic interests, and are different in who you are and how you feel, think, and act. Your professors are each an example of a full intellectual journey motivated by a keen intellectual passion and a desire to inspire intellectual passion in others which have led them to the vocation of being professors. Each of them has taken thought as far as it can possibly go in a particular line of exploration. Let me repeat to you, their students, what I say each year at this academic convocation: “Observe and follow the intellectual passions of your professors until you find your own intellectual passion.” That simply is the best part of this enterprise on which you are setting forth.

We learn about intellectual journeys, as we seek our own way, by the example of others. There is no prescription or formula for one’s intellectual itinerary except observing the example of what the itinerary of another has been from which we can come to know what path our own intellectual growth might possibly take. Let me give you something of my own intellectual itinerary, mostly by way of a few stories, as one example.

I grew up in the Territory of Alaska before it was a state. When I was 16 I lived in Fairbanks. During the summer when the sun sank below the horizon for only an hour I used to get up early each morning, walk across town with a book in hand to serve as an altar boy the daily 7:30 Mass at the little wooden Catholic church on the banks of the Chena River. After Mass I came back across the bridge, stopped at the log-cabin public library, checked in the book I had brought and checked out a new one for that day. I read a book a day. They were mostly novels, adventure stories, about foreign lands and peoples. This was the start of my intellectual itinerary. It started in the imagination, in developing the capacity to project myself into the lives and situations of others. The book you’ve read, Kindred, is largely about this starting point of the ability to project yourself by imagination into the lives of those living in slavery 175 years ago. I found in reading it that I so put myself by imagination into the unrelenting brutality and debasement inflicted on those slaves that I nearly vomited. Perhaps for most the first stage of an intellectual itinerary is the fascinating and winding road of the imagination.

By way of an aside, you might guess that I was—and still am—a bit compulsive, making a project of reading a book a day as a 16-year-old. But then, if you live in Fairbanks, Alaska, it is

very helpful to get out of there and experience a bigger world through books and the imagination! One day my older sister, a senior in high school while I was a sophomore, cozied up to me in a most unexpected way, coming into my room where I had my nose in a book. She asked me rather sweetly—again most unusual behavior—what good book I had read recently. I told her about a book by the Scottish novelist A.J. Cronin called, Keys of the Kingdom. (Cronin was a doctor and often wrote novels about nurses and at 16 I thought nurses were sexy!) My sister seemed quite interested in this book I described. As you have probably guessed, she wrote a book report for school on that book unread by her. (Don't try that here!) When she got back her grade, I learned what she had done, for she was enraged at me because she got the first "A-" in her life because the teacher wrote in red ink that she had the wrong title of the book. It was not Keys of the Kingdom, but The Keys of the Kingdom. I was once more her insufferable, dumb, dull, bookworm of a brother! My sister went on to be valedictorian of her class, went to Wellesley, U.W. Medicine, and is a psychiatrist. I'm still not sure she has read a book at least not voluntarily, but she reads people and me like a book! You might say she found The Keys of her Intellectual Kingdom by a different itinerary than mine.

The first stage in my intellectual itinerary was the imagination, the second stage needed to be discipline, method. My mind needed to be trained, put in shape, toughened, made fit. Imagination was not enough. You can discipline the mind and give it needed structure and method in multiple ways: science, math, music, nursing, the disciplines of social studies, etc. My mind got in shape through language: German, Latin, Greek. I learned mental structure, order, organization, method, precision, memory, discipline through the structures of languages, especially Latin. (Hooray for Dr. Dave Madsen... you will get to know him almost for sure!) Somewhere along anyone's intellectual itinerary there needs to be a long stretch of getting the mind slimmed down, in shape, resilient, toned up, able to focus and exert itself. I did it through hundreds of credits of classical languages in college, all of which I have since forgotten, but the structures and channels of the mind carved by them have not disappeared. Again, don't forget I am just a bit obsessive, but it's good to obsess through mental methods.

Then along came the queen of all sciences, by far the most impactful discipline in my entire academic life, philosophy. I don't mean learning the history of philosophy but rather learning how to think philosophically. After imagination and method, I was ready for it, ready to go deep, ready to take on the ultimate questions underlying reality. I loved it; swam in it; high-dived into it; snorkeled and splashed in it. Simply put, I developed the habit of thinking philosophically and it has changed my whole subsequent life. I remember one professor, Father Gordon Moreland, who taught metaphysics, the philosophy of being. He allowed us to write only one two-page, double-spaced, typed paper (he wouldn't turn a second page) each week on how we had thought philosophically in the previous week in connection with the course. How I worked on those papers and loved them! No one else's thought, only my own and my own at depth. I remember that one week Fr. Moreland assigned us to go outside, sit down in the grass, pick up a single blade of grass and for one full hour contemplate the difference between the being and the whatness of the blade of grass, that it was and that it was something. Then write about it. That opened up the floodgate of philosophy. (I love asking students I bump into here on campus whether they like philosophy. If they are coming out of a philosophy course I'll ask, "Isn't that the course where you get the distinction between being and essence?" Some will say, "Yes, father, that's where we get it, but I don't get it!" Philosophy may not be the best part of your intellectual itinerary where you go deep and learn to think deeply, but it was mine and

I'm still travelling through those woods and sitting in that grass. Some other subject may need to take you deep and develop in you a new habit of thinking.

Ultimately, like all of your professors, by whatever route they got there intellectually, they and I gave years of our lives to trace some simple question to the very end of exploration, to travel to intellectual destinations where no one else had ever gone before us. This part of the intellectual itinerary is called the doctoral dissertation. It was the boon and the bane of our lives and it is what made us to be and gave us the right to call ourselves, "professors"! Find out what journey to no-man's, no-woman's land your professors went in their doctoral dissertations. I went further than anyone had ever gone in exploring "Sexual-Affective Integration in Celibacy". That is, what is the process for a person like me with a vow not to marry or to engage in sexual activity to become an integrated, full human person, incorporating his or her sexual reality and relational capacity into his or her maturity? I went so far in exploring this subject that I wrote a 1265-page doctoral dissertation on the subject. (I told you I was obsessive!) One Jesuit wag once commented publicly on this length saying: "Every time Fr. Steve had a problem with celibacy, he wrote another paragraph!" Not true! I went to the lengths I went because I had a keen, overpowering intellectual passion to understand the human person, integration, one's spirituality, myself, and my way of life.

I could continue this example of my own intellectual itinerary into how this connected with and was applied to what I have done for the last 30 years as a Jesuit priest and a university president, and importantly how it has empowered me to be involved in action in critical social issues of justice and humanity. But I will spare you that part and remain focused in this academic convocation on the intellectual itinerary itself which you are likely to travel at Seattle U as part of your total development in these next few years or in graduate school beyond them. Let me just say two things.

One, in an intellectual itinerary you retain all the earlier parts of the journey and continue to walk them not only in memory, but in what your mind has become and how you think because of them. For me that's the power to project through imagination, having a trained mind through method and discipline, being able to go deep by the habit of thinking philosophically, and knowing with an intellectual passion that takes me to ends where I alone have gone.

My second comment is that, surprisingly, I have discovered only in the last dozen years, from age 60 on, that by far the most enjoyable stage of my intellectual itinerary is the current one by way of reading poetry. It is so good, I'd almost trade all that has gone before for it; but I know I can only savor poetry because of the whole of the previous intellectual itinerary which I have travelled. I do wonder, however, whether poetry is, in fact, the highest way of knowing, surpassed only by prayer.

Don't worry, I won't end with a poem or a prayer! I will end, rather, saying to you that this university and these your professors are committed above all to your intellectual journey and that they will honor and foster and protect that journey of yours above all else. Your professors will accompany you part of the way, point out the route to you at the start or at times help you get back on track, but at some juncture you must set off on your own and make it your own wonderful, life-defining, intellectual itinerary. Good luck! See you along the way! Welcome to the intellectual life of Seattle University!