On the Point of It All

Our undergraduate years are inevitably shaped by ideas about the purpose of university education, and these ideas have everything to do with the purpose of life. We do not have the luxury of evading such big issues. Our only options are to take responsibility for the ideas that shape our lives, or to accept passively the ideas that happen to have made their way into our thinking.

To make this point, I ask students on the first day of my introductory philosophy class, “Why are you here?” This tends to confirm their worst stereotypes of philosophers, but it usually starts an important conversation that unfolds roughly along these lines:

Prof.: “So why are you here?”
Student: “Umm ... I am here to earn a degree, and this class is a step along the way.”
Prof.: “And, why are you interested in a degree?”
Student: “Well I eventually need to get a job, and it will be hard to get the kind of job I want without a degree.”
Prof.: “Okay. But why do you want that kind of job?”
Student: “I just like it. It also pays well. I expect to have a family someday, and I’ll need a good income to provide for them.”
Prof.: “Makes sense. But why that way of life—with the respectable job, the decent income, the big happy family, and all that?”
Student: “I don’t know what to say. It just seems like a good life to me.”

And there it is, just beneath the surface of a decision as simple as attending class: an idea about the good life for human beings, and about what a university education has to do with a good life. Convictions about such matters are not at all obvious. People have lots of different ideas about what makes life worthwhile and about the value of college education. Nor are any such convictions trivial. We literally bet our lives on some answer or other.

So why are you here? What answer have you brought with you? Where did it come from? Does it hold up to scrutiny? You need an answer to these questions in order to know how to spend your time at Baylor, and to judge whether you are spending it well or poorly.

Our culture packs all sorts of answers into your mental luggage. You can probably recite the familiar litany: college is about having a good time before settling down, making professional connections (maybe even finding a spouse), launching a career, and preparing for leadership in society. These answers are fine as far as they go (though some are obviously finer than others). Rather than dwelling on their limitations, I want to draw your attention to an answer you will rarely hear outside of college. You may even have to strain to hear it within.
At Baylor, the answer resounds from the northernmost wall of Pat Neff hall, which bears the words of Proverbs 3:15: “Wisdom is more precious than rubies.” This wall is a clue to the best answer I know about the point of a university education.

To unlock the clue notice that the wall upholds wisdom, not mere knowledge, as the preeminent intellectual value. Knowledge is our best estimation of the truth in some domain, given our most rigorous methods of inquiry. We prize knowledge because it is useful. What we know allows us to promote our aims—health, security and prosperity, for example. But knowledge alone does not tell us which aims to promote, in what order, and at what costs. Knowledge therefore can be used well or badly. The very same bit of knowledge can be used to bless and to oppress. We may know, for example, that malaria spreads by insect bites. But this knowledge alone does not tell us what to do for vulnerable populations. Indeed, this bit of knowledge is just as useful for harming as for loving our neighbors. To use what we know well in our own lives and in society, we need to understand how all the things we know fit together, and how to live in light of all that we know. We need, in a word, wisdom. Wisdom integrates all that we know into a meaningful whole that directs our lives toward their proper end, and that is why it is so highly prized.

By enrolling at Baylor you have become part of a community whose highest end is wisdom. Baylor has this in common with any genuine intellectual community. But Baylor is importantly different in one respect. As a Christian intellectual community we proclaim, with the Apostle Paul, “the unsearchable riches of Christ” by which “the wisdom of God” has been made known through the church (Ephesians 3: 8-10). At Baylor you are invited into the common human project of understanding how all things hold together, and into the distinctively Christian project of understanding how all things “hold together in Him” (Colossians 1:17)—another truth enshrined in Baylor architecture.

The pursuit of wisdom lumbers forward by means of a complicated back-and-forth process. In our laboratories and libraries we push back the frontiers of knowledge by means of research. But each new thing we learn about ourselves and the world raises new questions about how all the things we know fit together. In conversation with the past and with one another, we reflect on what it all means and how we are to live in light of all we know. This conversation, in turn, raises further questions for reflection and research, and so on it goes. The point of a Baylor education, I am suggesting, is to equip you with the skills necessary to take part in this quest for wisdom and to sustain it for a lifetime. The skills required for the pursuit of wisdom—critical thinking, effective communication, civic engagement and Christian perspective—form the most general aims of a Baylor education. (See Dr. Null’s reflections on the four general education outcomes.)

You will spend your years at Baylor surrounded by a community whose very walls call you to seek wisdom and to find it in Christ. Wisdom may not be what you have come to Baylor looking for, but it is the most valuable thing you can find while you are here.