



**GUTENBERG COLLEGE**

**McKENZIE STUDY CENTER • ART PROJECT**

**1883 UNIVERSITY STREET • EUGENE, OR 97403**

## Two Challenges

by Jack Crabtree

You new graduates are about to begin the next and the most substantial phase of your lives. I would like to issue two challenges. The first is important, but I confess that it is not essential. The second is absolutely essential.

My first challenge is this: I urge you to continue your education in the humanities, in the liberal arts, in the history of ideas, and in the lessons of history itself—and to continue to do so for the rest of your lives.

We at Gutenberg College did not give you an education; we sought instead to give you the tools with which to continue a lifetime of educating yourself. That is true of every college or university, of course. No one can get an education in the four short years he or she attends college. But seldom do college graduates seek to advance their liberal arts education beyond their college years. After college, they work hard, make money, play hard, buy things, watch movies and television, go to church, and take care of their kids. "Not that there's anything wrong with that," as Seinfeld would say. Many wise, godly, and responsible people will live very meaningful and significant lives apart from any serious intellectual pursuits. You don't need to continue your liberal arts education to thrive as a person, nor to be a good citizen, nor to succeed, nor to enter the Kingdom of Heaven. But though it is non-essential, continuing your education has tremendous benefits that I would encourage you to consider seriously.

I have not been able to analyze for myself nor articulate what all the benefits of a liberal arts education are. I am not sure I am even capable of such an analysis. Most of the benefits of education are intangible and elusive. But let me discuss, by way of example, an important way in which my ongoing education as a tutor at Gutenberg College has been unmistakably beneficial to me.

Modern man takes for granted two important beliefs, which he believes as surely as he believes anything: (1) that none of our stories are true; and (2) that the Judeo-Christian worldview is intellectually and morally inferior. These two beliefs are among the assumptions which underlie everything that gets said, everything that gets thought, and everything that gets decided in the modern world in which we live.

Now these two beliefs are decidedly contrary to the Christian gospel. The Christian gospel calls us to live our lives in the light of the fact that what it declares is true. We are to believe it precisely because it claims to be the truth. But if none of the stories that anyone tells himself can

be true—as modern man assumes—then the Christian gospel cannot be true. It can be *believed*, but it cannot be true. But if it is not true, then—from its own perspective—we have lost our reason to believe it.

The second modern assumption is also contrary to the Christian gospel. Implicit in the gospel's claim to be true is its claim to be intellectually and morally superior to any other story. It is good and rational to believe the story the gospel tells. If it were not, the gospel would not be worthy of our belief. But if, according to the modern assumption, it is neither morally good nor intellectually respectable to believe the gospel, then it would be wrong for me to do so. To the spirit of the modern age, the gospel loses.

My ongoing education at Gutenberg has helped me to confront the spirit of the modern age head-on and reject its dogmas once and for all. The spirit of the modern age can only thrive in the dark; it loses its power in the light of knowledge.

When we have no intimate personal acquaintance with the thought of those philosophers and intellectuals who have constructed the spirit of the modern age, we are much more likely to sit in awe of them. We are much more inclined to defer to their brilliance and superior wisdom. In my relative ignorance and lack of familiarity with a philosopher's work, it is easy to be intimidated by what I assume must be decisive arguments by a brilliant thinker. But when one reads and becomes familiar with that same philosopher's work, it is not so easy to remain intimidated. One does not find decisive arguments. One finds subjective and tendentious arguments by a mere mortal who is using obscure language and eccentric reasoning to avoid bowing his knee to God. Through my ever more intimate knowledge of the works of the influential architects of the modern age, I have come to see how unconvincing they are. They have joined forces to declare that none of our stories is true. But not one of them has ever shown how this makes any sense. Of course there is a Truth. There has to be. Somebody's story is true! And no one has shown me otherwise. So long as Foucault and Nietzsche and Sartre and Heidegger are just names—legends of great men who showed us that truth does not exist and that Christianity is reprehensible—then who are we to argue? But once we have become partners with them in the conversation, once we have heard them say their piece, these legends shrink into mere men—men who are fallible, prejudiced, sloppy, proud, and wrong. Whereas once they were intellectual Paul Bunyans who could destroy all of metaphysics with the swipe of a hand, a little direct understanding of their writings shows them to be just another set of people around a coffeehouse table trying to rationalize their rebellion against God.

The point I am trying to make is this: the ongoing liberal arts education that I receive as a tutor at Gutenberg College is a very important factor in the continuing confirmation of my belief that the Christian gospel is true. I can say with ever increasing confidence that Christianity tells the true story. And I am confident that is so to the extent that I have heard everyone else say his or her piece; for none of their stories makes as much sense as the Christian gospel and the worldview that underlies it.

Now you may not agree with me about the truth of Christianity, but perhaps you can agree with me about this: whatever story we are convinced is true, we are much better off being confident our convictions are true because we have listened to all parties to the debate and have come to

understand—personally and directly—what the opposing voices have to say. As I continue my education, those who oppose my worldview cease to speak in the tongues of angels; I come to understand that they are ordinary men, engaged in mortal conversation and making mistakes that mortals are inclined to make. That is why today I am urging you to continue your education. The more you know and the more you understand, the more the true story will shine forth as true. It will grab your attention and demand that you believe. And as Martha Stewart is so fond of saying, "It's a good thing!"

I have a second challenge to make. Perhaps all across the land this month commencement speakers are urging new college graduates to work toward the solution of our social problems. They are urging people to combat racism, poverty, prejudice, discrimination, injustice, violence, and any number of various social evils. My challenge to you very first graduates of Gutenberg College is that you combat and seek to transcend the greatest social evil of them all: selfishness. Selfishness may not be the root of all evil; but it is certainly at the root of much of it. It is undoubtedly a significant contributor to every social problem we face. If we could take our magic wand and wipe out selfishness overnight, it seems plausible that every one of our social problems would evaporate with it. But it would go way beyond solving our social problems and eradicating social evil. It would literally transform our everyday lives. Along with social problems like racism, violence, and injustice, it would remove the source of virtually every interpersonal stress and trauma. With it would go pettiness, envy, jealousy, slander, lying, cheating, sarcasm, mockery, and unkindness of every kind. So. . . you want to do something socially constructive? Stamp out selfishness!

Unfortunately, the rejection of selfishness is a hopelessly individual responsibility. I can only effectively put an end to selfishness in me. It's the nature of the beast. I have no access to your inner commitments such that I could control them. But I *can* make an existential commitment to resist selfishness in my own heart and attitudes. There is no single more important project I can undertake than the transcendence of my natural-born selfishness. No accomplishment in all of life is more impressive than to have authentically learned to live for God and the things which please God rather than to have lived for myself and the things which please myself. No building built, no wealth amassed, no army conquered, no artwork created, no argument articulated, no book written, no research done, no sale closed, no pleasure experienced, no nothing at all can even come close to being as impressive as selfishness set aside. A poor, humble man—with nothing tangible to show for his life—who lived for righteousness and truth and God rather than for himself lived a vastly more successful life than the self-absorbed businessman who acquired the whole world. It is not Bill Gates or Michael Jordan that I hold up to you to emulate. I hold up Jesus—the man for others. The man who did not regard equality with God a thing to be grasped, but who emptied himself of all divine prerogatives and humbly became one of us. The man who was obedient to his Father even to the point of sacrificing his own life for others. If Jesus would sacrifice his very own life, can we not reject selfishness at least enough to sacrifice our time, our energy, our comfort, our convenience, and our possessions?

In any case, that is my challenge. I know it is a difficult one. It is so terribly unnatural and so terribly frightening. But I'm afraid this challenge is not optional—it is essential. It is essential if I am going to make any contribution to the improvement of social relations. And it is essential if I am going to save my own soul. In the end, there are two kinds of people. One kind confronts

one's inherent selfishness and defends it as the only way to survive in this world. The other kind confronts one's selfishness and flinches out of revulsion, crying out to God for mercy and rescue. The former have no future; their end is destruction. The latter—those who take a decisive stand against selfishness—theirs is the Kingdom of Heaven. That is what makes this challenge so essential. Opposing selfishness is a matter of life and death. My challenge is this: Choose life! Reject selfishness!

*Copyright October 1998 by McKenzie Study Center, an institute of Gutenberg College.*