

Dean's Annual Address
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And the Word is . . .

Words are wonderful things. The poet Emily Dickinson was fascinated with words—as most poets are. She delighted in the way they sounded, their minute differences of denotation, the rich depths of their connotations. In her late twenties, she wrote a friend, “We **used** to think, Joseph, when I was an unsifted girl and you so scholarly that words were cheap & weak. **Now** I don't know of anything so mighty. There are [those] to which I lift my hat when I see them sitting princelike among their peers on the page. Sometimes I write one, and look at his outlines till he glows as no sapphire.” Dickinson loved her “Lexicon,” or dictionary, which her niece described her reading “as a priest [reads] his breviary—over and over, page by page.” She religiously poured over Noah Webster's *American Dictionary of the English Language* (and one of her childhood friends was the granddaughter of the great American lexicographer).

Words remain popular even though many people egregiously misuse them. Each year a number of different groups select a Word of the Year: the most important word or phrase in the public arena, a term or expression that reveals something essential about life in that time. The German version, *Wort des*

Jahres began in 1971. The American Dialect Society's Word of the Year is the oldest English-language version and the only one decided by a vote of linguists rather than a commercial entity. In 2000, the year in which many of the first-year students were born, the word was *chad* (from the election controversy of that year). The Word of the Year in 2001, unsurprisingly was the now-ubiquitous term *9-11*. Some words enter our common vocabulary only briefly, but others make a permanent mark. *Tweet* was the word in 2009; *hashtag* in 2012. One of my favorites is *plutoed*, which means demoted or devalued, with reference to the former planet Pluto. Alas, that word never really caught on, did it? In 2016, it was *dumpster fire*, which was news to me when I looked it up. Do you all know that expression? (disastrous or chaotic situation). Does anyone know what the Word of the Year was in 2017? *Fake news*.

So I've decided to institute a Christ College Word of the Year in this, my first, Dean's Address. And I've done this for both pragmatic reasons as well as philosophical ones. Practically speaking, do you have any idea how difficult a task writing this kind of speech is? What can one possibly say that hasn't been said a hundred times before? What can I say that you might remember next month, or even next week? Do any of you—students and faculty alike--remember what the topic of the Dean's Address was even as recently as two years ago?

You see—it’s a daunting task. How do I say something both significant and memorable? My solution: give you a word to hang onto. If you don’t remember anything else about this talk, remember this word: **“Practice.”**

During my last couple of years at Seattle Pacific University, I taught a course called “Literature and Medicine,” primarily for pre-professional health sciences students and nursing majors. One of the essays we read was by Atul Gawande, a brilliant surgeon, as well as a staff writer for *The New Yorker* and the author of four books. In an essay called “The Learning Curve,” Gawande reflects on the role of practice in the life of a surgeon. Now most people when they think of the word *practice* in conjunction with a surgeon, probably think of the exercise of a profession or occupation, as in a medical practice or a law practice. In some ways the term *practice* is a fancier way of referring to a business operated by some kind of professional—more on that in a minute. There was even a television show about twenty years ago called “The Practice,” about a Boston law firm.

But Gawande is concerned with a different kind of practice crucial to the formation or training of good surgeons. While many people think that surgeons have particular gifts or talents of manual dexterity, sharp vision, or fluid hand-eye-coordination, Gawande says that’s not the case. The key trait of a good

surgeon is tenacity, the willingness to do something over and over and over again, in other words, to practice.

“The Learning Curve” opens with the story of the first time Gawande attempted to put in a central line, a type of catheter that is placed in a large vein that allows multiple IV fluids to be given and blood to be drawn. Gawande’s supervising physician, identified only as S, first tells him to collect the necessary equipment and prep the patient. When he thinks he’s ready to begin, she asks,

“Where’s the extra syringe for flushing the line when it’s in?” Damn. She went out and got it.

I felt for my landmarks. *Here* I asked with my eyes, not wanting to undermine the patient’s confidence any further. She nodded. I numbed the spot with lidocaine. (“You’ll feel a stick and burn now, sir.”) Next I took the three inch needle in hand and poked it through the skin. I advanced it slowly and uncertainly, a few millimeters at a time. This is a big goddamn needle, I kept thinking. I couldn’t believe I was sticking it into someone’s chest. I concentrated on maintaining a steep angle of entry, but kept spearing his clavicle instead of slipping beneath it.

“Ow,” he shouted.

Sorry, I said. S. signaled with a kind of surfing hand gesture to go underneath the clavicle. This time it went in. I drew back on the syringe. Nothing. She pointed deeper. I went in deeper. Nothing. I withdrew the needle, flushed out some bits of tissue clogging it, and tried again.

“Ow!”

Too steep again. I found my way under the clavicle once more. I drew the syringe back. Still nothing. He’s too obese I thought. S. slipped on gloves and a gown. “How about I have a look? she said. I handed her the needle and stepped aside. She plunged the needle in, drew back on the syringe, and, just like that, she was in. We’ll be done shortly, she told the patient.

Gawande bumbles through the next steps, but finally the line is in and subsequent x-rays show that he has not damaged the lung, much to his relief. His attending physician lets him make these mistakes, allows him to put the patient through some discomfort, so that he can practice. But his second attempt to put in a central line goes no better than the first. A few days later, he fails again with a third patient. At the time of writing this essay, in his seventh year of training, he has put in over 100 central lines, but he still occasionally makes mistakes.

Gawande comments: “In surgery, as in anything else, skill, confidence, and judgement are learned through experience, haltingly and humiliatingly. Like the tennis player and the oboist and the guy who fixes hard drives, we need practice to get good at what we do. There is one difference in medicine, though; we practice on people.” Practicing in medicine can lead to mistakes resulting in discomfort, pain, complications, and even death. Yet without practice, new generations of doctors, nurses, or therapist would never emerge. And even seasoned health professionals continually undergo learning curves, with the development of new medical procedures and technologies. The need for physicians to practice (in the sense of trying) before they can establish a practice (in the sense of a business organization) poses numerous ethical dilemmas.

Gawande’s story suggests some of the noteworthy complexities of the word or concept of *practice*. In one sense it refers to repeating something over and over, often making mistakes, in order to learn. Practice is needed for making free throws, for playing the piano, for mastering video games, for writing poetry. And practice plays a crucial role in education, in general. Many Americans have an odd tendency to assume that people are either innately smart or not so smart, discounting an ability to learn and grow. In the US intelligence is widely believed to be something one simply has, or has to some degree. In contrast, students in

Europe and Asia more often assume that people can get smart, increase their intelligence, through learning. Americans often think “that what you can learn has been delimited in advance by your level of smartness—which I something fixed and immutable” (Leamson). I’m no good at math; I’m a slow reader; I can’t write. But once you tell yourself that you are no good at math, you quash your ability to learn how to be better at math. And a crucial component of that learning process is practicing.

Now what do these assumptions about “smartness” mean for honors students, those who academically gifted and motivated? There’s a number of possible scenarios, but here’s three that I encourage you to eschew: First, don’t beat yourself up when you don’t do well in something, like failing to insert a central line. Second, and alternatively, don’t assume that you are “smart” so you don’t need to practice something. And third, don’t avoid doing things that are difficult. Push yourself to try to learn things outside your comfort zone: in the past ten years I’ve participated in a discussion group on string theory (I only understood about half of what was going on), I learned how to play bridge (I’m not a numbers person), and I took a voice class with a group of college first-year students, all of whom could sing considerably better than me. All of these activities required a lot of practice and resulted in many mistakes, but I did get

better at each of them. As Gawande puts it, I “learned through experience, haltingly and humiliatingly.” Practice did not make perfect, but it did result in improvement and learning.

In his hit song “10,000 Hours,” which is about his long journey to fame, Seattle great Macklemore raps, “the greats weren't great because at birth they could paint, the greats were great because they paint a lot.”

The song’s title refers to the so-called 10,000 hour rule cited by Malcolm Gladwell in a book called *Outliers*: that you must do something for 10,000 hours before you can become an expert. That’s not to say that practicing 10,000 hours guarantees success; I’m never going to be an opera singer, or rapper, for that matter. Gladwell cautions, “Practice isn't a SUFFICIENT condition for success. I could play chess for 100 years and I'll never be a grandmaster. The point is simply that natural ability requires a huge investment of time in order to be made manifest.”

Clearly one needs some degree of natural ability in order to learn. Someone who is under 5 feet is probably never going to make the VU basketball team. But even someone like Michael Jordan or LeBron James needs to practice his free throws. Natural ability alone is not enough; it takes practice, deliberate

practice that involves pushing yourself, much repetition (writing and rewriting, reading and rereading), and frequent failure.

Christ College's belief in the need for practice informs the way the Freshman Program is structured, with the semester's grade being S or U, to allow practice and failure. Our belief in the need for practice is why we require writing and re-writing, moving through multiple drafts. For those of you who are hesitant to speak in public, pushing yourself to try it, once, and again and again, will make you more comfortable.

Yet another significant meaning of the word *practice* is found in the writing of moral philosopher Alistair MacIntyre. In *After Virtue*, MacIntyre defines and recommends practices as central contributions to human flourishing. According to MacIntyre, practices are co-operative human activities with certain self-established standards of excellence that are passed on from groups to individuals, who in turn follow the practices, teach them to others, and, when appropriate, revise the practice. Here is MacIntyre's definition: A practice is "any coherent and complex form of socially established cooperative human activity through which goods internal to that form of activity are realized in the course of trying to achieve those standards of excellence which are appropriate to, and partially

definitive of, that form of activity, with the result that human powers to achieve excellence, and human conceptions of the ends and goods involved, are systematically extended” (*After Virtue*, 2nd ed. Notre Dame UP, 1997, p. 187).

Macintyre is following the practices of moral philosophers in giving us such a complex mouthful of a definition, but his key points are as follows:

- 1) a practice is an activity, the doing of something, but it’s larger than a single act; it’s a complex system of actions. Farming is a practice; planting a watermelon is not.
- 2) Practices can produce external goods--the money one makes by farming--but also internal goods--the kinds of character and virtue produced by following the practice of farming
- 3) Practices take place in communities. To enter into a practice one must learn from current practitioners. They are cooperative human activities. So many people talk about them as “Social practices.”
- 4) Practices have their own standards of excellence and set of rules that must be learned.
- 5) Both the history of a practice and the future of a practice are important: those who participate in the practice must learn and draw

on the history (tradition) but also be open to improving the practice and changing the rules, within the community.

- 6) The virtues are qualities that we develop when we pursue a practice following the highest possible standards and with the goal of the goods internal to that practice rather than for external reward.

When people use terms like “medical practice” or a “law practice,” then, they are referring to something more like MacIntyre’s concept of a social practice. These professional practices typically require specialized knowledge and long and intensive academic preparation; they have their own histories, traditions, standards, and activities; they affirm and instill certain virtues, such as a sense of justice or a desire to heal people. However, in our society today, the so-called professions also tend to involve higher salaries and status, external goods that can all too quickly warp the practice. But I digress. Let’s get back to Christ College.

Pursuing a college education is a social practice; it is only done well in community, apprenticeship with more expert practitioners. It has its own traditions--academic robes, convocations, plenary sessions, texts and experiments and performances. It is respectful of and draws on previous knowledge. One never learns anything ex nihilo. It has rules--ranging from high standards of honesty and the pursuit of truth, no matter what, to the smaller details of

academic citation, correct grammar, or following correct lab procedures. As a social practice, college education in general, and a Christ College educational experience in particular, has its own culture, vocabulary, and standards, as the seniors have come to know well and as the first-year students are beginning to encounter. And while tradition and authority are important, educational practice is always open to change and improvement; in fact, it paradoxically relies on both the knowledge and embrace of the past as well as the creation and development of the future, in terms of new knowledge, technologies, and practices.

As a social practice, a college education can be pursued for external rewards: jobs, careers, professions, credentials, money, recognition, status. And I'm not suggesting that such external goods are inherently or always bad; one must eat and support a family and pay off one's student loans. But we also should value how education in general, and a liberal arts education in particular, possesses many internal goods, virtues that are formed in us through our pursuit of learning. Macintyre says that any practice with internal goods and standards of excellence requires the virtues of justice, courage, and honesty (*After Virtue* 191). Mark Schwehn, a former Dean of Christ College, argues that "the conduct of academic life . . . depends upon such spiritual virtues as humility, faith, self-sacrifice, and charity" (*Exiles* 45), noting that learning has long flourished in

communities formed by the conscious practice of spiritual virtues, communities ranging from “the Platonic Academy to the teachers of ancient Israel to St. Augustine to the medieval university to Pico della Mirandola’s disputatious Florence, or even to the small colleges of early nineteenth-century America” (45). Schwehn emphasizes the way in which communities shaped by virtues produce learning; Macintyre the way in which certain kinds of communities, those engaged in social practices, produce virtues. The social practice of college education and virtues such as patience, humility, faith, and friendship participate in an intricate dance in which first one and then the other leads, one cultivating the other in return.

I want to mention one other way to think about practice that offers some moves for the dance. Besides disciplined repetition and Macintyre’s tradition-formed social activity, practice can also refer to the **doing** of something rather than merely the **theorizing** or thinking about something. In doing, something becomes embodied, a physical reality, incarnated in the here and now. Many religious traditions, including the Christian tradition, have embraced the idea of spiritual practices: concrete physical deeds or tangible acts like fasting, walking a labyrinth, meditating, washing someone’s feet, practicing hospitality in a soup kitchen, *lectio divina*, or deep breathing. While the term *spiritual* sometimes

refers only to an intangible, transcendent reality, in the Christian tradition, human spirituality is grounded in the material world. Theologian Don Saliers says that in the Christian tradition, “The divine breath entered the dust of the ground, and the Son of God came in stinking human flesh. [Spirituality then is] our embodied humanity fully alive before God and neighbor, stretched by story, stretched by touch, stretched by song, stretched by eating and drinking, bathing, anointing.” Such practices, says Craig Dykstra, “are . . . patterns of communal action that create openings in our lives where the grace, mercy, and presence of God may be made known to us, and through us, to others” (qtd. *Practicing* 206). So practice your faith, whatever that might be, in concrete, tangible ways. And those spiritual practices will enter the dance of learning and virtues to make it a beautiful and holy activity.

So, remember the word *practice* and remember *to practice* during this academic year: 1) Practice in your learning through effort and repetition and growth; 2) Engage in the social practice of the academic world by learning in community, adopting traditions and standards, cultivating intellectual virtues; and 3) Choose a spiritual practice to reinforce and strengthen your growth in knowledge and wisdom.