

# SPEECH AT THE RIVIER SCHOLARS CONVOCATION

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**Virginia M. Ryan, Ph.D.\***

**Associate Professor, Department of Religious Studies, Rivier College**



**I**t is an honor to be the speaker for the 2007 Scholars Convocation. This is a beautiful, warm spring day but it has been a particularly difficult week for colleges and universities who stand in solidarity with the Virginia Tech community. Let us continue to keep them in our prayers and thoughts.

I'm very glad that you are here, despite the temptations of the 65+ temperature outside and I warmly welcome your family, friends and general support staff! We, faculty, administration, and staff want to celebrate with you and formally acknowledge your accomplishments and commitment to academic excellence.

We live in a culture that likes to be casual, in our speech and attire. But we, all of us, are "dressed for success" today in our academic robes. Our atypical appearance helps to mark this day, this ceremony, as special and important. As you put your gowns on today, and looked around the room at your friends and colleagues, you may have sensed the transformations that have taken place in your own life, or you have been aware that this ceremony is the beginning of the end of your college years and the beginning of a future that may be still unsettled for some and for others, planned and certain.

One needs intelligence, for sure, to maintain a GPA of 3.5 but intelligence is not enough. It requires dedication, discipline, organization, sublimation of some goals for the sake of higher ones, and passion for learning and understanding. As all of us congratulate you, I want to add a reminder about your future that comes from the gospel of Luke, chapter 12: "Much will be required of the person entrusted with much, and still more will be demanded of the person entrusted with more." These words are addressed to all of us in this room, but I'd like you, our scholars, to take them in especially today.

When I was asked by Dean DeCiccio to speak to you today, I knew that I wanted to be able to share some of your stories. Over the past month or so, I've interviewed students, two faculty members and one administrator and asked each of them to reflect on the question: How did you get here? How did you get to this point in your life? As I tell you some of these stories today, I will try to place them within the larger context of Rivier College, a Catholic liberal arts institution of higher learning. Our mission statement states that we, as a college community are "committed to the faith heritage, intellectual tradition, and social teachings of the Roman Catholic Church." We strive to educate "the whole person in the context of an academic community that cultivates critical thought, sound judgment, and respect for all people." We hope to create an environment where we will "take responsibility for ourselves and for others, and engage in dialogue about basic human issues facing society, especially the plight of the poor and powerless." As a college community, we are part of a larger story of the Church and of Jesus, a master storyteller himself, who also became the story told.

Does it make any difference that you are scholars in a college that is Catholic and is committed to a broad education in the liberal arts, that is, a college that, in addition to professional courses of study, requires a core study of the social sciences, natural sciences, fine arts, literature, and the humanities?



Yes. Eric Drouart, professor in the Business Department, reminded me earlier this week that the liberal arts are like yeast in flour. They encourage and develop the important dimensions of communication, critical thought, and openness to world.

The public commitment to the Catholic and liberal arts traditions can be seen in the presence of a Religious Studies Department, an active Campus Ministry, co-curricular activities, volunteer and service programs, the Humanities series, the college-wide programs such as Engaging the Times, Heritage Day, Baccalaureate and Convocation liturgies. Faculty, staff and administration are always trying to find ways of making the mission of the college more visible to students and the local community.

I would like to set the context for my remarks today. You are part of a very long tradition that has reflected on questions of ultimate meaning and on the good and what is essential for human flourishing and planetary well-being. A Catholic liberal arts education ought to be transformative in two senses. It ought to be an experience that transforms the one who learns and it ought to encourage the kind of engagement with the world that is transformative.

I'd like to focus on several characteristics of the Catholic intellectual and social traditions, as they are enfolded in the more personal and subtle ways in the lives of students, faculty and administration. Each person here today has a story that is as precious as the ones I heard in my interviews and I wish that I could have interviewed all of you. I hope that in telling you about those I interviewed you will find common threads that make for the intricate fabric of the Rivier College Catholic liberal arts experience and reflect on the ways that you have transformed and been transformed by the college.

## TRUST

Catholicism takes seriously God's pronouncement in Genesis that the created order is good. The universe, and all that is in it, is truly good! Whether we research, investigate or study the world through sociology, psychology, nursing, business, education, philosophy, theology, literature, or the sciences, we can trust that in seeking the truth, we will find the source of all that is. Everything has the potential to mediate God's presence – all is a potential door to the sacred, a sacrament. One need not be afraid of questioning, discovering, of knowledge, for a Catholic sensibility embraces all seeking of truth as the path to a good and loving God.

Richard Smart, one of the students here today, experienced this in the laboratory. Through his curiosity, nurtured by his mother, he began at an early age to ask how it is exactly that “mighty oaks from a tiny acorn grow.” He came to understand that faith and reason are not in competition but are, as the late Pope John Paul II said: “like two wings on which the human spirit rises to the contemplation of truth” (*Fides et ratio*). The wondrous and exciting experience of biology classes and labs with Drs. Susan Barbaro, Sue Cooke, and Mark Bolt have helped him to really understand what the inscription “To God through science” means on the front of Mendel Hall.

## INCARNATIONAL ENGAGEMENT WITH THE WORLD

Pope John Paul II also said that “Christianity is an attitude of ‘deep amazement at the human person's worth and dignity’” (*Redemptor hominis*). The Catholic tradition takes seriously the human condition and our responsibility to work for justice and peace so that the conditions for human flourishing and the well being of our home, the earth, can occur. In the social teaching of the Catholic Church, the principles of the common good and a preferential option for the poor provide us with lenses to correct a vision of reality that is too often distorted by the ideologies of radical individualism, unbridled power, and cynicism. Cassie Anganes Van Der Hyde came to Rivier with a well-developed desire to serve others.



But it was here that she developed her particular gifts through nursing. She finds a deep connection to others by caring for the bodies of those she serves. As she put it: “I have always enjoyed connecting to people in the emotional sense, but nursing has taught me to connect to people by bringing healing and ministering to their physical needs the way as Jesus did.” Cassie’s desire to serve was deepened when she traveled to Honduras, along with other River students and faculty and members of a local parish, where she was able to participate with one of her professors, Mary Ann Breen, in bringing wholeness and healing to the people they touched. Professor Breen taught Cassie how to be compassionate without being “sappy” or “silly” or “touchy-feely.” But Cassie has also found a home in the liberal (or perhaps they are “liberating”) arts. She came to love writing and reading through the contagious passion Dr. Tim Doherty has for his field. Through Dr. Menke’s history class, she was encouraged to strive for excellence and hone her critical thinking skills. As many of you know, Martin Menke sets high standards, not looking for correct answers but genuine understanding.

Stacey Reddington wants to pay it forward by taking up the mantle of her third grade teacher, Ann Riggs, and teach in a school where the needs are greatest. As Stacey received love and support from her teacher during a difficult time, she wants to go back to Pawtucket and find work in a lower socioeconomic neighborhood school so that she can give the extra care and attention that she received as a third grader and help her students follow their dreams as she was encouraged to do. Stacey found the same kind the concern and dedication in Dr. Diane Connell when Stacey missed some classes last year after surgery. Diane took the time to work with Stacey so that she could complete her course work. She will take this example with her into the classroom.

Kristen Magro wants to use her degree in psychology to improve the human condition. She brought her natural and familial mediation skills to her studies and is looking forward to living out a preferential option for the mentally ill. For Kristen, the Catholic dimension of her education has supported and deepened her desire to help and serve others. Internships have allowed her to put her education into practice and use her skill and knowledge for the sake of others. She experienced this herself in the examples of Dr. Alan Goodman and Kate Ricci whose concern for Kristen’s well-being have allowed her to flourish academically and personally.

John Spellenberg told me that his Rivier College education encouraged a deeper engagement with the world in several ways. Through the Junior Honors Seminar “Beyond Religious Fundamentalism” and in his Honors Thesis research on Al Qaeda under the direction of Sr. Lucille Thibodeau, John has developed a more nuanced understanding of the complexity of the world we live in. Sr. Lucille’s excitement about his thesis was “contagious” and through her mentorship and the challenges Dr. Jerry Dolan presented him in his Business Ethics course, John has become a more engaged citizen of the United States and the world who knows how important it is to understand diverse perspectives, cultures, and the geopolitical problems in our world. Through Campus Ministry’s service activities, John has put this desire to engage the world into practice.

Both Stacey and John emphasized how their peers in the Honors program have been a source of inspiration and support. They have come to know firsthand what a “community of learners” means as these students have supported each other through the rigorous demands of the Honors program.

## **VOCATION**

Dr. Paula Williams shares Cassie’s love of nursing but, like Tim Doherty, she finds her vocation in teaching as well. Paula’s path to teaching in college (and her recently granted doctorate!) was in response to the needs of those in her care. Vocation is another characteristic of our Catholic heritage. As



Jesus tells us in the gospel of Luke, “Where your treasure is, your heart will be also.” Paula’s heart is with the nursing program here at Rivier. She desires to help others to see the masterpiece that each human being is. Their deficits, frailties, illness, old age spots and wrinkles make them all the more sacred. At Rivier, she has the freedom to speak of such things and encourage her faculty and students to share this vision.

Dean DeCiccio lives out his vocation here where the liberal arts are enhanced and deepened by the commitment to the Catholic intellectual and social tradition. I was reminded of Frederick Buechner’s idea that a vocation is “the place where your deep gladness meets the world’s deep need” as I listened to Al’s academic journey. He, like Tim Doherty, is dedicated to scholarship but, as I think of it, they are dedicated to scholarship for the sake of others. One of Al’s proudest moments occurred when he received the 2006 International Writing Centers Association Muriel Harris Outstanding Service Award at a meeting in Houston, Texas several weeks ago. His deep gladness, like Muriel Harris’s, is in serving the needs of faculty and students.

Tim Doherty echoed a similar sentiment as he told me that he wants to be trained in mediation through the Nashua Mediation Project so that he “can use his God-given abilities of language for others,” a lesson he learned so thoroughly through the mentorship and friendship of Peter Elbow during his doctoral studies at the University of Massachusetts at Amherst.

Our non-traditional students often find their vocations through paths that they have not forged but through walking a road with twists and turns. Ginny Day graduated from high school with what she calls “a five year plan.” It has turned out to be a bit longer than five years and not so much a plan but a response to a persistent call that persisted through emotionally difficult times, the birth of children, financial struggles and long hours of work. That call, her vocation, came in the gentle voice of Dr. Howard Muscott who continued to visit the garden store where she worked and ask: “When are you coming back to school?” She did and, in her words, “carved out and chose her profession – education. Through her student teaching, she has discovered that she is creative and loves her work and the children who are fortunate enough to have her in the classroom. As Howard has asked his students over the years, “What’s in your toolbox?” she is helping students discover what is in theirs. Through the Peace & Social Justice Institute several years ago, Ginny learned that she is part of a larger community of people of faith who desire to confront injustice and violence. Ginny will take this faith commitment into her classroom and help her students experience the miraculous gift of an education that brings liberation.

## COMMUNAL

Everyone I interviewed felt their accomplishments and successes would have been impossible without the communion of saints and cloud of witnesses that surround and support them in their endeavors. The Catholic view of the human person is that we are most fully alive and most fully ourselves in community. Interdependence and the bonds of community make it possible for us to grow and flourish and I hope that these stories will encourage you think of the ways in which the bonds of community have been the fertile ground of your own flourishing. Themes I’ve touched on today, trust, incarnational engagement with the world, vocation and community are running throughout all your experiences but you, like me, may not always have the opportunity to reflect on them. I hope that my remarks today might have inspired you to reflect on them and answer the two questions that served as prompts for my interviews: How did you get here today and how then shall I live?



In closing, I'd like to pass on some advice that comes from the cloud of witnesses who stand alongside you.

- Continue to be mindful of your deepest desires and the deepest needs of our fragile and vulnerable world.
- Recognize the places where these desires and needs meet for it is there you will find your heart.
- Always ask the question: for the sake of what, of whom do I do what I do?
- Be a good steward of your skills, practice, and professional life by keeping perspective and balance. I'd like to tell one more short story about the need for perspective and balance that has to do with Tim Doherty, who is not in our midst today. Tim planned to be here to celebrate with you and support me but learned early this week that his wife, Fern, planned a surprise weekend in New York to see one of the hottest new Broadway plays. Tim was torn (he was actually torn!) about his commitment here and the chance to have some quality time with one of the most important people in his life. He realized that this was the time to focus on deepening his relationship. Vocation will indeed cause us to feel the tension of multiple commitments and relationships.
- Continue to develop authentic sympathy and compassion.

This is what it means to pursue a profoundly religious way of life in the spirit of the Catholic liberal arts tradition.

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\* **Dr. VIRGINIA RYAN** is Associate Professor of Religious Studies at Rivier College since 1999. She earned a Ph.D. from Boston College in 1998 (Dissertation: "Physician-Assisted Suicide from a Social Justice Perspective"), M.A. in Special Education from Assumption College (1989), M. Div. from Andover Newton Theological School (1977), and B.A. from Boston College (1974). Dr. Ryan teaches courses in Bioethics, Christian Ethics, Environmental Theology, Biblical Theology, and Feminist Theology & Spirituality. Before becoming a college professor, Virginia was a hospital chaplain, patient representative, and youth minister. She is a Board Member and Section Convener (Theology, Ecology and Natural Science) of the College Theological Society and an active member in the Catholic Theological Society of America and the Society of Christian Ethics. She is on the Advisory Board and Ethics Committee of Notre Dame Health Care Center in Worcester, MA. Dr. Ryan has spoken to various groups on such topics as ecotheology, justice in the Church, spirituality and sexuality, and bioethics. She lives in Worcester, Massachusetts, married to Neil Castronovo. They have two daughters, Elizabeth, 21 and Annie, 15.