

President's Fall Convocation Address

**OneLeMoyne:
Water**

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WATER?

“There are these two young [dolphins] swimming along and they happen to meet an older [dolphin] swimming the other way, who nods at them and says, ‘Morning, boys. How’s the water?’ And the two young [dolphins] swim on for a bit, and then eventually one of them looks over at the other and goes, ‘What the hell is water?’”

“The point of the [dolphin] story is merely that the most obvious, important realities are often the ones that are hardest to see and talk about.”

A liberal arts education focuses on such realities. It teaches one how to think and “‘Learning how to think’ really means learning how to exercise some control over *how* and *what* you think. It means being conscious and aware enough to choose what you pay attention to and to choose how you construct meaning from experience.”

The real value of a liberal arts education “is supposed to be about: how to keep from going through your comfortable, prosperous, respectable adult life dead, unconscious, a slave to your head and to your natural default setting of being uniquely, completely, imperially alone day in and day out.”

By now some of you certainly realize, despite my substitution of “dolphins” for “fish,” that these remarks are from “This is Water: Some Thoughts, Delivered on a Significant Occasion, about Living a Compassionate Life” by David Foster Wallace. This essay was the philosopher’s 2005 commencement address at Kenyon College (Little, Brown 2009) and is considered one of the best commencement speeches of all time.

If we agree with him, Wallace places on us a tremendous obligation. Each of us, in our various roles here at Le Moyne, bears responsibility for constructing an environment where students learn the power and the necessity of mastering their own minds.

It is a task for which we, at a Catholic, Jesuit college of our size, are perfectly suited and for which we must constantly strive. Sounding quite Ignatian, Wallace states that by learning how to think and pay attention “it will actually be within your power to experience a crowded, hot, slow, consumer-hell-type situation as not only meaningful, but sacred, on fire with the same fire that lit the stars—compassion, love, the subsurface unity of all things.”

I will return to a consideration of life altering liberal arts education as conceived by Wallace, but let us first briefly review some “obvious and important realities” about Le Moyne.

OBVIOUS AND IMPORTANT REALITIES

You, my dear colleagues, have been working hard to meet the many tasks of running this fine Jesuit college in these challenging times. It is due to your investment of time and talent that we have largely managed to defy the effects of the economic and demographic downturns. Your dedication to Le Moyne is evident and the basis upon which our current and future success rests.

Many schools like ours have struggled over the last few years. By contrast, we have enjoyed phenomenal growth and achievement. We are receiving increasing regional and national attention, recognition and awards. Across the board we have a great story to tell. Reflecting the growing pride I sense among our alumni, one of our largest donors told me last month: “We always knew in our hearts that Le Moyne was a good school but it often seemed to struggle. It now appears to be on a path to become a great college. That is really exciting to watch.”

Let’s consider just a few of the remarkable things that have happened here at the College. Take philanthropy: we have been the recipient of amazing gifts—from the fifty million-dollar McDevitt gift, the largest single gift to any non-profit in the Syracuse region, to the Madden gift, naming the newly created

School of Business. In addition to Mr. Madden's seven million-dollar commitment, the second largest in the College's history, we received three additional million-dollar gifts during the last academic year—the Jack Collins, Harriet O'Leary and John and Kathy Purcell gifts—as well as many more in the tens and hundreds of thousands of dollars.

In an era when most other schools are delaying or cancelling construction projects, we are in the midst of transforming facilities across the campus, taking many of our tired spaces to state-of-the-art. This summer alone we renovated a substantial portion of the Coyne Science Center, completed construction on a new softball field, and entirely transformed the LaCasse Dining Center. We are responding to the needs of our students, faculty and staff in setting construction priorities and creating awesome spaces.

The new Dining Center is a prime example of the transformation. Sodexo Campus Services has over 1,000 colleges and universities among their accounts. Last month, Le Moyne College became number six in the 1,000 to have the highest level of campus dining—"Dining by Design." One of six! The current issue of *On-Campus Hospitality*, the industry trade magazine, ran a story titled, "Le Moyne Going for the 'WOW' Factor." The President of Sodexo Campus Services, Tom Post, reported that he received 500 e-mails from individuals who read it. Over the past few weeks representatives from other colleges have come to Le Moyne to study our dining complex. In a single summer our campus dining went from dated to premier.

We have also enjoyed success in the quality of people we have hired and the programs we have created and revised. One example on the faculty side came in January as we welcomed world-renowned scientist Fr. George Coyne, S.J. to Le Moyne as the first McDevitt chair. Several top Jesuit universities pursued Fr. Coyne. The caliber of the faculty colleagues he was joining here at the College and their dedication to the formation of our students were among the things that convinced him to join us.

I am pleased to announce today that Dr. LeMura has completed the national search for the second McDevitt Chair. This chair is in Information Systems. The top candidate was our own Dr. Martha Grabowski. Dr. Grabowski is a leader in scholarship involving large-scale information systems. Her work will further extend Le Moyne's place on the cutting edge of such research and will generate data that contributes to the betterment of society in the areas of transportation, the environment and advance warning for catastrophes. Please join me in congratulating Dr. Grabowski.

On the co-curricular and extracurricular side we have extensively modified our policies, practices and opportunities for student growth. Students are both initiating changes and responding very positively to them. They are feeling heard and empowered and regularly express this at the meetings I have with student leaders. These feelings undoubtedly contribute to other successes such as the fact that our first-to-second year retention rate has increased each of the past two years and our housing is at capacity.

We have also invested in a number of programs to strengthen Le Moyne's Catholic and Jesuit identity. Many of you in this room have written to me describing how much your participation in these initiatives has meant to you. You have indicated that they have made your work here more meaningful and have been a source of personal growth.

Bucking the trend in the northeast region, from the fall of 2009 through last fall we had three consecutive years of record first-year undergraduate enrollment. We did so without following the path of some desperate schools that raised their discount rates to levels that are threatening the viability of their organizations. We continue to benefit from this enrollment success. Regrettably, this fall's class is a rather different story.

As everyone here knows by now, we had a substantial enrollment decline in two groups. At the graduate level, the drop in employment of elementary and secondary education teachers has resulted in a steep decrease in teachers seeking master's degrees. Because this is the largest share of our graduate programming, the financial loss we experienced is significant. On the undergraduate side our entering class of new full-time students is considerably smaller than last year's.

Le Moyne is far from the only college beginning the year with fewer new undergraduate students than planned. However, we are clearly outside the norm in terms of the magnitude of our decline. Shortfalls like ours were rare. Naturally, this leads one to ask, “What happened?” and, more importantly, “What are we going to do about it?”

The Enrollment Management Division is reviewing and modifying a number of its admissions, financial aid and marketing practices in light of the lessons learned. Among other changes, the division is moving to a more quantitatively based approach to its decision making and aid awarding. Beyond this internal review we are also changing some of the firms with which we contract for critical enrollment support. More specific information on our review of last year and the changes underway will be shared with you in the weeks ahead.

As we reexamine our admissions and enrollment practices, consider new or modified programs that will attract students and make other changes necessary to return to the levels of success we previously enjoyed, we must simultaneously make budgetary adjustments to address the financial shortfall. In other words, we have to reduce expenses to balance the millions of dollars we are down in tuition revenue.

Very few of us enter higher education to focus primarily on its finances. Most of us enter this field of work because each of us, directly or through support roles, contributes to the education and formation of students. We pride ourselves on these efforts and the primary outcome of them—alumni who make a difference. Nonetheless, we face a situation where we cannot avoid immersing ourselves in the financial facets of our organization.

Our situation is serious but it is not a threat to the viability of the College. We can’t move forward, however, with business as usual. Last year’s reductions will take time to restore, certain resources will be realigned, some projects will be delayed and we will continue to consider what we should stop doing or do differently.

I am committed to strategic and inclusive decision making that allows us to maintain the distinctiveness and the quality of the education we offer. The President’s Cabinet will ultimately make the final decisions as we develop the multi-year financial plan. We will maintain our practice of shared governance, working in consultation with the faculty in decisions impacting the academic area and with the staff and administration in their respective areas. In the weeks ahead each vice president and dean will hold conversations in his or her division.

As we continue our habits of thoughtful, candid conversation, make cuts and reallocations strategically and learn from the past, we will emerge from this setback a stronger College. This is critical in the current environment for higher education. We are facing the combined effects of the demographic downturn, lingering economic consequences of the great recession, stiffer competition, potential threats from low or no cost online content and government cutbacks. Overall, affordability remains the most critical issue facing higher education, particularly for colleges like ours—small to medium-sized private colleges with modest endowments. We must be constantly mindful of the challenge of affordability balanced against the importance and value of what we provide for those students fortunate enough to enroll at Le Moyne. This is a topic that demands serious, sustained dialogue. It is one with which we must grapple.

OUR WATER

Together we begin Le Moyne’s 67th year. Each one of us has an important contribution to make to the overall well being of our College. As we go about our work we must keep foremost in our minds why we are here. We certainly want our graduates to have all of the skills necessary for career success and the financial security it brings. But here at Le Moyne, we want much more for them.

In the words of our OneLeMoyne Vision—your words—we want our graduates to be equipped “to navigate complexity, forge powerful intellectual connections and communicate effectively.” We “embrace an intellectual tradition rooted in the complementarity of faith and reason.” And thus our graduates “respond to problems with intelligence and purpose . . . comprehend the world’s needs and contribute to its progress.” “Le Moyne College is committed to fostering student capacities for success in all endeavors. Informed by a dynamic worldview, Le Moyne alumni craft meaningful lives, distinguished by their compassionate engagement with the world.” “Broadly educated men and women of integrity and idealism, they exhibit lifelong dedication to learning and service.” That is our vision and it is our reality. That is where our energy and attention must remain focused.

This is a terrific College that delivers on the promise of a Jesuit education. And we are becoming more widely recognized for it. Over the past four years I have learned that you are a talented and dedicated group that performs at impressive levels. Across campus—in our classrooms, offices, social and recreational spaces, housing, study areas and athletic fields—we are equipping young men and women with the habits of thought and being that flow from a “keen, compassionate intelligence.” You stoke the fire in their heads and in their hearts. They go forward to join the ranks of our alumni who are connecting with others and creating necessary and positive change in a world in which many face cynicism and despair, feel alone or have to go without, suffer from acts of exploitation or violence and in which some, like Wallace himself, are driven to tragic acts.

As a Le Moyne parent, I will share one small example of the difference you make. One of your students, the one I happen to know best, was required to read “This is Water” in a philosophy course. He was so excited by it and the classroom discussion that it was all he could talk about when he arrived home. He insisted that I read it ASAP. I always have a large stack of material to read so, ignoring “Water,” I placed it on the bottom of the pile.

The following night the student again pestered me to read the Wallace essay so the next day I did. At dinner that evening, we had a long discussion about the address. It was the sort of discussion that Wallace would have been proud to stimulate. To me it was further evidence of the quality and impact of the education my son receives here at Le Moyne.

This leads us back to David Foster Wallace’s remarks. He concludes the essay by noting that:

The really important kind of freedom involves attention and awareness and discipline, and being able truly to care about other people and to sacrifice for them over and over in myriad petty, unsexy ways every day. That is real freedom. That is being taught how to think. The alternative is unconsciousness, the default setting, the “rat race,” the constant gnawing sense of having had, and lost, some infinite thing.

The capital-T Truth is about life *before* death. . . .It is about the real value of a real education, which has almost nothing to do with knowledge, and everything to do with simple awareness; awareness of what is so real and essential, so hidden in plain sight all around us, all the time, that we have to keep reminding ourselves over and over:

This is water.

This is water.

I believe in you. And I believe that we are well equipped to meet the challenges ahead. I look forward to an exciting and successful year together.

May God bless you.