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Addresses

Wisdom begins with knowing the right questions to ask

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I believe it was Henry Ford who said that, “2 percent of the people think; 3 percent think they think; and 95 percent would rather die than think. That always struck me as a pretty funny but pretty cynical comment on human nature. Or it did until about a year ago.

Last spring — I mean spring 2000 — I was browsing through the newspapers, and I came across a story from The New York Times. The headline read: “*Why the ignorant are blissful: Inept individuals ooze confidence, study shows.*” It turns out that David Dunning, a professor at Cornell, did a study of incompetence. And what he discovered is that most incompetent people *don't know* they're incompetent. In fact, he determined that people who do things badly tend to be very confident about their ability. They're often *more* confident than the people who do things well.

Dr. Dunning went on to find that the ignorant overestimate their abilities for a good reason. The skills they lack for competence are usually the *same* skills they need to recognize incompetence. In fact, according to one of Dunning's colleagues, “not only do [incompetent people] reach erroneous conclusions and make unfortunate choices, but their incompetence robs them of the ability to realize it.” By the way, as a result of his study, Dr. Dunning now worries about his own competence.

Now that's a true story, and we can smile at it. But the lesson I want to draw from it tonight is a serious one. As a nation and as individuals, we're not as smart as we think. If we learned anything on September 11, it's that we bleed just like everybody else. We pay for our overconfidence and self-absorption just like everybody else. Fools with tools are still fools. Technology, wealth and power are not the same as wisdom, purpose and character. And they don't give us any security, because only God can do that.

Like all of us here tonight, I love my country. I believe that Americans are a great people, a *good* people. I believe that America remains a great experiment in human dignity. But it's an experiment that depends on certain assumptions — and first among them is the sanctity of the human person. “Sanctity” is an idea that makes no sense without God. The historian Gertrude Himmelfarb put it this way: “America today is “living off the religious capital of a previous generation, and [that] capital is being perilously depleted.” The more we remove God from our public life, the more we remove the moral vocabulary that gives our public institutions meaning. The more secular we become, the more we feed four problems that are killing us as a community.

Here's the first problem: *our inability to think clearly.* Reasoning requires time. It needs a reverence for ideas. It involves the testing and comparison of arguments. But the America we have today is a culture built on marketing — and marketing works in exactly the opposite way. Marketing appeals to desire and emotion. It depends on the suppression of critical thought, because thinking can get in the way of buying the product or the message. That explains why marketing is tied so tightly to images. Images operate underneath the radar of critical thought. That's why car dealers usually put an attractive young woman in front of their latest sports car, instead of a stack of performance statistics.

Here's the second problem: *our inability to remember*. Christopher Lasch once observed that Americans have a kind of addiction to the new. We're a people of the "now." We enjoy nostalgia, because it's a kind of entertainment. But we don't really like *history* because the past — as it really happened — burdens us with memories and unfinished business. It imposes obligations on the present. Americans like to think that we can invent and reinvent ourselves. But the cost of that illusion is that we tend to have a very poor grasp of history. We learn too little from the lessons of the past.

Here's problem three: *our inability to imagine and hope*. Americans have never been ideologues. We're pragmatists and toolmakers. We believe in results. So it's really no surprise that we have the strongest economic machine in the world; or that we excel at science and technology; or that these disciplines enjoy such esteem in our culture.

But technology always carries with it a "revenge of unintended consequences." And one of the unintended consequences of our science is that we've become its objects and its victims. The price tag for our science has been a decline in our vocabulary of the soul, a rise in the materialist view of the world, and a collapse in our confidence that humanity is somehow unique in creation. Hope and imagination flow out of a belief in a higher purpose to our lives. If all we are is very intelligent carbon — well, then hope and imagination are just quirks of the species. And so is any talk about the sanctity of the human person.

Here's problem four: *our inability to recognize and live real freedom*. Freedom is not an endless supply of choices. Choice for its own sake is just another form of idolatry. Freedom is the ability to see — and the courage to do — what is right. But if Americans stop believing that absolute principles of right and wrong exist, then how can we even begin to discuss things like freedom, truth and the dignity of the human person in a common vocabulary? How can we agree on which rights take precedence, or who has responsibility for what?

What we get in place of freedom is a kind of anarchy of conflicting pressure groups and personal agendas held together by just one fragile thing: the economy we all share . . . and that's not the basis of a community. In fact our economy, more than anything else in American life, teaches us to see *almost everything* as a commodity to be bought or sold. This is what Jeremy Rifkin means when he describes American culture as increasingly a "paid-for experience" based on the commodification of passion, ideals, relationships and even time. If we want freedom, we *buy* it by purchasing this car or that computer. If we want romance, we *buy* it by purchasing this cruise or that hotel package.

The trouble is, the more our advertising misuses the language of our dreams and ideals to sell consumer goods . . . the more mixed up our dreams and ideals become. We confuse ourselves to the point where we no longer recognize what real love, honest work, freedom, family, patriotism — and even life itself — look like.

So those are the problems. What do we do about them?

Well, the only thing we *can* do about them is fix them one heart, one intellect, one potential leader at a time. That's why the vocation of a college like Thomas Aquinas is even more important today than it was 30 years ago. It's easy to praise the obvious successes of any school. More than 30 young men have graduated from TAC and gone on to be priests. More than 20 young women have graduated and entered religious life. Many, many others have formed strong Catholic families, developed fruitful careers, and now live an active and faithful lay life. These are tremendous gifts not just to the Church, but to wider society, because men and women who live lives of virtue have a ripple effect. They ennoble the whole community. And that's the kind of "good infection" that little by little can heal the whole body.

But I think the real greatness of this college is written into its gene code. Neil Postman once said that "Any fool can have an opinion; [but] to know what one *needs* to know *in order to have* an opinion is wisdom — which is another way of saying that wisdom means knowing what questions to ask about knowledge."

As I worked on my thoughts for this evening, I paged through the curriculum. I read about the seminars. I reviewed the syllabus. And I was reminded why the old so often envy the young. What a priceless education this college offers. Homer, Aquinas, Plato, Tocqueville, Marx, Sacred Scripture: *These* are the real teachers and challengers of every TAC student. It's not a bad list of tutors. The genius of Thomas Aquinas College is that it teaches wisdom first — the things one *needs* to know *in order to have* an opinion . . . and the questions one needs to ask about knowledge. Nobody can give or get a better gift.