

"Last Lecture" Series Address

by David J. O'Brien

College of the Holy Cross

Monday, April 3, 2006

The United States of America, my country, land of my birth. Its history, like it or not, is in our hands.

For American history, serious American history, is about the future. Like memory, historical knowledge and imagination is shaped more by aspirations, and their absence, than by what we professional historians once liked to call "the truth of the past as it actually happened."

Arguments about American history, when they are serious once again, are political disputes about alternative futures. American history has almost always been a story about hope, I think. And it is hope, its presence and absence, of which I would speak tonight.

American hope has been naively optimistic at times, as if the newness of this new world and new nation exempted us from the dramas of other people's histories. That's why David Noble once called a wonderful book about the giants of American historiography "historians against history."

And sometimes Americans trusted in a benevolent Providence, as if we Americans were the new chosen people in the new promised land. We academic historians have paid a high price for belittling such ideas.

But providential destiny is not what we are after these days. Instead we search, I think, for "realistic hope". The kind of hope found in the hearts of our most heroic leaders, heroic precisely because they looked the evil of history full in the face: Washington and Adams and Worcester's Abby Kelly Foster, Lincoln and Jane Addams, Eugene Victor Debs and Martin Luther King. And realistic hope as it fueled the amazing liberation stories of our own immigrant ancestors. How far back do any of us have to go to find impoverished immigrants and exploited workers? What brought the family history down to you and me, here in this lovely library tonight? More than a touch of hope, I expect.

The phrase "realistic hope" comes from Philip Hallie's **Lest Innocent Blood be Shed**. After world wars and the holocaust and the bomb, Hallie recognized what most of us prefer to ignore most of the time: the heavy burden of historical responsibility. What we human beings had done to one another we might do again, and now with ever greater destructive potential in our hands. How, amid the still vivid memories of recent history, could he pass on hope, hope made realistic, and responsible, by unflinching encounter with historical realities? Hallie found an answer, or perhaps better, fragments of an answer, in Le Chambon, a French Huguenot town whose people rescued hundreds of Jewish children. It was a place where "goodness happened". The story of how goodness happened is a story of ordinary people who lived together in such a way that hospitality and shelter were almost an instinct: after all, who would turn children away? You will never understand what happened there, Hallie said, unless you understand why they say

later that it was easy: they did it together, on the basis of shared values and beliefs turned into a culture, a way of life, by habitual practice. For Hallie, and for the rest of us, this story and others like it renew the possibility of “realistic hope” by which we mean, I think, history with a future that can be our own.

It is a huge question, isn't it, this question of hope? Jesuit theologian David Hollenbach, in the best essay of recent years on Catholic higher education, thought about what we do in places like this. Speaking of the “wariness” we all feel in the face of the multiple evils of our history, Hollenbach wrote: “At least a whiff of nihilism can be detected in the atmosphere of the contemporary university. The question of the university today, then, is whether there is any ground for its hope to uncover meaning that can sustain human life and guide the vast energies of its scientific, political, economic and cultural undertakings. Or is all this activity simply a way of coping with life, filling the time between young adulthood and death with activity that is perhaps interesting but ultimately pointless?”

In answering that question, does history help? Better: does the study of history, a different matter from history itself, does the study of history help? James Joyce referred to history itself as a nightmare from which he was trying to awaken. Poet Paul Vallery thought history as we study it was the most dangerous product distilled by the chemistry of the intellect. For Joyce and so many victims of manipulated stories, Jews and African Americans, colonial peoples and marginalized classes, most recently women and gays, historical experience was not very good, and the history we write and teach often confirmed the sad message of that history they experienced: that is, people are no damned good, our aspirations are illusions, there is nothing we can do, and the powerful will always win.

“What can be said on behalf of the human race”, the great American theologian Reinhold Niebuhr asked in 1936. “Judged by my private values very little can be said on its behalf” he answered. “Judged by the private values current at any time, the human race must be mostly wrong and thoroughly perverse.” Niebuhr thought it important to face the hard truth of human sinfulness: “Sooner or later there emerges the most devastating of all facts, namely, that in an indifferent universe which endures, man alone aspires, struggle to attain and attains only to be defeated in the end.”

Make no mistake about the power and persistence of such pessimism. As one of my teachers put it, history itself imposes tremendous burdens, Joyce's nightmare, and much of what passes for historical argument lends to such burdens their specious authority.

An American history example I often use because it is so important for my generation came in 1971 when the President of the American Historical Association, Thomas C. Cochran, used his inauguration to explain what we have come to call the sixties. The cultural crisis of the day, he told us, arose from the conflict between ever larger and more complex institutions: very big government, corporations, universities, all spawned by massive forces of historical change, and the sudden reawakening of the “American belief in equality” among African-Americans, women and students. But history, America's top historian told us, taught that the institutions, with their hierarchical bureaucracies, were

here to stay, so ideals would have to be adjusted. “Is democracy or equalitarianism the kind of value that can cure antisocial behavior and the loss of social morale?” Cochran asked. “Since some hierarchy seems inevitable in the conduct of human affairs and since equality can never be complete, what is required is the justification of gradations, not their virtual elimination.” Take that. And one more thing: “A cure for the cultural crisis must be some compelling doctrine that will lead Americans to play their roles with the orderliness necessary for the operation of a good society.” Instead of “Give me your tired yearning to breathe free” we have “abandon hopefulness all you who enter here.”

Cochran thought that to be effective this compelling new doctrine of inequality would have to “attain the force of religious belief.” So even for the most secular social scientists, the cultural crisis was also a religious crisis, one that remains with us, I think. The sixties began as an American religious moment, not because John F. Kennedy was a Catholic, but because he was an American believer, and so was I. His inaugural address was the most profoundly theological since Lincoln’s second:

Let the word go forth from this time and place, to friend and foe alike, that the torch has been passed to a new generation of Americans -- born in this century, tempered by war, disciplined by a hard and bitter peace, proud of our ancient heritage, and unwilling to witness or permit the slow undoing of those human rights to which this nation has always been committed, and to which we are committed today at home and around the world.

In the long history of the world, only a few generations have been granted the role of defending freedom in its hour of maximum danger. I do not shrink from that responsibility. – I do not believe that any of us would exchange places with any other people or any other generation. The energy, the faith, the devotion which we bring to this endeavor will light our country and all who serve it. And the glow from that fire can truly light the world.

And so, my fellow Americans, ask not what your country can do for you; ask what you can do for your country.....With a good conscience our only sure reward, with history the final judge of our deeds, let us go forth to lead the land we love, asking His blessing and His help, but knowing that here on earth God's work must truly be our own

It was a noble dream, embodied for a moment in the Peace Corps, Appalachian regional development and the seeds of what would become Civil Rights bills and the War on Poverty. Dr. King raised our sights even higher with that remarkable 1963 speech at the Lincoln Memorial, all of us, arm in arms, working our way toward the beloved community. But the Cold War, the Cuban Missile Crisis, Vietnam, racism, domestic violence and assassinations interred the hopes stirred so strongly that inauguration day.

As Paul Goodman understood, the sixties became America’s age of religious Reformation. None chronicled it better than novelist Norma Mailer. After police

dispersed a ragtag march on the Pentagon in 1967, they arrested Quaker war resisters who then went on a hunger strike. Mailer ended his award winning book about the march, "Armies of the Night" reflecting on their prayers, "Catholic as much as Quaker" as they huddled together in a damp cell. "If the end of the March took place in the isolation in which these last pacifists suffered naked in freezing cells, and gave up prayers for penance, then who was to say they were not saints? And who to say that the sins of America were not by their witness a tithe remitted?"

Five years later, as the sixties ended with George McGovern's campaign for President, Mailer had it down: "As he stood near McGovern now, there came to him as well the first strain of that simple epiphany which had eluded him through all these days, and he realized it, and it was simple, but he thought it true. In America, the country was the religion, and all the religions of the land were fed by that first religion, which was the country itself. And if the other religions were now full of mutations and staggering across deserts of faith, it was because the country had been false and ill and corrupt for years, corrupt not in the age old dimensions of failure and evil, but corrupt to the point of terminal disease, like a great religion floundering. And if this new religion, not 200 years old, was either the best of the worst idea ever to shake the mansions of eschatology in the world beyond, one knew at last how to think of McGovern. If he had started out as a minister in the faith of his father, he had left that ministry to look for a larger one."

I believe that any of us who would truly understand our America today would do well to meditate on this crisis of the civil religion, for more than anything else it is our changed feelings about America that explain our loss of hope, and with it our unprecedented abandonment of responsibility for our common life.

Unfortunately, in the cultural struggle to interpret the sixties, and beyond the sixties to define the meaning of America, let us admit it, the Cochran's beat the Mailers, rather decisively. Cochran's formula for moral hopelessness was and remains common, in academia and in popular culture, high and low, though it is usually less honestly presented.

It comes disguised as "end of the story" diversity in which every group is its own historian and there is no common story, so no common future: there is nothing in particular that we are called to do together.

Or it comes disguised as mind and imagination-numbing complexity. Ambrose Bierce saw that move from story to data over a century ago when he said of that day's new history: "many eminent antiquarians have already thrown much darkness on the subject and it is possible that if they continue their work we will soon know nothing at all."

Or it comes as the metaphor of the free market, spreading across the cultural landscape with its easy rationalizations for irresponsible behavior: the market made me do it.

Or it informs discussion of social responsibility or vocation, how then shall we live, without either a pastoral or political component, almost a formula for the privatization of hope and public loneliness and disappointment.

Cochran's adaptationist hopelessness also comes in the attractive guises of various post-modernisms whose central claim was made years ago by a character in a John Barth novel: "we all invent our past as we go along, at the dictate of whim and interest."

So complete is our loss of hope, I fear, that we hardly notice. Recently Richard Rorty pointed to signals of the narrowing of meaning as religious and secular idealisms turn to dust and we are left with what Rorty calls a "queasy agnosticism" to build only personal, private lives. In Ian McEwan's novel Saturday the doctor who is the central character muses on "the late failure of radical hopes" leaving "no more big ideas". His adult son confirms the mood: "When I think of the big things, the political situation, global warming, world poverty, it all looks pretty terrible, with nothing getting better, nothing to look forward to. But when I think closer in--you know, a girl I've just met, or this song we are doing, or snowboarding next month, then it looks great. So this is going to be my motto: think small."

Around the time I read Rorty's essay, we saw Stephen Spielberg's "Munich". The Israeli Mossad agent, son of a hero of the founding generation, responds without hesitation to the assignment to track down and kill those responsible for the slaughter of Israeli athletes at the Munich Olympics. As he prepares to go, his young wife tells him, lovingly, that Israel is his real lover. At the end of the film, the hero's idealism is exhausted by the cycle of violence and uncertain politics. Possibility, meaning, has narrowed as he leaves Israel and Mossad and recommits to wife and child.

Signs of such narrowing of possibility to smaller, intimate relationships are everywhere: in Cormac McCarthy's No Country for Old Men, an update of the American western, characters refuse to read the newspaper or watch the news, the bad guy wins and places his murderous skills at the service of big oil, and the good guy sheriff abandons the pursuit to spend time, you guessed it, with wife and children. Hope survives, but privatized.

So what about history? Historian David McCullough, speaking in Worcester recently, told of sitting down by the fire to read his grand-daughter's history text book and rising an hour later asking why he was punishing himself so. What Francis Fitzgerald wrote two decades ago of school textbooks could now be said of our widespread popular historical meaninglessness: "A patchwork of rich and poor, old and young, men and women, blacks, whites Hispanics, Indians. The past is no highway top the present; it is a collection of issues and events that do not fit together and that lead in no particular direction. The word progress has been replaced by the word change. Children, the modern texts insist, should learn history so they can adapt to the rapid changes taking place around us. History is proceeding in spite of us. The present, once portrayed in the concluding chapters as a peaceful haven for scientific advances and Presidential inaugurations, is now a tangle of problems."

Dig into this loss of public hope, interred with American promises, and it becomes a little clearer why there is so little action to protect the public interest, to give moral purpose to American power, or even to talk about a real war in which people kill and die on our behalf.

This abandonment of the future as our shared historical responsibility simply will not do. My teacher Hayden White, who wrote of the burden of history, argued that the best historians know that historical awareness is not an end in itself but “a preparation for a more perfect understanding and acceptance of the individual’s responsibility in the fashioning of the common humanity of the future,” a position Pope John XXIII would have understood. One of those White admired was Alexis de Tocqueville, who wrote often of historical responsibility

I am not unaware that many of my contemporaries have thought that men are not their own masters here below, and that they necessarily obey, I do not know what, some insurmountable and irresistible forces arising from anterior events, from their race, from the soil or climate. These are false and cowardly doctrines, which can never create anything but feeble men and craven nations. Providence did not create mankind either entirely independent or completely in servitude. It traced it is true around every man a fatal circle that he cannot leave, but within that vast confine man is powerful and free, and so are nations.

But this position only works if one genuinely cares about history’s outcome, like Hannah Arendt whose biography is aptly entitled For Love of the World. Sociologist Robert Bellah, who discovered civil religion in the Kennedy inaugural, once told us: “Free institutions always require a measure of public spiritedness, devotion to the common good. A republic will survive, said Montesquieu, only so long as its citizens love it. They will love it only so long as they participate in it and care for their neighbor’s welfare as well as their own.” And they will care, and participate, I expect, only to the extent that they hope for a different future and take responsibility for bringing it about.

Hope, religious hope, has been the fuel driving the engine of American history. David Hackett Fisher and David McCullough reminded us recently of how the amazing George Washington, when all truly seemed lost, persuaded his ragged troops to stay with him, paid by nothing but dimming hopes for their emerging nation. Read Massachusetts records of the world’s first constitutional convention, then later debates over the federal constitution, and you will see evidence of realistic hope. They knew all there was to know of sin and death, yet they still took responsibility for their future and they made some history.

Independence when it came seemed providential, and for American sign seekers, and there were many, signs multiplied endlessly. Jefferson’s unexpected gift of Louisiana, Jackson’s miraculous victory at New Orleans, Adams and Jefferson passing over together on the fiftieth anniversary of their Declaration of Independence, Lincoln’s sacrifice on

Good Friday. No wonder Emerson thought the whole story one remarkable revelation of new beginnings, Adam and Eve back in the woods again, in the garden, starting over. His young friend, my man Isaac Hecker, caught the fever, became a Catholic, and evangelized his people around a vision of the Kingdom of God, breaking in, here, in America, in the union of faith, intelligence and, most miraculous of all, freedom.

Lincoln's civil faith came in a more chastened version, which is why we love him so. Of course his America, like ours, was deeply flawed, but freed slaves joined whites who did not want to be brothers and sisters to silently mourn over his traveling body, as Richard Wightman Fox told us in a lecture here a few weeks ago. We know the feeling because we had our own murdered heroes. JFK was slain, like Lincoln, and soon Dr. King and Bobby Kennedy. Blacks and whites crowding the streets of Washington or Atlanta, or lining the railroad track from Washington to New York, as bodies passed by in civil sacred ceremonies, as Lincoln's had, those people were not dummies. For those baptized in the American faith, for those who love America so much, hope is never easy, always linked to faith and love. Daniel Patrick Moynihan brought an Irish and Catholic voice to the American church. Love would someday win out over hate, he said, but it would be a very close thing. And meanwhile, the world would always break our heart. Hope, in short, is hard won.

Recently the Pope wrote eloquently of love, eros and agape, and many were moved, as was I. But some of us also heard Dorothy Day's voice, from Dostoevsky, wanting to remind the Pope and all of us that love in action, not in dreams, is a harsh and dreadful thing. In the passage Dorothy liked to quote, Dostoevsky's monk says that love in dreams wants return and evidence and response, and rarely gets it. And so it is with hope, realistic hope. None know that better than the peacemakers among us, accused so often of sentimentality but offering to those who look examples of courage and faith and love and realistic hope.

Listen to American peacemaker Tom Fox, kidnapped and killed in Iraq a few weeks ago. He and his Christian peacemaker Teams accompany ordinary people as they go about their lives in extremely violent situations. "The ability to feel the pain of another is central to any kind of peacemaking work. But this compassion is fraught with peril" he said a few days before he disappeared. "A person can experience a feeling of being overwhelmed. Or a feeling of rage and desire for revenge. Or a desire to move away from the pain. Or a sense of numbness that can deaden the ability to feel anything at all--- After eight months I am no clearer than I was when I began. In fact I have to struggle harder and harder each day against my desire to move away and become numb---If I am not to fight or flee in the face of armed aggression, be it the overt aggression of the army or the subversive aggression of the terrorist, what am I to do? Here in Iraq I struggle with this second form of aggression: how do you stand firm against a car bomber or a kidnapper?" I hasten to add that the same hard questions about hope confront our military personnel, who face also fear and death, let it be clear, on our behalf.

Who wants to deal with such responsibilities? The frontier may have instilled in us a remarkable self-reliance and voluntary community spirit, but was it not also "a gate of

escape”, allowing us to avoid confronting the sins of slavery and capitalist exploitation? Frederick Jackson Turner, one of our great public intellectuals, responded that historical truthfulness combined with democratic education and a renewal of shared political responsibility could keep us moving, not toward new imperial frontiers but toward a free, self-governing, and democratic future.

But the subject of that movement would have to be the American people, not their self-defined smarter or more virtuous betters. To say this is my country, and to mean it, we must also say that there are my people. It has been hard for us to do that, for we do not trust one another.

Appalled by Populism’s occasional racism and xenophobia, we ignored the way in which those nineteenth century farmers, far more than any of us, understood the unfairness of the emerging economy and offered realistic alternatives.

Disturbed by the marriage of progressive idealism and public service to technological rationality, we valorized self-interest, economic or psychological, and too often belittled the idealism of our own middle class students and their families.

Repelled by the fundamentalist and Pentecostal temptations of Christian evangelicalism, we cut ourselves off from the sense of democratic aspirations and shared responsibility awakened by Charles Sheldon’s “what would Jesus do?” and the hopeful idealism of multiple social gospels.

Loss of hope, and denial of responsibility, comes in many subcultural forms. I have been an historian of American Catholicism and have told that story in Americanist terms, affirming the journey of European-American Catholics from margin to mainstream as an experience of genuine liberation, deserving of serious theological reflection. Vatican II opened up possibilities for Americanized Catholics to renew their Catholic faith and build a way of life appropriate for a democratic people in a global church transforming itself for service to the human family. But many Catholics have shared in the American loss of hope, and Americanists are hard to find. Instead the story is being retold around not our Americanization but around our Catholicism, our difference and distance from the rest of American culture, from other Americans and from the American part of ourselves. Like so many other groups, Catholics can find their identity, and an illusion of integrity, by taking a resolute stand against America, as if Americanization was a gigantic mistake. As the story is not told, the end of our journey is not the promised land, but return to Egypt. Almost unnoticed is the way in which this story locates faith, hope and love in church, that is in the Catholic subculture, and leaves the world, including our American world, to its own devices. Hope there can be, but only with us. I pray for a renewal of Catholic Americanism so we can argue against this powerful ideological movement in my community, and I place my hope in the remarkable goodness and idealism of so many of my fellow Catholics, including so many here at Holy Cross.

Not only must we cherish our solidarity with our people, but we must beware of shattering the idealism that alone will enable any of us to take on the powers and

principalities of this complicated world. One of my colleagues once explained patiently to me the dangers of slipping toward technological rationality contained in my talk of self-making and historical responsibility. A few weeks ago Fr. Jim Corkery told us of our new Pope's anxiety that people will start to believe that they make history, not God. But I always worry that this unhopeful Augustinian "mystical city of God and sinful city of man" position may unwittingly induce a certain passivity; after all, shit happens. I would remind them that Reinhold Niebuhr repudiation of sentimentality I quoted earlier was combined with powerful demands for responsible politics. Niebuhr knew as well as the Catholic Workers that the pursuit of love, justice and hope is really hard, yet he also knew with them that pursuit was essential to genuine humanity. He ended his masterpiece of ethical realism with rarely quoted affirmation of idealism, thinking of Gandhi, whom he admired:

In the task of redemption the most effective agents will be men who have substituted new illusions for abandoned ones. The most important of these illusions is that the collective life of mankind can achieve perfect justice. It is a very valuable illusion for this moment (1933) for justice cannot be approximated if the hope of its perfect realization does not generate a sublime madness in the soul. Nothing but such madness will do battle with malignant power and "spiritual wickedness in high places.

An expression of that sublime madness of the soul came in 1981 when Pope John Paul II, addressing an interfaith audience of scientists and intellectuals at Hiroshima said that the building a new international order is not a utopian illusion or a vain ideal but a moral imperative a sacred duty. Tom Fox's colleagues and friends, some of them Holy Cross graduates, also know something of that sublime madness

Perfect justice is perhaps an illusion, Niebuhr warned, but hope is not. In October, 1969, Joanne and I and our four small children joined a rag tag group of Worcester activists and assorted Holy Cross and Clark students on a protest march led by local African-Americans upset about urban renewal. The target was State Mutual Life Insurance, now All America, that big building you see from I-190. As we straggled along Lincoln Street, the building came into view. So did several hundred riot police who surrounded the property, complete with shields, side arms, large clubs and very unfriendly looking dogs. Presuming myself protected by my status as a Holy Cross professor, I still felt some "shock and awe", and real anxiety about our fiery young Black leaders and those long haired hippie looking students. A few of them pushed against the police line and were quickly arrested. I felt great relief when young Lennie Cooper climbed onto a car and yelled that we were leaving, though he promised we would be back to dismantle that huge building, brick by brick.

Ever after that day I wondered at the Black Revolution in my country. Think of it---our massive hair-trigger violence, the fear those heroic Black people must have felt, the obscene hostility of law enforcement officials and the indifference for so long of our most respected leaders, including the Kennedys, and the courage it took to act: Fannie Lou Hamer and Medgar Evers in Mississippi, James Meredith setting out alone to walk

across that state, young Stokely Carmichael in Lowndes County, Alabama, America's most violent community, line after line of well dressed, disciplined young Negroes marching through Milwaukee streets crowded with their working class neighbors, mostly Catholics, screaming hatred, or Dr. King and courageous friends walking through even tougher streets on the south side of Chicago and in nearby, infamous, Cicero, or those Boston school children on buses easing their way through bitter, angry crowds venting all their pent up rage in Charlestown and South Boston---think of how they must have felt and what it took for them to keep moving on----and then think of Dr King, offering us that American dream beyond the struggle, the beloved community and, under pressures none of us could imagine, absolutely refusing to abandon nonviolence and always, always trying to answer hatred with love. As Gary Wills wrote after reading the first of Taylor Branch's three volumes on all this: "These were the King years, and there is no time in our history of which we can be more proud". Think of all that and tell me that History's lesson is that we must adjust our expectations to the requirements of a social order marked by ever increasing inequality and injustice.

So there is a hope filled history out there, made realistic by direct confrontation with evil.

A few recommended readings. Howard Zinn [A People's History of the United States](#) is history about the American people, intended to be read by the people; they are its subjects, its heroes and heroines, their ultimate triumph will be its vindication. They struggle, yesterday and today, against leaders--- slaveholders and greedy merchants, industrialists and yes, university professors---who, from the very start, 'have consistently proven unworthy'. Most of all Zinn communicates the suffering and the courage of history's victims. He writes of the revolution from the point of view of the soldiers, poor, hungry, cold, frightened and later forgotten; slavery from the point of view of the slaves, struggling against impossible odds to preserve their dignity and humanity in families, hating the system fastened upon them by greed and the corrupting power of racism; he describes "the intimate oppression" of women and the impersonal oppression of men and women in factories and slums....Ever the heretic, Zinn dares to *imagine* a "history that keeps alive the memory of people's resistance may preserve the possibility that someday the guards may join the prisoners in creating a new and marvelous world, Dr. King's beloved community."

Side by side with Zinn's "People's History" sample the multiple volumes of Page Smith's wonderful "people's history". Smith added a healthy dose of hope to Zinn's stories of protest and resistance. The anger of Zinn's radicals arose out of an always American rebellion against the dream deferred and delayed. Smith tells us how hope for a better life, the revolutionary possibility of economic security, personal liberty and popular self-government, these American promises and symbols transformed the whole universe of human expectation. Revolutions are made out of anger but also out of hope. Without hope, and the faith on which it rests, the anger can become self-destructive, as we are tragically learning once again across the world. Similarly, a people's history of the United States without success stories is not the full story of the American people. It risks distorting the past and losing the future. It can result in alienation, or a politics of existential gesture, rather than serious democratic politics. Smith's populism corresponds

more closely to the experience of so many of our own families, whose persistent hope brought us to this point, where the meaning of the story of the past depends on the choices we are free to make in the present, choices that in turn rest on our hope or lack of hope about that future.

In the two centuries since Jefferson substituted the pursuit of happiness for Locke's protection of property a lot of people worked very hard so that those who came later might be better and happier, and more than a few found in that hope the meaning of the pursuit. If we dismantle racism, sexism, corporate power and the warfare state, as we surely must, we will do so not to end the American dream and enter the American promise, but precisely to construct that "new order for the ages" and usher in that "new age" when all men and women will know the joys of freedom and the responsibilities of self government. As Smith entitled his first post-Revolution volume: "the new age now begins".

So, in the spirit of this last lecture, I offer my love affair with America and my own search for realistic hope, which are in some way one and the same. Many years ago, when I was not much older than the students here tonight, I heard a young Midwestern poet speak of his search for America, and I like it now as much as it did then.

Truck Stop: Minnesota (1976)
Stephen Dunn

The waitress looks at my face
As if it were a small tip.
I'm tempted to come back at her
With *java*
But I say coffee, politely
And tell her how I want it.
Her body has the alert sleepiness
Of a cat's, her face
The indecency of a billboard.
She is the America I would like to love.
Sweetheart, the truckers call her.
Honey. Doll
For each of them, she smiles.
I envy them.
I'm full of lust and good usage
Lost here.
I imagine every man she's left with
Has smelled of familiar food,
Has peppered her with wild slang,
Until she was damp and loose.
I do nothing but ask for a check
And drift out into the night air
Let my dreams lift

Her tired feet off the ground
Into the sweet, inarticulate
Democracy beyond my ears

I am not done, I'm afraid. I will leave you with ten words of advice, each requiring a few more words of explanation.

First, let us all rejoice in the people around us, as they are, not as we would like them to be. Walt Whitman is a great guide on this, and so is the Trappist monk Thomas Merton. Merton became famous for a book about how he left the world and its benighted people for the monastery. Twenty years later, on a street corner in Louisville, where he had gone to the dentist, Merton fell in love with the American people: "In Louisville, at the corner of Fourth and Walnut, in the center of the shopping district, I was suddenly overwhelmed with the realization that I loved all these people, that they were me and I was theirs, that we could not be alien to one another even though we were total strangers. It was like waking from a dream of separateness, of spurious self-isolation in a special world, the world of renunciation and supposed holiness... To think that such a commonplace realization should suddenly seem like news that one holds the winning ticket in a cosmic sweepstake." May we all have such a moment. Maybe that is the single most important factor in finding realistic hope.

Second, practice democracy. Like love, democracy has to be practiced to be understood. John Adams famously told Jefferson the revolution was in the minds and hearts of the people before the war started, and that revolution was in simple terms democratic practice, beginning, we are now told, right here in Worcester. The founders, those who made the Massachusetts constitution and debated the federal constitution across Massachusetts, knew what we need always to relearn: the only democratic program is a democratic people. Sam Adams and Samuel Gompers, Jane Addams and Saul Alinsky and Ralph Nader agreed. Authoritarianism and elitism and privilege and irresponsible power poison so many of our communities and relationships. The cure is democratic practice: developing the capacity and the skills we need for the public work we need to do, together.

A note to students: Historian Staughton Lynd wrote in the sixties that freedom, and responsibility, mean freedom and responsibility now. You hear many stories of the bad sixties, but the real story here was one of painful acceptance of personal responsibility, John Kerry in Vietnam and John Kerry at home opposing the war, conscientious military service and equally conscientious disobedience, dead soldiers in Vietnam, more than half killed after we knew the war would not be won, and dead students, black and white, in Mississippi swamps and American campuses. Democratic practice starts when we choose to start, not when others judge us ready. The great Jane Addams warned young people of her age about "the snare of preparation" in lengthening adolescence and ever extending education. Don't get too involved until...you can finish the sentence. Maybe those snares have something to do with our loss of hope.

Third, discover solidarity. Amid the amazing neglect of the public interest all around us—public health, public justice, the common environment and the common earth-- nothing is more important than a recovery of a sense of shared responsibility grounded in solidarity with brothers and sisters here and everywhere. According to Pope John Paul II, shared responsibility “is not limited to one’s own family, nation or state, but extends progressively to all mankind, since no one can consider himself extraneous or indifferent to the lot of another member of the human family.” Solidarity, he tells us in the spirit of organizers and resisters throughout history, is not “vague compassion” or “shallow distress” but “a firm and persevering determination to commit oneself to the common good, that is to say to the good of all and of each individual, because we really are responsible for all.”

Fourth, suspect the state. Those founding farmers so long ago would not allow us to have a state as they had known it. They insisted on frequent elections, regarded officials suspiciously, and set clear limits to what governments could do. This ethical consensus about war would have made them uneasy. When we think of the deadly force available to our government leaders, we too should be wary, not because they are limited people but because we all are. Remember what they call the state is really the government, and ours governors are not Washington, Adams and Jefferson but men more like us----- even, someday, someone like the Mayor of Worcester who aspires to higher office. He was a kid from our neighborhood and I ask you, is it safe to entrust vast power to a kid from your neighborhood, or, for that matter, to someone’s classmate from Yale or Wellesley?

Fifth, while suspecting all claims about states, engage in politics with a small p. Dorothy Day, who referred regularly with her characteristic edge to “our Holy Mother the State” told Robert Coles toward the end of her life: “We are not anarchists in the negative sense of that word,. We have our own routines and rituals. We obey the law all the time, pay our bills and try to be good citizens. A good citizen uses the Bill of Rights, says what he or she believes to be true, and shares his thoughts with others. A good citizen takes part in a democracy and doesn’t leave it to others—some big shots—to speak for him or act for him...If you want to know the kind of politics we seek, you can go to your history books and read about the early years of this country. We would like to see small communities organize themselves, people talking with people, people caring for people, people coming together to make known what they believe and what they would like their nation to do. Apathy, like sloth, is a sin----some of us are just plain Americans whose ancestors were working people and who belonged to small town or rural communities or neighborhoods in cities. We saw more and more of that community spirit disappear and we mourned its passing and here we are trying to find it again, for ourselves and for any others who happen to come our way.” That’s not a bad way to think about politics.

Sixth, organize. The first answer to the question what to do about injustice or official stupidity is organize. Zinn and Smith will tell you the rich history of organizing, Theresa Neumann of the Class of 2006 and Frank Kartheiser of the class of 1986 are here tonight and they can teach you how to do it, and why. Here you can learn about power as the ability to act not just to control, and that while power corrupts, so does powerlessness.

But don't think its just other people who need to organize. So do we. If we don't have organized power, in politics, in our workplace, in the professions, indeed in the church, then we will have history made for us a lot more than we will make history. If we are responsible, then we need appropriate vehicles for exercising responsibility and they won't be made for us. Same thing can be said for community. We need friends, people who share our hopes and care for us, so we need to construct and renew communities, and that too is an organizing challenge, similar to that which faced lonely and impoverished immigrants when they arrived in this strange land. So let me say it again: liberal arts education, with its vocational questions like ours at Holy Cross, f they do not include pastoral and political components dealing with community and power, encourage the privatization of hope and continuing public disappointment.

Seventh, think hard about love. Lots to say here but I'll leave it at that. It's a neglected subject but by far most important. In personal relationships, communities, nations, maybe the world, there is no hope without love. For a text try 9/11: stories of self-sacrifice in the twin towers, people, a lot of them, for whom goodness was an instinct, as at Le Chambon; and ceremonies of love in suburban churches, synagogues, mosques and town squares, sometimes with feelings of grief filled solidarity so strong that people did not want to leave; and day after day of profiles in the New York Times of men and women, rich and poor, immigrants and Ivy League grads, tale after tale of lives filled with hope and love, and story after story of people facing certain death calling partners or parents or children with the simple message: I love you. Maybe meditations on those texts would persuade our deeper thinkers to let up on sex for awhile and think again about the dreaded secularism their own pronouncements so often encourage. Vatican II suggested another path.

Ninth, search for hope in unexpected places. I was going to find twin images of Martin Sheen, one as President Bartlett in "West Wing", another as Dorothy Day's partner Peter Maurin in the film of Dorothy's life, "Entertaining Angels". In that film there is a remarkable scene when Dorothy comes upon Peter, washing the feet of homeless men. So where is the center of history, in the oval office or in that jail cell with Mailer's Quakers, or the house of hospitality where people practice the works of mercy, trying to learn how goodness might be easy.

Another looking in unexpected places story. A recent biography of R. Sargent Shriver tells of this Kennedy brother-in-law who was the founding director of the Peace Corps and the War on Poverty, wearing both hats at once for awhile. Shriver was a talented leader: Bill Moyers thinks Shriver was the one man who might really have changed America for the better. But his day in the political sun passed. But the subtext of the story is his long and loving marriage to Eunice Kennedy, who was passionately and tirelessly devoted to the cause of those we once called the retarded, children and adults. Every day Sarge left the house with two briefcases, one with his government work and another with Eunice's assignments. She let no one off the hook and, together, and with their many friends, they changed the world for developmentally delayed and disabled people. The book ends with Sarge shooting baskets with retarded children before a football stadium sized rally on their behalf---in China. Consider where retarded children were when

Eunice Kennedy's father cruelly destroyed and then hid away Eunice's sister, Rosemary, and where they are today and we would have to say that history can be changed, and people can make a difference. Hope happened.

Ninth, make a little history----the a little is there for those worried about taking ourselves too seriously. I have in mind a march of students in Boston protesting school segregation and a young African American woman telling Jonathan Kozol that she always thought history happened to somebody else in some other place. Now, she said with a smile spreading across her face, maybe I am part of history. And she was not somber and serious but happy to be acting on her convictions, a look we have seen before.

Tenth, make American history your own. The most important thing about American history is that it is ours. I pray that someday you will experience a solidarity with that history that will be a liberating epiphany. I had such small, unexpected, providential moments in my own life, for which I am very grateful. So would you rise and join Peter Seeger in singing Woodie Guthrie's great song: