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“The Labor of the Lost Cause”

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Thank you, Sierra and Hashem, for that beautiful introduction. Thank you to the Class of 2017 for granting me the honor of addressing you this morning. Thank you to all of you for being here, and especially to the grandparents, parents, siblings, aunts, uncles, cousins, and friends who’ve traveled a distance to be here today. I would like to extend a special note of gratitude to those who too often go publicly unappreciated and unacknowledged: especially the administrative faculty and staff of Earlham College, and the workers in housekeeping and food service who are not directly employed by Earlham but whose work is absolutely essential to our daily needs and to the very life of this college. Thank you all for your work.

Most graduation speeches are decidedly cheerful. But the Class of 2017, for whom I have a great affection, had to have known that even though I hold humor necessary to survival, “cheerful” per se isn’t usually my style. One of the things I’m known for among students is the long-running competition I’ve got going with Cynthia Fadem in the Geology Department over whose classes are more depressing. Cynthia teaches climate change. I teach peace studies, which means exploring all manner of violence and injustice. In this rather perverse competition, we’re basically tied. We’re really not trying to crush anyone’s hopes or dreams! We just want to send our graduates out into the world clear-eyed, and with fortitude.

While today is certainly a time of celebration, being clear-eyed about this moment means acknowledging that, for vast stretches of the world, it’s not an especially cheerful one. My obsession with “the moment” is another thing I’m known for among students. I keep asking them: How would you characterize this moment? How would you articulate the contours of this moment? In what ways has it broken from the past? This is because I want our students to take their place in history, which means seeing the present not simply as “the way things are,” and much less as the great culmination of and improvement upon all that has gone before, but rather as a true historical moment, one full of contingencies, with its own unique sets of limitations and possibilities — limitations and possibilities we’re not encouraged to see and might be unable to see, precisely because we’re immersed in it, as if it were *not* history but instead: just life. *Just life?* What a poor way to treat our present moment.

In order to set their imaginations in motion about how to conceptualize their place in history and how they might contribute to creating a more just world, I ask students to consider a counterintuitive and seemingly pessimistic question: What is no longer possible, and why? For this question forces an articulation of the ways this moment truly differs from the immediate past, opening the door to historicizing the present, with history’s paradoxically comforting reminder that the way things are is not the way they have always been, nor — correspondingly — the way they must be or always will be. Thus, consideration of the moment is absolutely necessary for anyone devoted to trying to engender greater justice, a cause that has drawn Earlham students for generations. In order to act, you must know where you stand.

To stand in the early days of 2017 and to ask what is no longer possible, and why, might seem especially poignant, even tragic. Some of us — especially from within the vantage point of this country — might be feeling the ground beneath us shifting, might be losing our bearings, as if this country were not really what we thought it was, or at least hoped it could be. Of course, many of us here today — and yes, *even* if not *especially* from within the vantage point of this country — never had that luxury. Never had much assurance in any feeling of security, that the ground beneath could be trusted, that the foundations were fundamentally sound. Never had the luxury of the proof through daily lived experience of the claim — even while the hope was sustained — that the moral arc of the universe was bent toward justice.¹ Those among us — many of whom are here today — who have persisted in the face of every rebuke to hope, every constant *in*assurance, and the lack of even the most basic security: you are the guides through this moment, to making history in and of this moment, to the becoming of different worlds.

It was the consideration of this moment, feeling the weight of it, as I was writing these remarks, that caused me to turn to one of these guides: the great Palestinian scholar and activist Edward Said, whose work is critical in the field of peace studies. Being in peace studies makes one feel like a failure nearly constantly — especially these days! Sometime back in October — or it might’ve been a certain day in November — I had casually said to Hashem, “Well, I don’t mind a lost cause. All my causes are lost causes.” And he reminded me of Edward Said’s beautiful essay entitled “On Lost Causes.” I hadn’t read it in a number of years, and as I’ve returned to it several times over the last few months, I find it speaking profoundly to this moment, when so many hard-won struggles are in danger of being undercut.

What is the great lost cause? It’s commonly thought of as tilting at windmills, some ultimately fruitless effort, but as I see it, if you align yourself with anyone who has been cast out from the centers of power and privilege, on any number of grounds, it is the only cause worth struggling for. Said remarks that the love of lost causes seems to “belong to all countries and all ages,” and comments with some bemusement upon the presence of Saint Jude in Christian thought, noting that “Jude provides a last resort in a religion whose central figure is supposed to be the last resort....”² Surely this speaks to humanity’s love of the lost cause and the depth of the plea that it not be lost, after all. We probably develop this taste for the lost cause in childhood, as much of the great world literature that’s made its way into children’s tales is about the heroic quest for justice that must take place against the greatest odds. But unlike the real world, lots of children’s stories have happy endings, and so for those of us who drew inspiration from such stories, we have to transform that inspiration into something better suited to the hardness of this world: hence, the love of the lost cause.

Said speaks of “[t]he passage from inculcated enthusiasm for higher causes in the young to the disillusionment of age” as a common theme among many cultures. It *is* a common theme, one so pervasive that in the face of it, the prototypical graduation speech can become a cruel hoax, as if this moment were the pinnacle of both your youth *and* your idealism, as if your idealism needed to be bolstered in this moment to its highest point, to sustain you in the face of what can *only* be a descent. But Said is rightfully critical of this theme of the inevitability of the disillusion said to come with age, noting how easily we older folks might give in to the “romanticism of disillusion.” And furthermore, we don’t believe that the high ideals of youth must necessarily crumble and give way over the course of one’s lifetime. Earlham College *does stand* for something. It must. If it didn’t, our students wouldn’t put so much energy into calling us to account when we ourselves have not lived up to our aspirations. And if it didn’t, very few of us — if any — would be interested to be here.

¹ The Reverend Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. used this phrase in several addresses, from the time of the Montgomery Bus Boycott onward, citing Theodore Parker’s 1853 address on the abolitionist movement.

² Edward W. Said, “On Lost Causes,” *Reflections on Exile and Other Essays* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2000), 535, 542.

We who have devoted a great portion of our life's work to the students of Earlham College are the believers in some great cause to be aided by the cultivation of the intellect. We believe that the questions pursued within and by the liberal arts can and might lead us somewhere beyond our current capabilities of imagining. I tell my students: Never make the mistake of thinking that the intellect belongs exclusively to the academy; the work of the intellect is and must be for anyone and everyone. But if it *doesn't* live here, the one place said to be devoted to its cultivation, then the risk might be grave indeed. I hope — and think — that there is a consensus at Earlham College on that score. I also know that many of us here believe deeply in the special contributions of the Humanities to the cause of redressing injustice in all its forms. Critical theorist Gayatri Spivak looks to the Humanities for the ways its disciplinary practices encourage “suspending oneself into the text of the other” and in so doing allow for the “uncoercive rearrangement of desires,” processes that Spivak hails as having the power to undermine the racialized global class apartheid that has brought us to this moment.³ In this context, carrying the torch of the Humanities, which hold an importance for the cause of justice proportional to their disparagement by the terms of narrow corporate calculations of value, could be considered devotion to a lost cause on behalf of a larger lost cause. As I look at the work my colleagues are doing, following in the footsteps of so many beloved professors at Earlham College over its history, and as I look at the broader landscape of small liberal arts colleges, and the generations of students and alumnae/i who carry forth an intellectual curiosity and a love of learning that cannot be reduced to the utilitarian, I see no signs of surrender, even as we are constantly told that it's hopeless, that the world has moved on, that there's not even time for the consideration of these kinds of questions anymore. The liberal arts have something profound to offer our moment, but they must be brought to bear, with everything we've got, for the moment demands it of us.

Said writes that the lost cause is associated with hopelessness, with the belief that the time for conviction has passed.⁴ Surely our moment is one in which reasons for hopelessness abound. Tens of millions around the world are on the run, fleeing unbearable circumstances, and many other millions do not even have the means to be able to move. Climate change, racism, rising xenophobia and nativism, and the unabated growth of the military-industrial complex: these four phenomena are among the causes of these unbearable circumstances and are also contributing to their worsening. As anthropologist James Ferguson notes, the always suspect discourse of progress has given way to a new insistence upon egress, the urge to exit. And yet, “the mapped-out pathways” leading from unbearable circumstances to some form of material security “turn out [for so many] to have been bricked-up.” The once-celebrated globalization has now yielded, everywhere: the proliferation of “edges, walls, and borders,”⁵ inviting forth the politics of scarcity and setting the world awash in fear.

It likely does not seem, to anyone paying attention in this moment, that the moral arc of the universe is bending toward justice, and if it is bent in that direction at all, it is only at an exceedingly high cost, with millions bearing up under that strain, carrying the weight of pushing that curve. Even if you find yourselves in situations of relative privilege, even then, if you make a stand for justice, these days, everything seems arrayed against you. Those who have a vested interest in the status quo with all its noxious and callous injustices will meet your demands for justice with far more resources: more time, more patience, more money and a louder megaphone — or just a stonewall of silence and

³ Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, “Righting Wrongs,” *South Atlantic Quarterly*, Vol. 103 (Spring/Summer 2004), 529, 532.

⁴ Said, “On Lost Causes,” 527.

⁵ James Ferguson, “Decomposing Modernity: History and Hierarchy after Development,” in Ania Loomba, Suvir Kaul, Matti Bunzl, Antoinette Burton, and Jed Esty, eds., *Postcolonial Studies and Beyond* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2005), 175, 176, 179.

a refusal to hear. Above all, to the extent that you get a reply at all, it will be, over and over: we cannot *afford* what you are asking for. There simply is not enough to be able to meet your demand. And in this moment, perhaps in contrast to earlier struggles for social justice, perhaps not even the truth will set you free. Right now, scientists in the United States working in the service of public health and the health of the environment might be feeling both the weight and the pull of the lost cause. But if this is the world in which we find ourselves, is there no hope? Or is hope just another cruel requirement that simultaneously repeatedly gives new life to the status quo even as it might also offer the means to survive its harshness?

I think, despite this bleak picture, that there is yet still hope. Because that world that seemed as though it started showing signs of collapse over the last few years, causing some of us to feel as though we were losing our bearings, was one in which those of us who were comfortable were *too* comfortable, too assured, that this world that somehow made sense, despite its obvious flaws, could be counted upon to continue indefinitely. And that world, we must acknowledge, with its comfortable ways reserved only for some, was made possible only by a series of terrible exclusions. As the ground of that terrible exclusion, certain questions were not allowed to be asked. Certain things could never be admitted aloud. Even if they were staring you in the face. The wondrous world that Francis Fukuyama promised in his so-called end of history — at the end of the last century — turned out to be a rather grim cul-de-sac.⁶ Now that world has broken open. Now the demands of the unheard come rushing forth, and silence offers no security. In this moment, perhaps, the questions long forbidden will finally be asked. What better moment to take up the lost cause?

Said brings up the common association between the lost cause and hopelessness only to reject it. As someone who devoted his life's work to the struggles of the dispossessed, Said insisted the lost cause was not a hopeless one. To uproot entrenched racism ...to dare to name, to question, and to challenge practices that are colonial through and through but that have become considered merely normal ...to upend all that gives rise to police brutality, so deadly common and so casual in its cruelty ...the cause of Tibetan liberation ...the cause of Palestinian liberation ...to build a movement that at once neither disallows criticism nor awakens "the demon of comparison"⁷ and turns to consume all in its path — including its own adherents — all of these are lost causes, for in each case, generations of experience would counsel against too much hope. In every case, valiant struggles might yield temporary victories, only to be met with forces newly stacked against them, sometimes more overtly hostile, sometimes far more insidiously subtle and thus harder even to name. Yet in every case, the struggle persists. These are lost causes. They are not hopeless causes. Said describes the labor of taking up the lost cause as enacting "a movement of vitality, a gesture of defiance, a statement of hope whose 'unhappiness' and meager survival are better than silence...."⁸ The lost cause is characterized by a tenacity that so defies logic it may go altogether unseen, even for decades at a time.

What is it that sustains hope in such a situation? Many would say it requires absolute faith or utter foolishness. Said has a different answer, and it is one with which I would like to think that, in all our diversity and difference, all of us who have passed through this place called Earlham College could agree. Sustaining hope in the face of a situation in which all the intellectual merit is on the side of hopelessness requires two things: courage and engagement of the intellect.

⁶ Francis Fukuyama, *The End of History and the Last Man* (London: Macmillan, 1992).

⁷ Alexander G. Weheliye, *Habeas Viscus: Racializing Assemblages, Biopolitics, and Black Feminist Theories of the Human* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2014), 72.

⁸ Said, "On Lost Causes," 552-53.

When it comes to resources we might draw upon to sustain ourselves in the face of what appears to be hopeless, faith, by its nature, has the virtue of a steady reliability, even if it's not constantly so. As for foolishness, well, given the human condition, that one's a bit more certain. Courage and the intellect, as resources, are both much more shaky, much less certain, and for Said, that's part of the point. The work of the intellect can transform certainty into uncertainty, and that is its power. It can destabilize the very assumptions that drive the status quo. No easy slogan and no fixed category — no shibboleth of any kind — is safe in the presence of the intellect, and the intellect promises no safety. Said describes the keeper of the lost cause in this passage he quotes from Adorno: "...the uncompromisingly critical thinker, who neither superscribes his conscience nor permits himself to be terrorized into action, is in truth the one who does not give up.... As long as thinking is not interrupted, it has a firm grasp upon possibility."⁹ Possibility will be a key word here, for the world in which the intellect labors is a world without guarantee, a perfect match for the labor of the lost cause, which keeps going despite its continual inability to find purchase.

And that brings us to courage. Courage might be the most subversive quality of all, these days. This is because the watchword of the moment is fear. In an earlier moment, also one of profound despair throughout much of the world, during the Great Depression of the 1930s, there were those who spoke directly against fear, exhorting the public not to give in to this dangerous and oftentimes deadly sentiment. Many warned, and often from their own life experiences, of the consequences of pitting the security of one group against that of another. Even the president of the United States once issued this kind of exhortation — stating that it was only fear itself that was to be rightly feared — something that in the current moment is unimaginable. Quite the contrary, in fact. Fear is being mobilized and utilized. Fear is being endorsed, embraced, and rewarded. Fear is being monetized. Fear is being weaponized. And in many regions of the world, the forces of fear, sometimes as nationalism, sometimes as white supremacy, will attempt to render you suspect if you have not sufficiently embraced the forms of fear deemed proper to the boundaries said to need enforcement in the current moment. It is a politics of scarcity that has brought us to this moment: the rendering of actual scarcity for many millions by designs in which actual human need was mere afterthought, if any thought at all, followed thereupon by the constant drumbeat, over decades, of the fear-inducing message that there will never be enough for everyone and that each of us is really on our own. Fear and all the ugliest forms of anger for which fear is the fuel have underwritten this historical moment, in which many believe the only hope lies in weaponry and walls, both literal and figurative.

And thus, in such a context, courage becomes subversive. I do not mean to suggest that courage is *necessarily* fear's opposite. One of my favorite memories is a conversation I had with my nephew Pierce a little while ago, when he was six years old. Pierce is the little brother, and as the little brother, he's developed a bit of a reputation as a kind of Robin Hood figure, in the sense that he's known for standing up on behalf of younger and smaller kids at school who are getting picked on. I was commending him for his courage in standing up to bullies, and he got a troubled look on his face, which I was about to realize was because he didn't want to receive any undue credit. After a pause, he said, "Sometimes I'm scared when I do that." That's when I shared with him a not-uncommon understanding of courage, telling him that feeling fear and going on in spite of it can be a sign of an even greater courage, and that courage in the absence of fear might not even count as courage at all. What makes this a favorite memory was watching his facial expression as he puzzled through that, and the amazing smile that spread across his face in the process of considering this. It was as if he had suddenly realized a world of possibility — as if, ticking through the list of fears of a six-year-old, he were amassing a great reserve of potential courage.

⁹ Adorno quoted in Said, "On Lost Causes," 553.

Of course, there are countless other understandings of what constitutes courage, and another one worth considering is Plato's intertwining of courage and the work of the intellect in the idea that courage involves knowledge of what *not* to fear.¹⁰ If those whose voices currently have the loudest amplification on the world stage are not only *not* exhorting us not to fear but rather promoting the experience of fear and the threat of harm where it might well not indeed be, intensifying the politics of scarcity at every opportunity, then this kind of courage becomes absolutely necessary — for wherever fear has been successfully cultivated, and courage eradicated, the promise of security becomes irresistible. Where insecurity abounds, where resources have been made purposely scarce, where suffering is spreading, where suspicions have been sown, where debate itself has been deemed detrimental, and the life of the mind a useless luxury, how quickly might one give in to the dangerous temptation to seek to exorcise one's own vulnerability. How easily might one be lured by the promise of a guarantee: some form of security backed by force — if only the lines of inclusion and exclusion can be correctly drawn, fixed, and sufficiently enforced. How quickly might we become the police, the prison guards, and the prisoners themselves. This is ripe terrain for the profit-making cynicism of the fear-monger and the arms dealer. Therefore, it must also be the terrain of the courage of the keeper of the lost cause.

The labor of the lost cause is not heroic, at least not classically so. And this can be one of the hardest realizations for those who are tempted by the fantasy of fame and the fetishizing of the individual whose name goes down in history — a temptation that might be especially strong in one's youth but that can be a siren song at any age. Said, following Adorno, recognized in his literary analysis of some of the great works on the lost cause — among them Jonathan Swift's *Gulliver's Travels* and Thomas Hardy's *Jude the Obscure* — that these were written near the end of these authors' lives; and that facing one's own mortality might give way to an especially pessimistic view, leading one to overemphasize and even overestimate the lostness of the great lost cause.¹¹ A wider aperture is needed. There is a certain aesthetics of resistance that the world inherited from the mass movements of the 1960s that has shaped popular imaginings of commitment to the cause of social justice: "a certain look, a certain lyricism, a certain requirement of youthfulness, a certain cool knowingness ...a certain danger and willingness to risk, and a certain insistence upon — above all — being seen."¹² But we all know that any success of any mass movement owes far more to the many unnamed than to the few who are named, who might well also be lost to history were it not for that anonymous labor.

And so I ask you, members of the Class of 2017, as I asked an earlier generation of students in another trying time, right after the majority of the U.S. electorate seemed to have re-endorsed the invasion of Iraq: Will it be enough for you to be remembered as part of the faceless masses, all of whom helped, in whatever large and small ways, to turn this thing around? To resist the spread of fear and the rise of militarism? To ensure that once and for all, Black Lives Matter is not a plea or even a demand, but a statement of a stone-cold fact borne out by everyday lived reality? To stem the tides of climate change and ecological collapse? To value lives — actual lives — over profit? Will being part of the faceless masses be enough for you? I hope so, dear graduates. I hope you will always see yourselves as part of something much bigger. I hope you will never let yourselves feel completely alone; there are so many out here doing this work. And so many more to come, after we are long gone. Said is emphatic that there is no such thing as a cause that is not collective: the cause is such that it "[stands] outside individuals and compel[s] their energies...."¹³

¹⁰ Socratic dialogue with Laches, in *Plato: Complete Works* (John M. Cooper, ed.) (Indianapolis and Cambridge: Hackett Publishing Company, 1997), 675-685.

¹¹ Said, "On Lost Causes," 537, 540.

¹² Joanna Swanger, *Radical Social Change in the United States: Badiou's Apostle and the Post-Factual Moment* (New York and London: Palgrave Macmillan), 272.

¹³ Said, "On Lost Causes," 530.

It is its collective nature that ultimately speaks against the lostness of the lost cause, even if it does not guarantee against it, for even in the loneliest moments of the most trying times, one can be assured — if the cause is just — that the thought that keeps alive this one flicker of light in the struggle must also “be thought in some other place and by other people.”¹⁴

In the end, Said concludes not merely by rejecting hopelessness, but by questioning whether any lost cause can ever really be lost, which might be taken to mean that in fact there *are* no lost causes. I will shift that slightly, in a way that I hope illustrates the importance of the commitment to the lost cause to which Said is urging us. The lost cause is one which, when pursued as far as it must be, will, in the course of that pursuit, change the entire context in which that cause was deemed lost in the first place. Thus, the lost cause carries the ultimate transformative potential.

Undertaking the labor of the lost cause can transform this moment and give rise to a new one, but it requires a direct confrontation with the politics of scarcity, a confrontation with the allegation of a zero-sum game that is anything but a game. And it requires going forth without any guarantee. The search for our own security, when that security is of a kind that comes only at a great cost to others: let that cause be truly lost. Let us instead find the strength to give up our attachments to the fictional protections of boundaries, to ask the questions that dare not be asked, and to confront the politics of scarcity by creating the circumstances of abundance, with our own courage, heart, brains, and generosity of spirit. I know we have this within us, and I certainly know that you have it within you, members of the Class of 2017 — because if we up on this stage are in some sense the keepers of a lost cause, which we hope will contribute to many other causes, one of the ways we’re able to keep at it, year after year, is through being continually inspired by you, our students.

I would like to conclude with a poem written over ten years ago, but one that might speak to this moment. It’s called “Invocation of Saint Jude,” but I hope it might have a wider resonance. I thank you all for listening, and I leave you with these words.

“Invocation of Saint Jude”

Now we pray to Saint Jude,
patron saint of lost causes,
the only one watching over Don Quixote,
for the *sabot* we threw into the works
did not stop the machine,
and the clang of all those empty pots
still rings in our head,
and while we sanctioned
“all those abortive attempts
drowned in rivers of blood,”
and while some of them even
ended up in annual days of celebration,
there was no liberation.

Clear-eyed and sober now,
we pray to Saint Jude,
who nods at us
and reminds us that all the ants in the world
weigh more than all the humans,
and this comforts and kindles us,
for surely ours
is the work of ants.

All our bridges have been washed out,
our hills flattened,
many millions of us
utterly crushed.

And what of all the love in our hearts?
What will they do to us
when they see the pulse still beating?
Pray, pray to Saint Jude, comrades,
and keep digging.¹⁵

¹⁴ Adorno quoted in *Ibid.*, 553.

¹⁵ Joanna Swanger, “Invocation of Saint Jude,” Unpublished poem, 6 August 2006; quote from Frantz Fanon.