

HOPE COLLEGE:  
CONVOCATION ADDRESS  
The Wonder of the Present Moment  
Dr. Gerald L. Sittser  
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## INTRODUCTION

When I entered Hope College I was certain that I knew my future vocation. I was going to become a medical doctor. So I was eager to enroll in science and math courses to get on with the preparation. Other academic courses were a distraction and inconvenience to me, like having to show up for classes on a day when you would rather be frolicking on the beach.

But I made a fatal mistake in selecting a college. Hope College was—and is—a liberal arts college. It required students to take a broad range of general studies courses. If I ever wanted to earn a degree from Hope, therefore, I would have to read Dostoyevsky, listen to Beethoven, study the causes of the Crimean War, and write a persuasive essay.

I had to sign up for a frosh writing class first. I was not inclined in my early years to read much. In fact, the only books I remember reading before college were *Toyon*, *Dog of the North* and *The Ant Men*, both undoubtedly familiar to you because they are so well known as modern day classics. And I refused to write anything at all, except when my high school teachers forced me to it. My instructor for the composition course, Dr. Nancy Miller, now a dean at Hope, knew my type well. When I told that I simply did not need the course because I was not planning to write for a career, she replied, as I recalled, with something like, “Jerry, you never know how things will turn out.”

Of course she was right. I didn’t know how things would turn out. I didn’t attend medical school at all; I enrolled in seminary. I didn’t become a medical doctor; I became a minister instead. Later I returned to graduate school for a Ph.D. Now I work as a college professor, and I speak and write as well. Words are therefore central to what I do. That composition course proved to be more useful than I ever could have imagined. Dr. Miller has benefited, too, having been given an illustration of frosh stupidity that she has no doubt used many times over the past thirty years.

I think about a second experience, taken once again from my years at Hope College. It was at the end of my sophomore year, during the week of May Day festivities. Drizzles forced us inside for the May Day coronation. I sat in the back of this very chapel with my fraternity friends. We were present to applaud the women whom we considered worthy of making the court, namely, our friends. Several of them did in fact make the My Day court, which only validated our superior tastes and reinforced our insufferable conceit. Finally the moment came for the coronation of the queen. When the emcee announced her name, I slid down in the pew and whispered, “Anybody but her. She is so pathetically nice, so sweet, so Christian. What were students thinking when they voted for her! I married her a year and a half later.

You never do know how things will turn out.

You, the members of the class of 2004, will spend more time than you can imagine over the next four years thinking about your future and making big plans for what lies ahead. You will devote endless hours to pondering career pathways, job possibilities, graduate school options, and marital prospects. And rightly so. If there's an appropriate time to consider these important choices, it is certainly now, during your college years.

But sooner or later you will also learn how little control we human beings really have. However well we plan and well prepared we are, we will encounter surprises along the way—some wanted, some not. We will pursue one vocation, only to find ourselves ten years later doing another. We will consider marriage as inevitable as going into debt and remain single for the rest of our lives, or we will marry Mr. Or Mrs. Right and wonder what went wrong five or ten years later. We will plan on having a small family and end up with quadruplets. We will settle into a comfortable life in Hamilton, Michigan until some fiery missionary inspires us to work for Wycliffe Bible Translators in Congo. We will go to work for IBM and end up living as a bohemian on the beach in Santa Cruz, writing suspense novels. We will start our teaching career in a nice suburb and conclude it by serving as a school counselor in the toughest school in the city of Chicago. Not to sound too morbid, but some of us might not even live long enough to graduate from Hope. We can never be sure how things will turn out.

Which is why so many great spiritual writers have emphasized the significance—and the wonder—of the present moment. It is almost too obvious to say, though I will say it anyway: This present moment is the only time we really have. The past is done, unchangeable and irretrievable, like a baseball that has left the pitcher's hand, headed straight toward the batter's box. The future is not here yet; it only looms ahead as a range of possibilities, any one of which could become a reality. The “eternal now,” as Quaker mystic and philosopher, Thomas Kelly, called it, is the only time we have.

Augustine of Hippo, fifth-century bishop and theologian, devoted a chapter of his *Confessions* to the subject of time and eternity. Time itself was a mystery to him. As he writes, “What, then, is time? If no one asks me, I know; if I want to explain it to someone who asks me, I do not know.” Yet Augustine had more to say than that. He was certain of at least some truths about time. “I can state with confidence, however, that this much I do know: if nothing passed away there would be no past time; if there was nothing still on its way there would be no future time; if nothing existed, there would be no present time.” He argued that the eternal God created time. Through God transcends time, humans are bound by it. Humans have a past and a future, but we can truly live only in the present. Strangely, if we do give ourselves completely to the present moment, we will relate most meaningfully to the past and to the future, however much they are beyond our control. We will be able to redeem the unchangeable past and to prepare for the uncertain future. It all depends on how well we live in the present moment.

Jean-Pierre de Caussade, an eighteenth-century Jesuit writer and spiritual director, agreed with this insight. He believed that the secret of the spiritual life is surrendering to God in the ordinariness of each moment. “The present moment holds infinite riches beyond your wildest dreams, but you will enjoy them to the extent of your faith and love... The will of God is manifest in each moment, an immense ocean which the heart only fathoms in so far

as it overflows with faith, trust, and love.”

I have two examples to illustrate this point. The first comes from a trip I recently took. My children and I spent the summer in Nairobi, Kenya. I taught at a university, and my children did volunteer work at a Mother Teresa orphanage that was situated, like an oasis, right in the middle of a vast slum. My children visited the orphanage twice a week and so became accustomed to the conditions and the routine. They spent the morning hours feeding and caring for severely disabled children, most of whom could not walk and only one of whom could talk. These children pass their days lying on mattresses or playing in a large room. Many have not ventured outside the orphanage for years, if at all. Most will die there. Their days follow a routine seemingly as dull as a blank calendar. I talked with a young Kenyan nun while I was helping to feed one of the children during my one visit there. She described what a typical day was like for her: up at dawn, prayers, breakfast, care of children, more prayers, lunch, rest, more care of children, dinner, more prayers, and bed. There is no hot water; no TV or movies; no computers and email. None of the usual diversions. They get one month off every seven years. While I was thinking to myself—“What an unspeakably boring schedule!”—she said, with a serenity in her voice that I will never forget, “This is my life.” She had turned the present moment into something almost sacramental.

The second example comes from an oddball movie, *Groundhog Day*. It tells the story of Phil Connors, an arrogant weatherman from Pittsburgh, who is dispatched to the town of Punxsutawney, Pennsylvania, to do his weather report live at their annual Groundhog Day Festival. Connors hates this assignment. He does his report with obvious disdain and then urges the crew to return to Pittsburgh as quickly as possible. But a winter storm turns them back. So Connors is forced to spend another night in Punxsutawney. When he wakes up the next morning, however, he discovers that it is again February 2, Groundhog Day, which he is forced to live over again. The same thing happens the next day, too. And on it goes. Connors wakes up morning after morning, but it is always February 2. Every scene happens just as it did the day before; every character remains just as each one was the day before. He has entered a time warp.

At first he is overjoyed by the experience. He can live as he pleases and not face any consequences. So he decides to indulge his appetite for alcohol and sex and romantic manipulation. But soon tires of pleasure and begins to despair. He has entered into an eternity of Groundhog Days, and it is hell. He commits suicide dozens of times, only to wake up the next morning on February 2 with circumstances just as they were.

Connors finally makes a discovery. He realizes that, although the day never changes, he can use the day to change himself. He can become a better person, just a little at a time. He develops his talents. He takes piano lessons, masters ice sculpture, goes to school, memorizes poetry, learns a language, all by using just one day over and over again. But then he discovers something else. He can help other people, too. He begins to roam around the town to learn what happens on Groundhog day. He finds a man choking on his food and saves him, he runs into a couple having difficulty and helps to restore their friendship, he changes a flat tire for a carload of elderly women. Day after day he shows up at the same time and place to help people in crisis. He grows to enjoy the role of serving others and becomes a hero—or better, a saint—in a town that stays forever stuck in one day.

Connors has only that one day in which to live. His life is literally confined to the present moment, which goes on for what seems like an eternity. But he learns to live that one day well. The story finally ends when Connors wakes up one morning and discovers it is February 3. But by then it is not just the date that has changed. Connors has changed, too. He has become a new man—musician, sculptor, poet, doctor, counselor, helper, friend to everyone—all in just one day.

If the present moment really is the only time we have, how should we live it well? How should you as students use your ordinary days while attending Hope College? I have two brief suggestions. First, I suggest that you be attentive to the little things. While you will feel pressure (from your parents, for example, who are helping to pay for this education) to ponder the big things that loom in the future—career path, graduate school, marriage, and the like—you will spend most of your time dealing with the little things. There will be daily reading assignments, weekly quizzes and paper, conflicts with roommates, jobs and service opportunities, down-time with friends, moral challenges, often subtle and seemingly insignificant, that quietly demand attention. It will be easy to overlook these little things. Yet the little things we do build habits, whether good or bad; they develop character, whether admirable or despicable; and they set a course for our lives, whether toward excellence or toward failure.

Newsweek carried a series of articles in late 1999 telling the story of the twentieth century from eyewitnesses. One issue was devoted to sports—noteworthy athletes, amazing feats, unforgettable moments, and great sports dynasties. One of the greatest of all dynasties in college sports was UCLA's basketball program in the 1960's and 1970's. Its team won ten national titles, including seven in a row. John Wooden was the coach. A reporter asked Wooden to reflect on the secret to his success. Rather than mentioning successful offensive plays, recruitment strategies, perimeter shooting, even superior training, Wooden provided a different perspective. "I think it's the little things that really count." Even as little, it seems, as tying shoes. "The first thing I would show our players at our first meeting was how to take a little extra time putting on their shoes and socks properly. The most important part of your equipment is your shoes and socks...It took just a few minutes, but I did show my players how I wanted them to put them on correctly." As Wooden advised so humbly, be attentive to the little things.

Second, I suggest that you be attentive to one big thing. While at Hope, search with all your heart for truth. It is the one opportunity you will have when time and resources are at your disposal for just such a search. You will have a few epiphanies along the way, I am sure. You will be reading Dostoyevsky and gain some insight that will make your head tingle as if your brain had just been awakened from sleep. You will succeed in conducting a scientific experiment and feel that you are inching toward a genuine scientific breakthrough. You will see some pattern in history that will illumine what is happening in the world today. Much of the search, however, will be more methodical and less euphoric.

But the most important search of all will be a religious one. I am treading on delicate ground here. Hope College has peculiar identity. It claims to be Christian, yet imposes no creed and requires no statement of faith and follows an open admissions policy. You will not be forced to believe anything at Hope. You can let your conscience guide you.

As you probably know, most colleges in the United States are decidedly ambivalent about

religion. College faculty in particular might study it and teach it. But actually belief makes many faculty across America feel uncomfortable, as if belief itself was somehow beneath the standards of academic integrity. In matters of religion, college faculty are often better at asking questions than in providing answers. Of course it is the business of a college education and of college faculty to challenge students to ask questions. It takes courage to ask questions, as we all know. But somewhere along the line a college education must also help student to find answers, if there are answers to be found. It takes courage to find answers, too. The answers to your questions about God are the most critical of all. It is the one “big thing” that I encourage you to put at the center during your years at Hope.

I began my own search when I attended Hope. I asked questions; I also found answers. I became a Christian while at Hope College. But the journey did not end upon my graduation. I said at the beginning of this address, “You never know how things will turn out.” I discovered how true that is when I married so unexpectedly. Lynda and I settled down to a good life together, pursued our vocations, and eventually had four children. Then, nine years ago Lynda was killed when a drunken driver missed a curve and smashed into our minivan. One of my children and my mother died in the crash, too. I learned then just how big this “big thing” of religion really is.

I remember thinking often about the unfairness of it all. I wanted, I demanded fairness from a God who seemed anything but fair after the accident. But a friend and mentor, Martin Marty, challenged me to consider another perspective. Did I really want to live in a fair world? A fair world would have spared me the experience of losing three members of my family. But a fair world would have deprived me of them in the first place, for I was in every way unworthy of the presence and influence of such good people in my life. What would each of us have if the world were fair? I am not so sure we would like to live in such a world. So I have changed my mind. I would rather risk living in a world that is not fair. That means that I will have to take my share of losses; but it also means that I will receive some gifts along the way, too. Either way, I will get what I do not deserve.

Which is exactly what grace is. Grace is God’s undeserved favor; it is not fair. No religion on planet earth holds up grace like the Christian faith does. Though the God of the Christian faith is high and holy and powerful, he became a human being in Jesus Christ to search for lost and lonely and trouble people like me. He suffered and died and rose again from the dead to give desperate people grace. He is like a shepherd who seeks for a lost sheep, a woman ransacking her home for a lost coin, a father who cares nothing for personal dignity and family fortune, if only he can have his wayward son return home again. In this matter of grace—God’s undeserved favor—there is no religion quite like the Christian faith.

Religion might be about the human search for God; the Christian faith is about God’s search for humanity. That is the one big think I urge you to investigate for yourself. And Hope College will provide you with the support, resources, and freedom to do it well. I mentioned the serenity of conviction. I realize now that the reason why she could do the little things in the orphanage so peacefully and contentedly is because she had been attentive to one big thing, too. In her search for God she learned that in Christ God had been searching for her. She found grace. That made all the difference.