A Valediction

by Robbie McClintock, based on remarks, May 12th, concluding 50 years as a student and faculty member at Teachers College, Columbia University

Thank you. First of all, thank you to the numerous people who have been essential in my career here, too numerous to name, and thank you to those who have just spoken today, to Frank, Jen, Nick, Phil, for their comments, and to René for his wonderful talk—it is a true honor to be put in the same company with Stanley Cavell. To close this occasion, I want to pick up on a phrase that René quoted from Cavell, having to do with "provoking a friend and evoking a democracy" because we need, I think, to recognize how great a challenge it is truly *to evoke a democracy*.

To get started, I want first to say one word about this occasion, my stepping down as a member of the faculty. Three or four years ago, having been here a long time, I began to think about retiring. I came to Columbia in 1961 right out of Princeton as a beginning graduate student. Word that I've stayed and stayed had gotten around and a good conversation starter became, "How long have you been here?" On the fly, the resulting math was a bit complicated and I found it easiest to answer—"My whole adult life." To that, my unsaid follow-up was—"Gee, that's kind of scary! I never thought I'd be in one place all my adult life!" With that, I started thinking about what else I might do while there was still some life left.

So I said to myself it was time to retire, but to my mind retiring had the wrong connotations. I am not interested in retiring in the normal sense of the word. Conversing with a colleague a few days ago, the way to think about this putative retirement suddenly occurred to me. To explain, I need to state that this life of study, to which I am so committed and which René has so well explicated, carries with it a question—If the driving force of all education is the study that students engage in, then what do teachers do?

I think teachers do two key things. First, teachers model, both intentionally and inadvertently, the variety of human possibilities—the sum of our opportunities, capacities, achievements, and foibles—to those around us, whether in schools or the world at large. In our engagement with the culture, in our effort to study its resources, we are models of possibility, for both good and ill. We have some control over what we model and how we do it, but we also serve frequently as ironic models, exemplars of what students decide not-to-become. And second, in the course of modeling possibilities, teachers put questions to themselves and to those around them. As we teachers engage in our own study, we raise questions for ourselves and other people, saying, through word and deed, that here is something worth thinking about, worth pursuing through the effort of study.

Now, I resolved my dilemma about retirement this way. As teachers in a world of study, we model the possibilities of study and put questions that drive study. This means, in reality, through my career here at Teachers College, I have been a student, one on a long-term, rather cushy, fellowship. I have had the opportunity to be what I really think everybody should be all their lives, namely a permanent student. Thus, I have had the good fortune to be a teacher-student (not a student-teacher), able to pursue my education in the community of other people interested in education, modeling the art of study and putting questions, as best I have been able to do. And at this point, I have finally decided, not to retire, but instead, I have in reality decided to *graduate*. After 50 years on this plum fellowship, on Wednesday I am finally going to have my graduation. In a few days, I will go forth from the halls of Teachers College to carry my work of study out into the world at large. And I greatly thank everyone at the College for this 50-year fellowship that I have enjoyed here, with you—to say the least, it has been very generous and perhaps even productive.

But in that great graduation spirit—*Carpe diem!*—finding myself before an audience, I want to embrace the occasion, one more time, to put a question to those of you who are still on your fellowships here and to all in the world who will listen. I will preface the question with three short thoughts, rather like three *whereas*-clauses preceding a formal resolution. The first is to observe that where there is life there is art, art in its primary sense, "Skill; its display, application, or expression." This *whereas* bears brief explanation.

Life is synonymous with art. More and more, I find myself reflecting on what it means to be alive. Perhaps that is natural, for the more life you have lived, the closer to its end you get, making it more compelling to understand what being alive might mean. Natural scientists will say that as physical objects, living beings, ourselves included, are basically sacks of water— mostly water with a lot of minerals dissolved in it, and with some of those minerals precipitated out into the various structural features of the human corpse. As objects—the water, the minerals, the whole corpse—we are dead matter, the passive stuff of nature, stuff that merely responds as the universe acts upon it with all those deterministic powers.

To be a natural object is to be some *thing*, perfectly responsive to the sum of the forces acting on it. The water in the sack, my stuff if you will, does not flow away, as water usually does, simply because the cell membranes that have precipitated out are strong enough to hold it in. Water, and all other dead matter, along with dead energy released in material decomposition, acts in accordance with all the natural determinants working upon it in fully predictable ways, slowing winding down in accord with the entropic law.

Except for life. For whatever time and in whatever place that a living being finds allotted to it, it lives by working against entropy, against the determining constraints. In

the face of determinisms, the living being forms purposes and struggles to achieve those meanings, to live its intentional life, converting, as best it can, the chaos of natural forces into its crafted cosmos. Neither the natural scientist nor the reflective layman knows exactly how life imbues mute matter and energy with its purposive resistance to deterministic constraints, but it does so. To live, it seems to me, is to form some intentions in the face of all those determinative forces acting on the stuff of nature, and with those intentions to generate certain skills, the ability to pursue the possibility of self-organization, self-fulfillment, to live intentionally in the face of constraints. To be alive is to exercise art, to exhibit skill, in order to realize some purpose. And I think that is true for the lowliest worm, as well as for the most exalted human.

So, as the first step in putting my question, I want you to grasp and hold tight this idea. To live is to exercise art, in the fullest meaning of the word, using cultivated skill to form and serve a meaningful purpose. All living creatures are doing that all of the time, particularly human beings, in every walk of life and in every human situation. And hence, here is democracy: Life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness are inalienable because such art is what differentiates the corpse from the living being.

My second step in putting the question, the second *whereas*, is simpler. Having asked you to keep firm the thought that where there is life, there is art, I want you now, at the risk of a certain cognitive dissonance, to call into mind the range of concerns and imperatives that are associated with matters like *A Nation at Risk, Tough Choices or Tough Times*, and the whole edifice of institutions that we serve with their high-stakes testing, their curricular standards, the flow of research commending this intervention or that, an array of certified functions, and all the debates about for-profit versus public schooling and the like. You know—just keep all that in mind, next to the idea that where there is life, there is art.

My third step, the third *whereas*, is more pleasant. I ask you to listen for two or three minutes to a passage from Goethe's *Wilhelm Meister's Apprenticeship*. It is the "Indenture" that Wilhelm finds, towards the end of his saga, that he is committed to as a human being, hoping to realize his artistic potential through the formative encounters of his life. Here it is, keeping in mind what I said about life – that life is art—forming and pursuing intentions in the face of the world's constraints.

> Art is long, life short, judgment difficult, opportunity transient. To act is easy, to think is hard; to act according to our thought is troublesome. Every beginning is cheerful: the threshold is the place of expectation. The boy stands astonished, his impressions guide him: he learns sportfully, seriousness comes on him by surprise. Imitation is born with us: what should be imitated is not easy to discover. The excellent is rarely found, more rarely valued. The height charms us, the steps to it do not: with the summit in our eye, we love to walk along the plain. It is but a part of art that can be taught: the artist needs it all. Who knows

> it half, speaks much, and is always wrong: who knows it wholly, inclines to act, and speaks seldom or late. The former have no secrets and no force: the instruction they give is liked baked bread, savory and satisfying for a single day; but flour cannot be sown, and seed-corn ought not to be ground. Words are good, but they are not the best; the best is not to be explained by words. The spirit in which we act is the highest matter. Action can be understood and again represented by the spirit alone. No one knows what he is doing while he acts aright, but of what is wrong we are always conscious. Whoever works with symbols only is a pedant, a hypocrite, or a bungler. There are many such, and they like to be together. Their babbling detains the student: their obstinate mediocrity vexes even the best. The instruction which the true artist gives opens the mind; for, where words fail, deeds speak. The true student learns from the known to unfold the unknown, and approaches more and more to being a master.

With Wilhelm's "Indenture," we have completed our three *whereas*-clauses and we arrive, ready, as the parliamentarians might say, to call the question. Remembering that the artist is not only the practitioner of high art, but everyone is the artist of his own life, for life is art; and remembering, too, the *Nation at Risk* and all that it represents; and remembering finally the artist's Indenture—the extent of art, the brevity of life, the difficulty of judgment, and the transience of opportunity—let us ask ourselves, each and all, here and everywhere—

For what, should we, as educators, stand accountable?