

Love and Strife

President's Breakfast

May 20, 2000

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It is a pleasure to welcome back to campus the alumni who are here for class reunions, and to welcome—and congratulate—our soon-to-be alumni, this year's graduates, as well as their parents and other members of their families.

Reunion and commencement are events that, in a certain sense, head in opposite directions. A reunion temporarily brings together people who for a long time have been physically separated; Commencement is a leave-taking by people who have spent considerable time together and are about to go their separate ways. That we join together such opposites for a single weekend, however,

hardly seems strange at all. Rather, it is deeply human to put our reunions and our leave-takings side by side. Those coming back to see old friends and renew old acquaintances are reminded of the time they took their own fresh steps into the world; and the new graduates about to strike out on their yet untrodden paths are rightly reminded that their lives belong to a larger pattern in the rhythm of generations.

I was myself reminded of that pattern in reading about the recent remarkable recovery of a fragment of an ancient text. When I was an undergraduate, I was taught that the works of the philosophers who lived before the end of the fifth century BC—and who are known collectively as the Pre-Socratics—survive only in the form of quotations in later writers. Because of this, the study of Pre-Socratic philosophy has been a matter of painstakingly connecting

clues and drawing inferences. Still, we thought we knew the basic outlines of the philosophical teachings of Anaximander, Heraclitus, Pythagoras, Parmenides and others.

The tradition was especially strong for the philosopher Empedocles. He is the originator of the famous theory, which was later taken up by Aristotle and which was accepted in one form or another for more than 2,000 years, that the world is comprised of four elements: earth, air, fire, and water. These elements, according to Empedocles' cosmology, are combined and mixed, then separated and dispersed in an endless cycle of creation and destruction impelled by two great countervailing forces in the universe, which he calls Love and Strife. As he has been understood by generations of interpreters, Empedocles' idea of "love" is something like gravity: it pulls things together. But

unlike gravity, it is also social. It pulls together not only planets and stars, but alumni reunions. Strife is similar to the second law of thermodynamics, the law of entropy: that systems always tend to move from a more orderly to a less orderly state. You will see a delightful example of strife tomorrow when all those rows of neatly arranged graduating students suddenly toss their caps in the air and give vent to a display of what Alan Greenspan calls irrational exuberance.

And since this is one of the last occasions on which I will have a chance to counter such exuberance, this morning I will show my love for the graduating seniors by speaking at length on ancient Greek philosophy. To begin, Empedocles has come down to us as the author of two works, one titled *On Nature*, describing the physical

universe, and the other titled *Purifications*, discussing man's moral state and relation to the gods.

But the discovery of a new scrap of writing by Empedocles—a bit of papyrus with forty new lines of text—has dramatically upset that established view. What we thought we knew was wrong. What we thought were two separate works—one on physics, the other on religion—turns out to be only one book, and it is a book richer with meaning than anyone could have dreamed.

The recovery of this fragment of ancient text is a story about universities and the research they foster; but it is also a tale of negligence, inadvertence, forgetfulness, serendipity and chance. It reminds us of the entropy—or strife—in our lives that extends from the dust on our windowsills to the fate of whole civilizations.

The story begins perhaps two thousand years ago in upper Egypt. By that time, Empedocles had been dead more than five hundred years, but his book was a classic well-known to scholars. Somehow a section of the Greek text, perhaps from a damaged scroll, found its way into the hands of a craftsman constructing a ceremonial wreath for a funeral. The craftsman cut out a strip from the piece of papyrus and used it as backing for a ring of copper leaves. And thus a small piece of Empedocles' masterpiece was deposited in an Egyptian tomb, to the glory of someone now truly lost in the sands of time.

Sometime around 1904, tomb-robbers discovered the site and looted it. What else they found we will never know, but they sold the copper wreath to a German archaeologist, Otto Rubensohn, who noticed the papyrus

backing and paid one British pound for the artifact on behalf of the Deutsches Papyruskartell.

Unfortunately, when the wreath was sent back to Europe and the museum removed the copper leaves, the papyrus disintegrated. The museum curator brushed the fragments into a box, and there Empedocles sat entombed again. When first consigned to its Egyptian grave, however, the manuscript must have been one of hundreds of copies. Now it was, by the strife and entropy of human history, probably the last tiny fragment of the original book.

So it sat for most of this century in crumbled bits in the archive of the library at the University of Strasbourg, in France, unrecognized and unreadable. In 1990, Alain Martin, a specialist in reconstructing ancient papyrus texts,

came across the box and decided to see if he could assemble the fragments.

By the spring of 1994, after three-and-a-half years with this peculiar jigsaw puzzle, Professor Martin knew that he had found something special: an unknown fragment of Empedocles. The story has, however, one more twist: for the fragment revealed that Empedocles' supposedly separate works, *On Nature* and *Purifications*, were parts of a single complex poem, which describes man's place in a great cosmic cycle. It was as if we discovered that Newton's *Principia* and Milton's *Paradise Lost* were one and the same.

For Empedocles, physics and religion seem to have been parts of the same subject. If that surprises us, it is perhaps because we have grown used to thinking that the ancient Greeks were a lot like us—and *we* usually draw an

important distinction between looking at the world with the eye of science and looking at it through the eyes of faith.

Galileo was tried by the Inquisition in 1632 and forced to abjure his view that the earth revolved around the sun, but the modern world gives the victory to Galileo's intellectual descendants. We no longer accept cosmology dictated by religious authority when it goes against the evidence of scientific observation.

Or so we tell ourselves. And with assumptions such as this, modern scholars had reconstructed Empedocles as a thinker with something like our own outlook, who speculated a little on physics and gave voice to his poetic intuitions about the gods, but like us did not confuse the two.

One of the challenges posed by Alain Martin's discovery is that we have to rethink what Empedocles and

the other Pre-Socratic philosophers were about. Of a sudden, they seem not so much quaint and naïve, as deeply mysterious. For Empedocles seems to have experienced the world in a way radically unlike the way we experience it. For us, the sundering of physics and religion is almost total. Attempts to measure the mass of the neutrino cast no light on the question of whether we possess immortal souls; the search for dark matter in the galaxy gives us no grip on the dark matters of brooding evil and human temptation.

The schism between science and religion, however, is not something we cheerfully accept. It is, rather, a price we pay for the immense power of scientific explanation and it has left a perplexing gap. We do not wish to believe for no reason. We would *like* to know that our intuitions about justice, our thoughts about what it means to be good, our abhorrence of cruelty, our reverence for life, our longing

for the transcendent are rooted in the real nature of the universe. But the quintessential modern belief is that moral understanding and spiritual insight are grounded in nothing but inner experience. No law of physics declares that we should do unto others as we would have others do unto us. And, conversely, no principle of moral agency determines the fluctuations in the quantum vacuum.

The discovery of the Empedoclean fragment is in and of itself a major event in the specialized world of classics and early Greek philosophy. Those are not my fields, but I take a certain vicarious delight in the combination of scholarly achievement, sheer chance, and the spectacle of forty lines of obscure text upending thousands of pounds of learned tomes full of pompous pronouncements based, it turns out, on utter ignorance.

I suppose one could look at this in the spirit of mocking the pedants, but that is not at all the lesson I take. After all, it was a practitioner of one of the most pedantic specializations imaginable—papyrology—who uncovered, or I should say, reassembled the truth. Instead, I see in this story a victory for the lovers of fact over the theorists who hold that “mere facts are incidental.” The next time I hear that I will think of Professor Martin’s little bits of papyrus and smile.

The rediscovery of Empedocles strikes me as an apt story for an occasion like this in which we have not only our own instances of alumni coming together and graduates preparing to depart, but also an opportunity to reflect on the larger purposes and deeper motives of higher education.

In 1658, the English physician Sir Thomas Browne, published an essay titled, *Hydriotaphia, Urne-Burial or A*

Brief Discourse of the Sepulchrall Urnes Lately Found in Norfolk. Browne's imagination had been stirred by the discovery of some pots that held the cremated remains of ancient Britons. The pots did not hold any precious lines of Pre-Socratic philosophy; rather, as Browne wrote, "These are sad and sepulchral Pitchers, which have no joyful voices; silently expressing old mortality, the ruines of forgotten times..."

But Sir Thomas Browne was mistaken, for his own essay gave joyful voice to those Pitchers and expressed far more than old mortality. Reflecting on the possibility that the traces of the dead now brought to light would be ignored, Sir Thomas wrote:

We were very unwilling they should die again,
and be buried twice among us.

Beside, to preserve the living, and make the dead to live, to keep men out of their Urnes, and discourse of human fragments in them, is not impertinent unto our profession.

I think the same can be said of Empedocles' paper fragments. His last remains may have been consigned to a wreath rather than an urn, but it can serve us just as well to preserve the living and make the dead to live. In the spirit of Sir Thomas Browne, then, let us consider the larger meaning of the martyred records of Empedocles.

The new fragments teach us, as I said, that Empedocles found no schism between science and religion similar to that which divides our modern minds. This schism is embodied in the structure of the modern university, which for the most part consists of disciplines, departments, and schools that are on either one side of the

rift or the other. We do not look to departments of chemistry, physics, or biology to answer questions such as, “How should I live my life?” and likewise we do not look to departments of literature, history, or religion to answer questions such as, “How does DNA encode genes?” This division of labor among academic disciplines is so well-established and so familiar that we seldom pause to think how new—and how deeply troubling—it really is.

Less than 150 years ago, no university anywhere in the world considered science a stand-alone intellectual pursuit. Science—natural history and natural philosophy as it was then called—was simply part of the study of how the world came to be, and that was the same study that explained why humans must govern themselves by law and by knowledge of right and wrong.

Today we hear only faint echoes of this unity of science with philosophy. You will hear one of those echoes tomorrow at Commencement when Boston University awards Ph.D.'s—doctors of *philosophy*—to students in such non-philosophical fields as astronomy and chemistry. No one mistakes what the title really means. The doctor of philosophy who really studied biomedical engineering is not expected to cure the soul.

But if we consider this through the eyes of thinkers of ages past, how strange this really is! How is it that one can profess to know the inner secrets of the world around us and not know our own inner nature? Empedocles thought the two subjects were inextricably one. He saw the blood coursing through our bodies, our lungs surging with air and observed that we and other living, breathing creatures belong to the whirl.

And so we do. All of our modern science confirms that we are made of the same stuff as the universe around us, and are subject to the same physical laws as govern inanimate nature. But is that all? Some modern thinkers hold to that bleak view, reducing us and our moral aspirations to mere wishful thinking, the delusions of scattered atoms in the cosmic dust. But that sterile hypothesis is, to say the least, unproven. And perhaps we should listen when Empedocles commands us to:

...harken to my words; for learning will increase your understanding.

Empedocles knows that we are indeed part of the strife-riven universe, but Empedocles also knows that strife is not boundless, for in its midst, also an integral part of the universe, is Love. Love indeed is fully equal to strife,

...equal in length and breadth. Observe her with your mind; do not sit with dazed eyes. She it is who is known as inborn in mortal limbs, through whom they think friendly thoughts and do well-fitted deeds, calling her Joy and Aphrodite.

For Empedocles, Love is as real as the chaotic whirl of wind and water, earth and fire—and, even if we no longer personify the force as the goddess Aphrodite, we feel the immense sweep of his reasoning. Some part of the universe is governed by a moral economy, because we find it in ourselves and we are part of the universe.

The human animal is inextricably imbedded in the natural order, but in an unusual way. We cannot survive infancy and childhood, and we cannot live anything resembling a truly human existence as adults, without family and community. We depend upon others and others

depend upon us: and this inextricably gives rise to obligation, to duty—it gives rise, that is, to moral laws.

These are real laws, even though—unlike the law of gravity or the second law of thermodynamics—they can be broken.

In fact, it is precisely because they can be broken that the proper definition of our humanity hinges on whether we observe the moral law and thus achieve our humanity, or ignore the moral law and thus cast our lot with the beasts.

In order to be fully human, we must acknowledge the laws that are in us. Even when we break these laws, or attempt to ignore them, in an important sense they govern our actions. We are creatures who exist within our obligations to each other, not merely dying animals, not merely ionized particles in the solar wind. We are part of nature, but we are bound by our sense of right and wrong and by our elemental need to be joined in community. We

are incomplete without others and we are made whole only by Love.

In saying this, I am not suggesting that we give up what we have achieved by making science a deliberate and systematic pursuit holding an honored place in the universities. Still, I think we long for the lost unity of humanistic and scientific thought, even if we are not always conscious of that restless longing.

The longing itself is, I think, one of the deeper motives that characterizes a Boston University education. Our Core Curriculum is founded not only on the idea that students should read great books but that faculty members should possess the breadth to teach those books. Our liberal arts requirements in all of the undergraduate colleges are founded not only on the idea that students aiming for careers in business, engineering, health, communication,

and the arts need a grounding in the humanities, but that our professors of the humanities have the agility to teach their subject to students who are primarily focused on professional preparation. And we are ceaseless in our efforts to appoint faculty members who see the larger horizons that give the university its deeper purpose.

Looking to the larger scene, I fear the humanities have been reduced to a supporting and often decorative role. They are like Empedocles' book in the hands of the Egyptian artisan who saw its only value as a stiff backing for a funeral wreath. Day in and day out now, our own age's wreath-makers snip away at Shakespeare, Dante, Goethe, and others, cutting them down to decorative size.

Boston University has opposed this busy industry of fabricating ornaments for the funeral of Western civilization. To the extent we have succeeded, our

graduates face the world of striving and of strife courageously. Imbued with a love of learning, they refuse to live within sterile and arbitrary divisions of knowledge and long for the connections that enrich and complete the life of the mind, the body and the soul. They know, as Sir Thomas Browne wrote, that “Time hath endlesse rarities...reveals old things in heaven, makes new discoveries in earth, and even earth it self a discovery.”

That we should live in an age where an ancient philosopher might be rescued from the Urne of oblivion to teach us a new old lesson about the unity of knowledge proves that many more discoveries remain yet before us, and that our voyages forth, in love and in strife, may yield the treasures we seek and still other, greater treasures whispered only in our dreams.

Boston University alumni, graduating seniors, this special weekend is compounded of unlike elements, of comings together and farewells, leave-takings and taking stock, renewals and perhaps some last embraces. We celebrate but not as if there is no tomorrow; for the joys of this weekend are inextricably compounded with our tomorrows. In Sir Thomas Browne's words, we have learned that "all present felicities afford no resting contentment." For we have in us the intuition that "we are more than our present selves."

Class of 2000, reunioning alumni, shipmates all: may your searches beyond your present selves continue to be voyages of fair discovery, of strife worthy of striving, and of love to fill your sails as you continue the great human journey, now a thousand and more generations long, toward knowledge and truth.

