

Scholarship and Redemption

President Niels-Erik Andreasen's Convocation Address delivered to the students, faculty and staff of Andrews University, October 9, 1998, in Pioneer Memorial Church

This past year I reread Homer's *Odyssey* in the new brilliant translation by Professor Robert Fagles of Princeton University, who also translated the companion volume, Homer's *Iliad*, in 1990, as well as other volumes of classical Greek literature.

So why did I read this book once again? Well, first, because my wife gave it to me for my birthday. Second, because this is an exceptionally fine translation of a very important work. Professor Fagles has a masterly command of both classical Greek and English. And he has produced an absolutely splendid translation, one of the best in our time. Besides, I think we can learn something of value for ourselves from it.

Incidentally, I hope I have not lost you already! You know about Homer's two large poems, do you not? *The Iliad* and *The Odyssey* are two very long poems, the oldest European literature. They tell a story. The story is about a beautiful woman—Helen—who was taken prisoner from Greece in Europe to the city of Troy in Asia Minor. In response, the Europeans mobilized a naval expedition of a thousand ships to get the beautiful Helen back. So we have the expression: *The face that launched a thousand ships*. That was Helen's beautiful face. All right, you college men, do I have your attention now? This is about the most beautiful woman in the world.

The war raged ten years with no victory in sight. Then the Greek war hero Odysseus thought up a plan. He built a

large wooden horse and left it outside the gates of the city of Troy while pretending to retreat. The Trojans thought it was a present and brought it inside their city, not knowing that Odysseus and his soldiers were hidden inside the horse. Well, at night they crawled out of the horse, opened the gates, and Troy fell. That is the first part of the story. It has given us another proverb: *Beware of Greeks bearing gifts*.

After the victory and for the next ten years, Odysseus and his men set out to return home where his faithful wife Penelope awaited her man for 20 years, and that is the story of the second volume, *The Odyssey*.

Now all this happened about 3,200 years ago, at the time of Samuel and Saul, Samson and Delilah (another beautiful woman), and the Philistines in the Bible. Four-hundred years later, about 2800 years ago, at the time of the prophet Isaiah in the Bible, Homer wrote the story in his two great poems. There is also some similarity in themes between the Bible stories and Homer's. It is said that Homer was blind, and that he composed his poems in his head and memorized them, just as Beethoven composed music in his head after becoming deaf.

Now, what does all that have to do with college education? Quite a lot. Let me explain. Odysseus is preoccupied with one thing: Getting home. He wants to get home to his land, his farm, his wife Penelope and his son Telemachus. But like some college students he is not trav-

eling the shortest way. Instead, he has ten years of adventures on the way. He struggles a lot and learns a lot, mostly because his companions are reckless and get themselves and their ship into all kinds of trouble.

But Odysseus is clever, disciplined and experienced, and he finds solutions to all the problems of these high adventures. He visits marvelous and frightening places, meets noble and mischievous men and women. Nevertheless, our hero never forgets his single purpose, getting home. He comes close to heaven and to hell, but never lingers long. He meets beautiful women, but never forgets his wife Penelope. And have you noticed that whereas the first volume, *The Iliad*, deals with men, their power, their fights, their temper tantrums and their triumphs and defeats, the second volume is dominated by a longing for peace and security, and by the faithful love of a woman who draws her man Odysseus back home like the needle of a compass is drawn to the pole.

For 20 years Penelope waited for her husband. She raised their son Telemachus. Along the way she received many offers to remarry, but instead she kept weaving a blanket and waiting for her man to return. When Odysseus finally made it back 20 years later, he had changed so much that no one recognized him, except his old dog and his nursemaid, who noticed a familiar childhood scar on this strange man's leg. Only then does Penelope realize that her man has returned, and they fall in love all over again.

So you see, this story is not about a trip; it is about men and women, husbands and wives, friends, lovers longing to be together. Above all, it is about life, just like our Andrews experience will be a story of our life. It is a story about having a mission, about determination, about being smart, about devotion and nobility and high moral purpose, about learning new lessons every day, about loyalty, about going away and returning home, and about love.

To put it succinctly, it is a story about becoming wise and about being committed, and that is what college is all about as well.

Odysseus tried earnestly to be smart and to keep his wits about him so he could rescue his companions and return

to his family. We can learn that same lesson here in college—to be smart and to be committed and to discover that these two qualities support each other, like two sides of the same coin.

So often we imagine that we learn to be smart in our classes, laboratories and in the library, and that being caring and committed is an add on, the spiritual dimension that we add to our smarts here in this Christian university so as to make our education complete.

We even talk about being intentional about our commitment to spiritual development, as a special ingredient of an Andrews education. I would like to propose that spirituality, piety, a caring and redeeming attitude is an integral part of our education, not an “add on.”

In fact, “add-on” spirituality is a danger-

Of course, I know that for the last 200 years or so of human history it has been common to say that a university education and religious faith tend to militate against each other. The Enlightenment, some argue, set about to overcome the so-called superstition of religion with the bright light of information, research, and scholarship. However, in terms of overall human history, that conflict some see between faith and learning is only a recent, temporary development. For the rest of human history, all the way back to Homer’s *Odyssey*, it was assumed that being smart and pious, being educated and committed were natural allies.

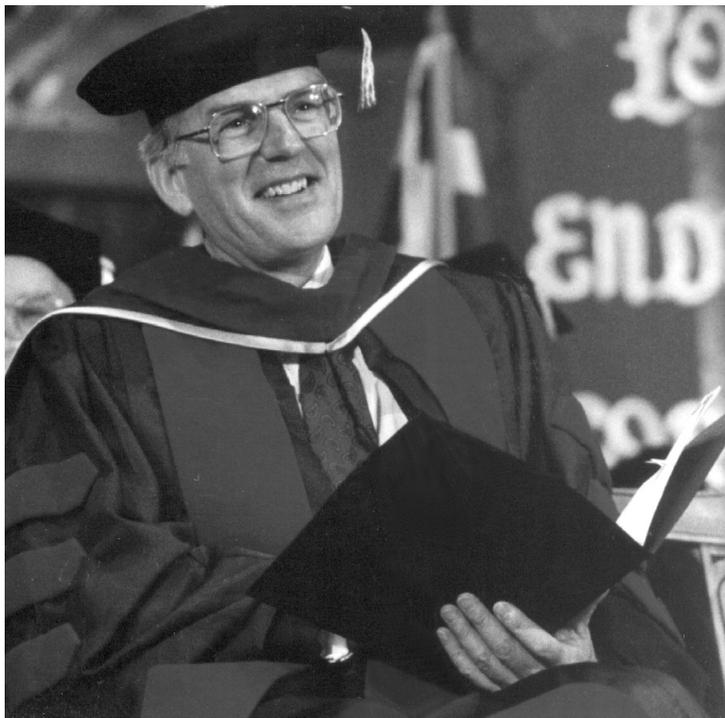
We must accustom ourselves to that kind of thinking again. That is why I read Homer. Of course, we must also read that in the Bible, for Scripture says: “The fear

love, as he made his way back home. And how about finding it in the lives of great scientists and economists and leaders? That is a fascinating argument in support of our system of education—namely, that true education brings together the brainy intellect and the believing heart.

It has been my experience that our minds are like baskets. The more we enlarge them through education, the more faith they can hold. And faith is like devoted determination—the more we have of it, the more we wish to learn.

So when we speak about a spiritual master plan for Andrews University, we are not advocating yet another extracurricular activity to squeeze into an already busy schedule.

No, I’m talking here about a new way of teaching and learning, not an addition to



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ous thing for a person and for a campus, as well as for a church. Further, being smart or scholarly is a natural aspiration of all God’s children, and we must never apologize for that aspiration. Being smart does not militate against being committed. And being redemptive is not a sign of weakness in the academic environment of learning, research and achievement. Rather, it is a sign of personal maturity, a smart thing to do. That is what *The Odyssey* is all about.

of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom.” But we sort of expect to find such things in the Bible, and maybe for that reason they do not impress us as much as they should.

But how about finding it in Homer’s poems, the story of the earliest and greatest hero in early Western history who used his intelligence to foster all the spiritual qualities of a noble human being: loyalty, faithfulness, devotion, compassion, faith,

our regular teaching and learning—in fact, a new way of living as well. For on a university campus, learning and living become inseparable. Our residence halls, workplaces, chapels, even the dining hall are part of the university, are part of living and learning. Nothing we do here is an “add-on.” Everything we do in a Christian university makes us wiser and more redemptive.

My wife once told me that in her student

years in Greece she had three great heroes—Jesus Christ, her minister, and Dostoevsky. Is that not a strange combination: The Son of God, a Greek Orthodox priest, and a Russian writer? Not really, if we see understanding and piety as closely related experiences. The love of Christ, the guidance of a pastor, and the ideas of a good writer all help us grow.

Spirituality is not an addition to learning, making sure it remains godly; and learning is not a secular control mechanism to keep our spirituality informed and honest. No, the two are part of a single human quest—like an odyssey—helping us to make it home again.

And where is that home? For Odysseus, home was the island of Ithaca and his wife Penelope. For us students and teachers, home is where intellect and spirituality meet, where learning and commitment wait patiently for each other, where scholarship and redemption become one in the pleasant company of our Creator.

Last spring, my wife and I and some friends went to Chicago to attend a concert of the Chicago Symphony under the direction of guest conductor Herbert Blomstedt. He is a Christian, a Seventh-day Adventist, and he holds an honorary doctorate from Andrews University. Before his retirement he was conductor of the San Francisco Symphony. Just now he directs the Northwest German Symphony in Hamburg. Besides, his niece, Monica, is the organist in my mother's church in Denmark. So, of course, we wanted to hear this man making music on Saturday night and then to meet with him over brunch on Sunday morning.

I remember calling on him Sunday morning in his modest hotel room. There on his table lay the score (the sheet music) of one of Brahms' symphonies and a German Bible. He was reading both in preparation for a Brahms concert in San Francisco the next day. "Do you need a piano to help you study Brahms?" I asked. "No," he replied, "do you have to be in church to read the Bible?"

So we talked until early afternoon about God mostly, by referring to the Bible or the Brahms score or both. He told a story about meeting a young Russian organist from Moscow and helping him play the

organ in St. Catherine's church in Hamburg, where Brahms had once played. This led to an invitation for Blomstedt to deliver a lecture in a series of presentations for the general public given from the pulpit in that church on the subject: *Warum ich (k)ein Christ bin*. Why I am or am not a Christian. Other speakers were Helmut Schmidt, former Chancellor of Germany, the mayor of Hamburg, and other thought leaders in North Germany.

In his presentation, Blomstedt gave four reasons why he is a Christian, but the most important was this: *Christian faith brings us close to the source of creation, and all of us—artists, scientists, artisans, service professionals—are invited by God Himself to become creative in our life and work.*

And then he added something Odysseus would also have said 3200 years earlier: Faith in God and piety protect us from *hubris*, from human pride in the presence of God. That is why smart people need faith. Without faith, smart people tend to become intolerable. Don't ever let that happen to you.

I invited Maestro Blomstedt to visit Andrews University the next time he returns to America to guest-conduct symphony orchestras. It may not be for a while, but I wanted him to explain to you that spiritual commitment is not an addition to our scholarship, to our creative work, or to our service. Rather, it is a way to be scholarly, a way to be creative.

So the most important questions at the beginning of this year are not. *How can we find time to promote spiritual formation? Who will do it? Who will measure it? How do we know when we have achieved it?* Our real question is far more simple, yet profoundly more difficult to answer, and it is this: *How do we become spiritual persons in the very work we do as teachers, students, staff, and administrators?* To answer that question is to embark upon a quest, like an odyssey, that will place us face to face with many adventures and even dangers, but in the end will bring us safely home to our first love.

So this year, like Odysseus, we will start a journey. We are going to be smart about what we do without apologies to anyone, creating an atmosphere of scholarship, research, and achievement in this

Christian university community, but we also desire to become a pious, faithful people, a creative, a caring and redemptive community which gathers near the presence of God closer and ever closer.

You may have heard me speak enthusiastically about spiritual development among faculty and students here on campus. You know that Net '98 begins tonight here in this church, and that I have been an enthusiastic supporter of broadcasting these services from this university campus. But you will also hear me speak earnestly about research and publishing, and reading books, and getting A's and expanding the library, and creating a whole new learning center for undergraduate students that integrates the arts, letters, social sciences, religion, and communications into a single and seamless experience.

This is not my personal balancing act between the expectations of our church on the one hand and the expectations of our accreditation agency on the other. No—this represents an approach to education in this Christian university which affirms that we wish to discover a way to teach and to learn in such a manner that the higher we reach in learning, the deeper we are grounded in faith. The more we pursue scholarship, the more redemptive we become. The smarter we get, the more humble we will be.

I have thought a lot about this throughout my entire career, and I am now prepared to make you a promise: *As we find ourselves on such an odyssey toward scholarship and redemption, this good university will become an exemplary Christian institution of higher learning, a faithful lighthouse for others to steer by, a flagship institution to guide others safely home to port.*

Niels-Erik Andreasen has been president of Andrews University since 1994.