

Scholarship at St. Norbert College
Wednesday, August 25, 2010
8 a.m. in Bemis 20

8:55-9:25 a.m.

I. Living the Life of Inquiry

Good morning! Thank you all for welcoming me so kindly to St. Norbert, a place I have long admired from my years at Mount Saint Mary's in Maryland.

Thanks in particular to Linda Beane-Katner for inviting me to come and helping me prepare, and also to Jeff Frick for our conversations.

The image on the screen is the constellation Sagittarius (courtesy of the Hubble telescope), envisioned by the ancient Greeks as the Archer—a centaur with a drawn bow (image from Harvard). This next image is M23, an open cluster of stars in Sagittarius. I've taken the M23 picture from a June 2007 article in *Astronomy*, which starts out like this:

Astronomers detected variability in 30 stars in the field of open star cluster M23 in Sagittarius. The observations were presented by Dr. Jeffrey Wilkerson and a team of researchers from Luther College to the American Astronomical Society meeting in Honolulu, Hawaii. These results are part of a long-term study of fields containing bright open star clusters. The study hopes to shed light on how a wide variety of stars vary over many years by monitoring the luminosity stability of normal stars, searching for changes in the periods and amplitudes of variable stars, and waiting for any flares or outbursts.

The deliberately plain prose downplays at least three things:

- Discovering a new field of variable stars is a big deal in astronomy
- Study of variable stars—a star whose brightness varies either because of pulsations due to gravitational imbalances, or because it is one of a pair of stars (binaries) close enough together so that one periodically eclipses the other—such study can help us understand how star clusters form

- The “team of researchers” was composed of Wilkerson’s *students*, most of them undergrads at the time of the Honolulu presentations but some of them Luther students who had gone on to graduate school.

Wilkerson came to Luther with a U-Haul full of equipment from his doctoral program at Berkeley, equipment used to develop x-ray astronomy instrumentation, and although he published some work on this after coming to our college, and though one of the students collaborating with him won a Rhodes scholarship, Jeff shifted his research prior to tenure review to optical astronomy. He noted in his application for tenure and promotion to associate professor (quoted here with his permission) that although progress in instrumentation is essential in physics, “the greatest glory is rarely reserved for the solderer of wires.”

But it seems clear that the real reasons for the switch in research focus were two: he realized that optical astronomy would enable him to draw more undergraduates into research, and he loves looking at the stars. As a consequence, Luther has remote and on-campus observatories; an ongoing research program of real significance that engages physics majors every year and sends some of them to grad school and one to a Rhodes scholarship; astronomy courses for non-majors that close as fast as a Springsteen concert; and monthly Friday night star-gazing sessions for Decorah children and their parents. (On a pragmatic note, by the time Wilkerson came up for tenure and promotion to associate, he was the author or co-author of nine published articles, but his astronomy investigations had not yet produced results ready for publication. He and his senior colleagues made the

case that this work would be slow in reaching its conclusions, and would be worth the wait: they were right.)

The example of Wilkerson illustrates my theme for the morning: that scholarship is first and last a labor of love—the love of discovery, reflection, and sometimes creation or performance, and the love of drawing bright young people into a lifetime of such work. One of the scholars at St. Norbert, John Pennington, writes about the Scots novelist George MacDonald, whose work shaped the writing of C. S. Lewis, himself a university teacher, Christian apologist, and novelist. In an introduction to MacDonald, Lewis writes of the way in which a harsh figure from MacDonald’s own life is revealed in his writing to be more complex than first appears, a revelation that Lewis attributes to the insight of forgiveness: “He who loves, sees,” says Lewis (*Phantastes and Lilith* 7).

The one who loves, sees. The scholar sees because she cares enough to take the time needed; she sees because she has the humility of intellect to know that truth matters more than her initial assumptions; she sees because she has the humility of spirit to devote herself to something she cannot own.¹ And what the scholar sees is not only an object of study (the stars, a work of fiction) but also the community in which her work plays out, and the relationship of her particular work to health of that community. Hence the allusion in your program to the

¹ The terms *humility of intellect* and *humility of spirit* I borrow from Chris Nelson, President of St. John’s College, Annapolis.

Kentucky farmer and author Wendell Berry, who likes to draw parallels between cultivating the ground and cultivating human understanding. This is from his essay, “Discipline and Hope”:

Like a good farmer, a good teacher is the trustee of a vital and delicate organism: the life of the mind in his community. The standard of his discipline is his community’s health and intelligence and coherence and endurance. This is a high calling, worthy of a life’s work. (*Recollected Essays* 193)

If we as college teachers are trustees of the life of the mind in our particular communities—St. Norbert, Luther College—then our first concern is for the “discipline” of cultivating that life among the students and faculty and staff who compose those communities. Our scholarship in the first instance serves the mission of that community: in of a college of liberal learning and of faith, a vision of human flourishing that includes the primary joys of searching, finding, and telling what we have seen.

There are then, in my experience, two defining assumptions for approaching the question of scholarship at colleges like ours: (1) that it is not work we do to meet an arbitrary standard, but rather work we do out of love (nothing could be more dreary than faculty churning out papers or performances merely because someone is “making” them do it!), and (2) that it is not a private enterprise, but rather communal—scholarship can sometimes be lonely or even isolating, but it is in community that we discover the love of truth seeking, in

community that our ideas are tested, in community that they create the beauty of the arts, the rigor of open debate, the possibility of service.

Given these assumptions, the first questions we ask about scholarship are not “counting” questions but rather questions like these:

- Why did we come here?
- What do we love?
- How can we arrange our time to pursue that love to our own good and to that of the community for which we are trustees of the life of the mind?

Before we break, let me recall what all of you know better than I: that such assumptions and questions are fully in sync with the mission of St. Norbert, which sustains a Catholic tradition of affirming “the sacred dignity of all persons” (and therefore of the labors that fulfill their humanity), a liberal arts tradition promoting collaboration to gain knowledge over a lifetime of learning, and a Norbertine tradition of living out our vocations in communal service. And such assumptions and questions are in sync too with the 1992 statements about scholarship in your faculty handbook, in particular these:

- “Scholarship at St. Norbert College is not an abstract term, but rather a way of life.”
- “Scholarship at St. Norbert College is the bringing to bear of a trained mind on a problem or question and the public sharing of the results of these labors. It is what academics *do*.”

Let’s break, and then I will tell you about our experience over the last decade at Luther.

Works Cited

- Berry, Wendell. *Discipline and Hope. Recollected Essays*. New York: North Point Press, 1983.
- Fujii, Akira. Sagittarius Constellation (photograph). April 24, 2003. See <http://www.spacetelescope.org/images/heic0305c/>.
- Hevelius, Johannes. Sagittarius (drawing), from *Uranographia* (1690). See <http://chandra.harvard.edu/photo/constellations/sagittarius.html>.
- Lewis, C.S. Introduction. *Phantastes and Lilith*, by George MacDonald. Grand Rapids: W. B. Eerdmans, 1964.
- Wilkerson, Jeffrey. "Study Yields New Variable Stars." *Astronomy*: June 13, 2007. See <http://www.astronomy.com/asy/default.aspx?c=a&id=5670>.