

**Off to See the Wizard  
Baccalaureate 2006**

Twenty-five years ago this week I sat where you graduates are seated. Not literally, not in this church; but as a member of the Class of 1981 at Wallenpaupack Area High School in northeast Pennsylvania. I, too, attended my baccalaureate service and in fact my own pastor gave the address. Yet as I tried to remember what the Rev. Edgar Singer talked about, I confess that for the life of me I cannot.

Preachers need texts and in a pluralistic society finding the right text isn't easy. Sunday mornings in the parish that I serve is much easier, because our narrative is the story of the life and death and resurrection of Jesus. Parts of that story are told through images here at St. Mary's as well: images such as the cross and font and the Eucharistic table resonate with me and I find comfort in them. But I am profoundly aware that these images and the larger narrative of which they are a part is not one that we all share. While this story—quite frankly above all others—gives my life meaning and is at the core of my own identity, I am respectfully aware that there are other narratives—other traditions—which I also honor and value. It seems coercive to inflict my narrative on all of you tonight, and so I'm not going to do that. If you want to hear that story you are welcome at St. Francis Church any weekend!

It's hard to live in a pluralistic society and to hold fast to your own core beliefs and values and stories while also making room within you for the beliefs and values and stories of others. As a society we aren't very good at it yet, and I think it remains the great challenge that your generation has to help us to figure out: because at the moment we are an extremely polarized people. Read the letters to the editor of *The Landmark* or *The T&G* or do a survey of some of the emails that people forward to one another, and you'll see that underneath the veneer of civility there is anger and hostility from both the right and the left around a whole constellation of issues. I'm not sure how we got here, but I look to your generation to help us find ways of moving beyond the impasse of "red" and "blue" and to discover again all the shades of purple in between. That doesn't mean we all need to be the same, nor that we shouldn't talk about our differences. It just means that the great challenge that still lies before us remains the challenge of finding common ground. *E pluribus unum*—from the many, one.

Now with all that serious stuff in mind, I want to reflect with you on what I consider a great American story written over a hundred years ago: L. Frank Baum's "The Wizard of Oz." You may or may not be a fan of that story, but I can pretty safely assume it is a story that is familiar to all of you—that you remember Dorothy, and her little dog, too. Whatever your traditions, if you listen closely I think you will hear echoes of those traditions in this familiar story:

- Life is a journey; and on the road we make friends who give it meaning;
- We need courage, brains, and heart if we mean to get where we need to be;
- Sometimes the curtains need to be pulled back on the mighty in order to expose their folly

Stories have power because their meanings have infinite possibilities and layers of interpretation. They can be turned a bit and become new when told from a slightly different angle. Might this story be read, for example, as the story of fraudulent politics in a media age? Or as a feminist tale about a young woman who finds strength and power in her shoes—in spite of the wimpy male figures who surround her?

I recently saw “Wicked” on Broadway. Perhaps some of you have seen it, or have at least heard about it. And I know some of you have been singing parts of it this year. Who gets to decide that the wicked witch of the west is wicked? How do those labels stick? What if she is in fact not “wicked” at all, but demonized by the powers-that-be for their own gain, for their own desire to manipulate and control? In “Wicked” the Wizard sings these words:

*A man’s called a traitor or a liberator  
A rich man’s a thief, or philanthropist.  
Is one a crusader—or ruthless invader?  
It’s all in which label is able to persist.*

Surely anyone who has just come through high school knows the truth of that song: how people can be labeled by others and how the label can stick, even when it isn’t true, or more likely when it’s only a part of the truth. I wish I could tell you that stops after high school but in some ways it only gets more sophisticated. One of the great weapons the weak and the vulnerable have is to tell their own stories, in their own words. The pen truly is mightier than the sword. That’s why totalitarian societies always lock up the writers and artists first. A world of nothing but information loses its meaning and purpose, and the key to surviving in such a world is to cultivate imagination.

So if you don’t already, learn to relish stories: the stories of the great faith traditions, of the founding fathers of this nation, or of the stage or film. Listen to the stories that grandma and grandpa tell about coming through Ellis Island. Journal about the stories of friendships gained and loves lost during your years at Wachusett. Remain open to the still unwritten next chapters of the story of each of your lives. Tend to those stories, and ponder their hidden meanings. Find ways of telling them in new ways, of seeing them from new perspectives, of finding nuances that you missed the first time around. In so doing, life finds meaning and vitality—imagination is unleashed, perspectives are challenged and nuanced. We can begin, I think, to see the color purple—in all of its varied shades.

One thing I can tell you I’ve learned over the past twenty-five years: the path is rarely as obvious as a yellow-brick road. Yet looking back on the story of my own life it becomes clearer that there was a path there—with all of its twists and turns. If we pay attention I do think we find our way, and that we find the friends we need to share the journey. In the midst of challenges and fears, we still find that virtues like courage, and heart, and wisdom aren’t something others can give us—but gifts we already possess within, gifts we need simply to claim as our own—usually with the help of others who can see in us what we can’t always see in ourselves. My prayer for each of you is that you find those gifts, and that the journey is an adventure.

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