

Looking for Good Work: Western Christian High Commencement, May 19, 2015



by Nicholas Wolterstorff

It's wonderful to be back! This is my home country. I was born in Bigelow and lived there for the first twelve years of my life. When my twin sister and I were three years old, our mother died of cancer. Four years later, my father married a woman from Edgerton. After continuing to live in Bigelow for the next five years, we moved to Edgerton. In those days, the Christian school in Edgerton did not go beyond the tenth grade. And so it was that I,

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along with about fifteen other kids from Edgerton, completed our Christian high school education here at Western. We went back and forth between Edgerton and Hull on weekends, boarding here in Hull during the week. Western gave us its oldest bus to use – naturally, since it was used only on weekends. The heater barely worked; you here can imagine what it was like to travel the sixty miles between Edgerton and Hull in the winter! Once we slid off the road. There were no cell phones in those days. You walked to the nearest farm and hoped someone was home.

I loved my two years at Western. We had wonderful teachers, and I developed many close friendships, some of which I maintain to this day. But the only time I've been back, since graduating in 1949, was for the sixty-year reunion of my graduating class. Every now and then I do get news of your accomplishments; those make me feel proud. So I am truly delighted to be invited back to give this commencement speech.

I have given a number of commencement speeches over the years, most of them to college students. I have come to realize that commencement speeches are strange things. Nobody ever comes for the speech. People come for the graduation, not for the speech. And the only graduation speeches anyone ever remembers are the truly awful ones. I will try not to provide you with such a memory!

Those words were addressed to everybody. The rest of what I have to say is addressed to the graduates.

I know, from my own experience of graduating from high school and college, that this is a bitter-sweet day for you. On the one hand, you are feeling proud of your accomplishments and of achieving graduation. If any of you just squeaked by, pride in your case is mingled with relief: "Wow! Made it!" That's the sweet part of the day. The bitter part is that you have all developed attachments, as I did when I was a student here: classmates with whom you have become close friends, teachers whom you have come to admire. Many of those attachments will now be ruptured. Never again will all of you be assembled together in one place.

There's another sort of tension built into graduation, in addition to the tension of being both sweet and bitter. There's the tension of both looking back and looking ahead. You can't help looking back at what you have experienced here; but you also can't help looking ahead to what your future holds. We call these ceremonies both "graduation" and "commencement." The word "graduation" points back; the word "commencement" points ahead: the rest of your life now commences. For the remainder of my talk, I invite you to look ahead.

Each and every one of you will soon be looking for an occupation. Some of you will be looking for an occupation immediately. Others will be continuing your education for a few more years and then be looking for an occupation. Either way, looking for an occupation is now not far in the future.

In earlier days, young people didn't look for an occupation. If you were the son of a farmer, you became a farmer; if you were the son of a blacksmith, you became a blacksmith; if you were the daughter of a housewife, you became a housewife. Many of your and my forebears emigrated from Europe to this country in order to escape that system. Maybe some of you will take over your father's farm; maybe some of you will take over your father's business. But you don't have to. You can look around for an occupation.

When you look for an occupation, you look, of course, for a *good* occupation. Some occupations are not good; some are downright lousy. You look for a good occupation, for good work, for a good job.

And what is a good occupation? How do you tell whether an occupation is good or not? What

should you be looking out for when you look for good work? That's what I want to say something about. I will suggest four or five considerations. For forty-five years I advised students. At first I was pretty bad at it. The advice that I give you now is the advice I learned to give after many years of practice.

Let me say in advance that you may not find work that fits all of the criteria I suggest. I can give you advice as to what to look for; but I cannot guarantee that you will find it. There are thousands of people, in our society as in all societies, who look for work but can't find any, or who find work but not good work. This is one of the ways in which God's kingdom has not yet fully come. So we pray that God will provide good work, we lament the absence of good work, and we support those policies that promise to increase the availability of good work.

First, when you look for work, look for work that is worthwhile, work that provides products and services that are genuinely good for your fellow human beings. Not all work is worthwhile. Some work provides products and services that are useless, or worse than useless, products and services that are bad for your fellow human beings. Your and my work is to be one aspect of our love for the neighbor. And in loving the neighbor, we are serving God. We are to serve God by loving the neighbor *in* our work, not just *after* work.

I find that lots of people never ask themselves whether what they are doing in their occupation is worthwhile. All they ask is whether it pays good money. Sad to say, Christians are among such people. They seem to think that one serves God by loving the neighbor only *after* work. I realize that it may well take considerable courage on your part to say, when some well-paying but worthless job is dangled in front of you, "No, I'm not going to do that; it's not worthwhile. I cannot love my neighbor in doing that work." I hope you have that courage.

Second, when you look for work, look for work that you can perform with integrity—work that does not violate your Christian convictions, work that does not require you to cut corners, to engage in shady deals, to bad-mouth your competitors. Currently a fair number of our national politicians identify themselves as evangelical Christians. What

strikes me about many of them is that they have no compunctions about bad-mouthing their opponents and telling lies about them. I do not understand this. In the New Testament Epistle of First Peter we read, "Honor everyone." I am not persuaded that to be successful in politics one has to bad-mouth one's opponents. But if you believe this is required, then don't go into politics; do something else. Do not compartmentalize your Christian con-

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victions. Look for work that does not require you to put your Christian convictions on hold.

Third, when you look for work, look for work that you are good at, work that fits your God-given talents. Over the years I have found myself advising students who wanted to become professional philosophers but who weren't very good at philosophy. One of them was named Amy. "Amy," I finally said to her, "there are other worthwhile things to do in life than teach philosophy." "Not for me there aren't," she immediately replied. It turned out that she thought teaching philosophy was prestigious and she wanted the prestige. My advice to you is: forget the prestige. Look for work that fits your talents. If farming fits your talents, go for it. I love what the English Puritans wrote on this matter. Here is what one of them (John Dod) said: "Whatsoever our callings be, we serve the Lord Christ in them....Though your work be humble, yet it is not a humble thing to serve such a master in it."

Let me add that you may not yet know what your talents are. I didn't know what my talents were when I graduated from Western. I enrolled at Calvin College, and took the required philosophy course in the first semester of my sophomore year.

We were about thirty minutes into the first class session when I said to myself, "I don't know whether I am any good at this; but if I am, this is it." As it happens, I did prove to have a talent for philosophy. But I didn't know that when I graduated from Western. So keep your eyes open for work that fits your talents. Don't over-rate yourself, as Amy did. But also don't under-rate yourself. Most of you come, as I did, from a small town in the upper mid-West; don't let those humble origins deter you from developing and using the talents you've been given. Don't aim too low.

Fourth, when you look for work, look for work that you enjoy doing, work in which you can find fulfillment. In the Old Testament book of Ecclesiastes we read, "There is nothing better for mortals than to eat and drink, and find enjoyment in their toil. This, I saw, is from the hand of God" (2:24). The writer clearly thought the point was important; so a few verses later he repeats it: "It is God's gift that all should eat and drink and take pleasure in all their toil" (3:13).

From the time I was a teen-ager I have known that lots of work is onerous and boring. But I first became fully aware of the importance of this point when I found myself advising Korean and Chinese students who were planning to go into medicine but who told me that they did not expect to like medicine. So why were they planning to go into medicine if they anticipated not liking it? Because their parents were forcing them to go into medicine; if they did not go into medicine, the family would be shamed.

I haven't mentioned money. Hundreds of commencement speeches will be given over the next several weeks in which the speaker urges the students to aim at being successful, with success being understood as financial success. I haven't said anything about financial success. I realize that most of you will have to make a living from your work. If so, then good work for you will not only be work that satisfies the four criteria I mentioned but work that provides you with a living. Not work that makes you wealthy; work that provides you with a living.

Lots of work does not involve making a living: volunteer work, for example, and the work done by housewives and, nowadays, by househusbands.

I wanted to include such work in my discussion. And as for working for a living, I am reminded here of what a businessman friend of mine, Max de Pree, once observed when someone said in his presence and mine that the point of business is to make money. "No," said Max, "I don't agree. You see, for me, making money is like breathing. I don't live to breathe; I breathe to live."

Five pieces of advice for you graduates as you commence the rest of your lives and look for work: look for work that serves God and neighbor and is in that way worthwhile, look for work that does not compromise your integrity, look for work that

fits your God-given talents, look for work that you will enjoy, and, if necessary, look for work that provides you a living. If you find good work, do not fail daily to give thanks to God. Good work is a precious gift.

Oh, one more thing. Work isn't everything, not even good work. Look for work that doesn't take up all your time, work that leaves time to delight in God's creation, to enjoy family and friends, to assemble for worship. Look for work that does not require that you become a workaholic.

We, your relatives, your teachers, your friends, hope and pray that you find good work.