

GENEVA COLLEGE Honors Convocation Address
Of Mill Towns and Colleges
Delivered by Brad Frey September 20, 2017

Brilliant, mid twentieth century philosopher Hannah Arendt noticed an ironic twist while listening to astronauts in the early era of space travel. There seemed to be, she thought, a desire by modern humankind to *escape* the earth, as if it were kind of a *prison*. These moderns seemed unaware of their utter dependence on the world where they lived. This was a mistake, she believed, because the earth is our home.

Arendt said the earth is a fundamental part of our human condition for three reasons:

1. As humans we're bound to the earth, we can't live without water and food, air to breathe, space to live, etc.
2. We are also bound to time, it places us in generations and accompanies us from childhood to adulthood and death. Every day we feel its effects in our bodies as we become "less young."
3. And, third, we are bound to each other as part of being part in the world. We cannot be human without each other.

This evening I'd like to make a parallel suggestion. Just as Arendt says we can't be human without the world, I'd like to suggest we can't be Geneva without understanding that our environment, our place, is a mill town. As humans are bound to the earth, so Geneva is bound to Beaver Falls. President Troup said in one of his early addresses concerning our relationship with Beaver Falls, "we're not going anywhere." So if we're not leaving our mill town home maybe we should think about *how* we live here.

So what does that mean for Geneva and more importantly for this evening, what does it mean for our Honors Program? Let me suggest a few things by first being Arendt-like. As Arendt said we're bound to the earth, so I'd contend Geneva is rooted in Beaver Falls. Even if we tried to isolate ourselves (build a wall) or try to rezone ourselves, we'd still be part of the city.

Arendt suggests time as another category for our being in the world. Currently, our time of being in Beaver Falls is a time of recovery. The golden age has past. The economic/social cataclysm came. We're now in recovery. Each day, each week, each year produces both more death and more newness.

And, to parallel Arendt's third category, we're bound to the people of Beaver Falls. Many of us are them. Most of us interact with them. Our lives are theirs and vice versa. We could no less be a part of this mill town called Beaver Falls than as humans we could be bound to the earth as Arendt describes.

But so what? Why does it matter to Geneva or to Honors Students that we're embedded in a place, a place like Beaver Falls? I think you are all aware of the theological response we would

make to this question rooted in the Lord's governing direction. The Caller has called us here. But I would like to fold that theological reality into another discourse and say more pointedly that being a liberal arts college in a distressed mill town **is our project**. It should animate us and keep us from the social abstractions of modernity. We're placed and, as we have been since 1870, that place is a mill town.

As sophomore Honors Students may remember, I tried to make a case in HON 120 that Geneva's project was outlined in our central document that we call "The Foundational Concepts of Christian Education." It outlines a comprehensive academic strategy that has energized us for fifty years after steering us away from the secular slide we were on in the 50s and 60s. However, I would argue that a document as rich and important as that could and should empower many Christian colleges not just Geneva. What makes us unique is that unlike Calvin College we're not located in an upper middle class suburb. Unlike Nyack College we're not located in an unimaginably expensive proximity to NYC. Unlike Gordon College students, who have to drive 30 minutes to find any poor people, we don't find ourselves nestled amongst the mansions of the North Shore of Boston. And unlike Taylor, Dordt and Northwestern we don't sit in the middle of a cornfield! We are surrounded by a distressed mill town. And that means a lot.

Mill towns stand as a monument to the failed modern-industrial vision that fueled the US for more than a century. In this area by the 1980s the damage that such a failed vision wrought was immense. Throughout the northeast and midwest town after town struggles to recover from the gospel of modernity that promised flourishing and actually delivered it for decades. But that gospel turned out to be transitory and the rotting alters that fill these thousands of towns testify to a project failed. Great wealth was produced, buildings were birthed neighborhoods constructed but now only boarded up stores and deteriorated houses of a bygone era remain.

Before Hannah Arendt reflected on our dissociation from the earth, Walter Benjamin reflected not so much on Arendt's view of modernity's proclivity to abstraction by dissociation, but rather that modernity and its first-born child industrialism appeared incapable of acknowledging or giving due weight to all the suffering it had imposed on humankind. For Benjamin, a brilliant Jewish philosopher who tragically died trying to escape Nazi Germany, his views on the suffering called forth by modern industrialism were forever linked to his analysis of Paul Klee's *Angelus Novus* that he compared to "the angel of history."

In the painting, the angel is hovering over a world in ruins Benjamin attributes to modern industrialism and gazes at it with pain filled eyes at the suffering he sees below. In Benjamin's interpretation the angel has spread his wings to give a blessing but is unable to because a gust of wind from failed progress below pushes him far away. Because of the gust he can't see the promise of the future but only the crushing burdens that lay on the people by the promise of the future. This, Benjamin says, is what we call progress. Progress indeed goes on in spite of the profound suffering it inflicts.

Now imagine the angel with its wings spread out over Beaver Falls trying to heal and bless. But the gust of progress from the era of industrialism pushes him away. Modernity in the form of industrialism has left Beaver Falls scarred and depressed with the Angel of history and progress unable to give a blessing.

Yet tucked right in its midst of this distressed town and it's alters to a dead god is a Christian liberal arts college. It is a college whose vision for academic and societal reform graces its catalogue, its important orations and especially its historic celebrations. As an institution in a distressed city it appreciates what Benjamin simply notes of the painting, that every painful past deserves to be remembered in the present. Remembering does not restore what went wrong; it cannot take the pain of the past away. But Benjamin calls each act of remembering "a small messianic healing." Each act of remembering is a "small messianic healing."

Now that would be a project. A small Christian liberal arts college and its finest students that would embrace thousands of cities destined for the waste heap of modernity by especially embracing its own PLACE. Can you imagine engineers, teachers, business people, historians, political scientists, authors, human service workers, speech pathologists and more unleashed on the wasteland. A group so transformed by the Lord of the wasteland that restoration is not some abstracted religiosity but the wasteland imagined as "the work of our hands."

But please stay with me for one more moment. Joshua Yates, the director of The Thriving Cities Project at the University of Virginia warns that the modern industrial juggernaut isn't finished. As it has chewed up thousands of small industrial towns in the northeast and Midwest it now threatens to consume our gentrifying cities in the image of our "hipster template." You know, bike lanes, coffee shops, farm to table restaurants, brew pubs and micro-distilleries, and tech hubs are sure to appear. Such a template is driven by the new embrace of modernity, where consumption has replaced production and where Big Data collected in every imaginable venue now dictates what a "smart city" will be like if it is to serve the god of progress.

Silicon Valley's accelerator, "Y Combinator" developer of the Airbnb worldwide has said they can use the same technique to renew our cities if they can simply "optimize" the city. By optimize they simply mean, "making the most of a process, situation or resource. That is, maximizing potential in light of given circumstances." This is the vision as you see on the screen not just of Silicon Valley hipster-ism but also of Big Blue who also sees in optimization the technique of thriving. Optimizing the preferences drawn from Big Data will usher in the utopia created by the god of progress. Optimization is simply efficiency in new garb. Or better, efficiency driven not by savings but by pleasure. Building more alters to the god of modernity.

Yates warns, "don't be fooled, the most necessary things for human thriving can't be optimized. Thriving is rooted in things invisible to optimization: conviviality, family, friendship, serendipity, play, dependency, trust, calling and even happiness." And where are these available? Where are they rooted? How do we get our hands on the list? They are the historical purview of the liberal arts. Not the optimization of information exchange. But the deep embedded learning that transforms a wasteland. God-directed learning that allows the God of the wasteland to

draw deep on His promise and resource, drawing deeply on His work as the Lord of the wasteland to restore it.

We're not stuck in a mill town. We don't need to apologize to prospective families about our surroundings. We are a college deeply embedded in a mill town. But not just any college, we're a liberal arts college that can generate the very things to remediate the damage done to towns like us all over the northeast and Midwest. But not just any liberal arts college, we're a Christian liberal arts college who bows before the Lord of the wasteland and seeks in obedience to Him to enable the blessing of the angel of history for our healing, the healing of the wasteland. Now that's a project!