

TIMELESS WISDOM

**A Sermon by Dean Scotty McLennan
For Reunion-Homecoming Sunday
University Public Worship
Stanford Memorial Church
October 15, 2006**

One of the questions that John Hennessy posed in his inauguration as this university's tenth president in the fall of 2000 was "What does Stanford stand for?" Part of his answer has been to remind us, during his presidency, of Jane and Leland Stanford's directive "to exercise an influence on behalf of humanity and civilization" and to produce "cultured and useful citizens."ⁱ Stanford stands for the advancement of knowledge,ⁱⁱ surely, but also for the preservation of timeless wisdom that goes well beyond, and much deeper, than mere knowledge.

Wisdom reveals the sacred hoop of the whole world, as it's described in the Native American tradition.ⁱⁱⁱ Wisdom emerges from the Capital "S" Self that dwells in the heart of every mortal creature, as we're taught in the Hindu Bhagavad Gita.^{iv} Wisdom has to do with the journey of love, in the words of Mohammed Iqbal.^v It's not by coincidence that this Memorial Church was placed by the Stanfords at the very center of their campus, and not because they were religiously sectarian in any sense. To the contrary, in the Founding Grant it was stated that the "University must be forever maintained upon a strictly...nonsectarian basis...entirely free from all denominational alliances."^{vi}

Jane Stanford had these words chiseled into the walls of this church: "Whichever form of religion furnishes the greatest comfort, the greatest solace, it is the form which

should be adopted, be its name what it will.” Yet, there’s a clear distinction made in other sayings preserved here between the “widening of science” and “the highest and central truths of humanity.” As is inscribed between the entrance doors “There is no narrowing so deadly as the narrowing of man’s horizon of spiritual things.” And “Wisdom is the highest spiritual intelligence, while natural man, through knowledge [alone], can know nothing of wisdom.”^{vii}

The search for wisdom is a lifelong search: a very long journey, in the words of Mohammed Iqbal – crossing deserts and searching again and again without losing hope. We search together here as students and teachers. But it’s also critical that former students keep returning to this campus as alumni, not only to be reminded of the institutional values which were formative for you here and which need to be renewed regularly as you continue to grow as “cultured and useful citizens,” who can effectively “exercise an influence on behalf of humanity and civilization,” but also to help this university renew itself through intergenerational experience and evolving understanding over the lifecycle. We need you, our alumni, to help us teach the wisdom of life and not just the knowledge of the day, just as you may need your university to help remind you to pursue the highest and best of which you are capable throughout your lives.

This becomes particularly poignant when we gather, as we do today, to memorialize those classmates and members of the Stanford faculty who are now deceased. We gain particular clarity and perspective about our vision and our purpose on this day. We best honor those who are no longer with us by asking the largest questions about the meaning of our lives and what we are continuing to be educated for. Ultimately, what are our lives about, and what really matters when all’s been said and done? Jane

Stanford had some of the answers engraved on these walls: “We need something outside of and beyond ourselves... We speak of love, but what do we know about it, unless we see the power of love manifested... By your life only can you prove your principles to the world, and show to them there is a life worth living.”^{viii}

NOTES

ⁱ John L. Hennessy, “Looking Backward, Thinking Forward: Reflections on 2000-2005 and the Future” (Stanford University, August, 2005), pp. 1-2; See also *The Founding Grant* (Stanford University, 1987), pp. 4

ⁱⁱ Hennessy, “Looking Backward, Thinking Forward,” p. 27.

ⁱⁱⁱ Black Elk, “The Sacred Hoop,” in *Singing the Living Tradition* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1993), no. 614.

^{iv} “Brahman” from the *Bhagavad Gita* (*Singing* #611).

^v Mohammed Iqbal, “The Journey of Love” (*Singing* #610).

^{vi} *Founding Grant*, p. 21.

^{vii} *Jane Stanford’s Inscriptions on the Interior Walls of Memorial Church* (Stanford Memorial Church, pamphlet), pp. 1, 2, 4.

^{viii} *Ibid.*, pp. 1, 3, 7.