

JANE STANFORD'S VISION

A statement by the Rev. Scotty McLennan, Dean for Religious Life
University Public Worship, Stanford Memorial Church
Parents Weekend, February 27, 2005

As you'll notice on the front of your order of service today, Jane Stanford wanted moral and spiritual life to be at the very center of a Stanford education. An important part of that for her was being true to oneself, and being depended upon for truthfulness and honesty of purpose. You'll hear that perspective powerfully expressed today in reflections by three Stanford students whom I had the privilege to teach in Sophomore College last fall. Coming from different religious backgrounds, they're all addressing the challenge of integrating their spiritual lives with their intellectual development in higher education. "Education for what?" they ask. Each in their own way, they answer, "Education for finding and promoting meaning and purpose in life."

Jane Stanford and her husband Leland had required in their Founding Grant of 1885 that the Trustees erect a church on the campus, but Leland died in 1893, before the church was built. Ten years later Jane had this Memorial Church completed and dedicated. It's not by accident that the church sits right at the center of campus -- that it's the visual destination exactly one mile away when you come through the gates to the university and start down Palm Drive. As she put it, "While my whole heart is in the university, my soul is in that church." Her religious perspective was very open and pluralistic for her time, in proclaiming that "no creed or dogma will be permitted to be taught" within the walls of this church, but that "ministers of all denominations will be invited to deliver lectures on the fundamental principles of religion."ⁱⁱ

If you look around you on the sandstone walls of this church, you will find inscriptions of sayings that Jane Stanford assembled during her lifetime and then had chiseled into this edifice. When Leland and Jane's only child died of typhoid fever just weeks before his sixteenth birthday, they decided that "the children of California shall be our children," and so they founded this university.ⁱⁱ Jane's inscriptions are written as a mother to her children. I want to read a few of them to you now, altering for modern ears the references to "man" and "he" that Jane Stanford used to refer to humanity as a whole, as I assume she would do if writing today:

"There is no narrowing so deadly as the narrowing of one's horizon of spiritual things... And it is not civilization that can prevent this; it is not civilization that can compensate for it. No widening of science, no possession of abstract truth, can indemnify for an enfeebled hold on the highest and central truths of humanity. We need something outside of and beyond ourselves... Each of us, like every other individuality, has an object and a purpose to fulfill; and, when we comprehend this, we will think too much of ourselves to stoop to any material action that shall bring us down from the highest position on the throne of our nature... If we do good deeds to others and try to help them live happier and better lives by being kind to them, and teaching them of the God germ within themselves, we in that way sow the seed, and God in His

own way and time will make it grow... By your life only can you prove your principles to the world, and show to them there is a life worth living."

May all of our hearts and minds be open to Jane Stanford's vision of a meaningful education and of a life well lived, a vision for her deeply grounded in faith in God and in love for all of humanity.

NOTES

i. Jane Stanford, San Francisco Chronicle, May 15, 1887 (as quoted in Orrin Leslie Elliott, Stanford University: The First Twenty-Five Years, Stanford University Press, 1937, p. 137).

ii. "Approaching Stanford: An Academic Guidebook for Entering Students" (Stanford University, 2000), p. 8.