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Parent's Weekend Service, Feb. 25, 2007, Stanford Memorial Church
"Spirituality and Education"

So I'm currently in the process of declaring as a Religious Studies major, joining the ranks of the other 25 or so undergrads majoring in the field. Perhaps because there are so few of us and we are embedded in the heart of the Humanities at Stanford, I've been faced with this question quite a bit: education for what? Why am I learning about religion? Why am I learning about anything at Stanford? What's the point? I have to confess that I've never had to present my thoughts on the subject quite so formally before, so writing this little talk has been discerning for me.

On one level, I do believe that what I am learning is genuinely important when measured on a traditional basis. It's no secret that there is violence stemming from religion almost daily, and I hope I'm not shocking anyone when I tell you that some of the people making decisions about how to deal with religious violence seem to know nothing about why religion might or might not fuel that violence. So studying religion might have some use in that area, but, frankly, if that was my only concern I would have become a Political Science major or something.

No, I am a Religious Studies major for different reasons. Oddly enough, you might say that I study religion exactly because of what the department is lacking. Let me explain. I remember reading Origen—an early Christian Church father from the third century—in a class last year, and he was using the story of Jonah as an example of how, when someone is floundering in cynicism and they have all forms of hope and belief, they should just pray. And when that doesn't work, continue to pray. Or in a class I am taking on Dante Alighieri's *Spiritual Vision*, Dante asks some souls on the first level of Heaven if they are envious of those in the upper levels of Heaven. To paraphrase, the souls kind of chuckle and respond to that question by saying, "Brother, we love." But in the classroom, we don't pray. We don't particularly love, either, though I am usually very fond of my classmates. This is the deficiency I am speaking about. I grew up in a Christian tradition, and so college was certainly the first time I was overwhelmed by an intellectual understanding of certain faiths and practices without actually practicing much myself. Having seen the intellectual side of religion, I am forced to make some serious decisions about my practices. It's an issue I am still wrestling with. I'll let you know when I get it sorted out.

Anyway, though I say this is a deficiency in the Religious Studies department, I mean that in the most wonderful way. This gap between academia and practice has led me to consistently struggle with how to prioritize my life and discern what exactly is important to me—to a degree, I only acknowledge that I am missing things in my life because I've studied those things in class. Religious Studies has ignited the rest of my life—the classes force me to reconsider all aspects of my life, and at times this process of questioning has allowed me to see something sacred in what I thought was profane, as if the mere task of discernment has added some spiritual qualities into parts of my life. For this I am especially grateful.

So to return to the question: “What is my education for?” I spoke entirely about the Religious Studies department because that is most dear to me, but I am sure students in other departments have similar experiences, similar issues. Anyway, the education I want to receive is one that will have me consistently asking what is important, from which point I’ll seek it out. I don’t know what is important, and I know the Religious Studies department can’t just tell me what is important. However, it has me asking the question and it forces me to confront issues regarding how I act as a human being. Prayer and love are just examples—I am inundated with questions regarding how I should conduct myself on many levels.

Should I pray? How should I pray? How should I love? How should I live? I don’t expect any answers soon. In fact, I expect that as I continue down this path of academic study of religion I will only face greater spiritual agitation. But it’s a blessed agitation, and I think it makes my education invaluable.

Thank you for your time and to all you parents out there, I hope you’ve enjoyed your weekend here.