

JANE STANFORD'S VISION

A statement by the Rev. Scotty McLennan, Dean for Religious Life
University Public Worship, Stanford Memorial Church
Parents Weekend, February 23, 2003

This is a very special Parent's Weekend for many of us personally, speaking as the father of a Stanford junior, but also institutionally, because this is the centennial year of Memorial Church. It is not by accident that the church sits right at the center of campus, that it is the visual destination exactly one mile away when you come through the gates to the university and start down Palm Drive.

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. 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."ⁱ And as you see from the top of the first page of this morning's order of service, morality and spirituality lay at the center of the educational enterprise itself for her. What are students being educated for anyway? What is the true meaning of a Stanford education? Not simply to get a job and make a good living. Jane Stanford insisted that "There is only one failure for you, and that is not to be true to the best you know... You can safely dispense with the more brilliant qualities if you can be depended upon for truthfulness, honesty of purpose."ⁱⁱ

Jane and Leland's Founding Grant of 1885 stated the purpose of a Stanford education very clearly: "To promote the public welfare by exercising an influence on behalf of humanity and civilization, teaching the blessings of liberty regulated by law, and inculcating love and reverence for the great principles of government as derived from the inalienable rights of man to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness." Notice the moral and spiritual language in that statement of purpose: "influence on behalf of humanity and civilization...blessings of liberty...inculcating love and reverence...[and] the inalienable rights of man." Education for what? Education for finding and promoting meaning and purpose in life. Education for promoting the public welfare, rather than merely personal interests. Education for the fundamental values of life and liberty. Education for character, based on virtues like love and reverence.

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.ⁱⁱⁱ Jane's inscriptions are written as a mother to her children, and these are some of the thoughts they express: "There is no narrowing so deadly as the narrowing of man's horizon of spiritual things... We need something outside of and beyond ourselves... In the great record above, our names are written in characters of love... We speak of love, but what do we know about it, unless we see the power of love manifested; unless we are given the power to bestow, and a willing heart to bestow it upon, and within humanity... Man has an object and a purpose to fulfill; and, when he comprehends this, he will think too much of himself to stoop to any material action that shall bring him down from the highest position on the throne of this 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."

On this one hundredth anniversary of the opening of Memorial Church, 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.

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. Gunther W. Nagel, Jane Stanford: Her Life and Letters (Stanford Alumni Association, 1977),

pp. 35-36.

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