

“Coming Home Again?”

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Many, many thanks to David Shiner and the rest of the Shimer community for inviting me to talk with you this afternoon. When I studied here—well, not here exactly, but in Waukegan—I admit to imagining what an honor it would be to be invited back to speak before a Shimer audience, if I could graduate and make something of the education I was receiving. Now, some may question whether or not I “made something of myself”—I teach philosophy at an impoverished Catholic university in Detroit—but here I am, and Shimer College is in large part responsible for *who* I am. And for that I am grateful, and herein lies the honor of appearing before you today: an opportunity to express my heartfelt gratitude to this special place.

But of course this specific geographic location is not where the Shimer of my memory resides. The Shimer in my mind has its home in Waukegan, among a cluster of cottages ensconced in a historical district located next to a generally depressed city center. Coming back to Shimer today—my first visit to the school since its move to Chicago—may be a testimonial to Thomas Wolfe’s declaration that “you can’t go home again.” I confess that I wasn’t especially in favor of the move from Waukegan; I thought the College had worked too long and hard to realize its campus plan to just pack up and leave it behind, and the College had finally, after many years of struggle, come to be thought of as an asset to Waukegan by the city’s leadership.

But then I recalled that if Shimer had never left its original home in Mount Carroll, I wouldn’t be standing before you today. When people ask me how I found Shimer, I tell them it was more a case of Shimer finding me, and then completely by chance. The school suddenly appeared in my hometown of Waukegan in the late 1970s, where it established a foothold in an old, run-down Italianate house on Sheridan Road, behind a crudely painted plywood sign declaring itself to be “Shimer College.” For years, I and most of the rest of Waukegan drove by the College without taking much notice, wondering (when we bothered to think of the school at all) whether it was some kind of cult. But another chance circumstance brought me into closer contact with the College: I lived in an apartment over a shop that did the school’s printing, and when I went down to pay my rent every month I would filch pamphlets and other material.

After poring over this material for two years and several visits to the campus, I finally conquered my initial doubts and applied for admission. To say that I wasn’t college material would be an understatement. No one on either side of my family had ever even applied to college, and there was no expectation that I should depart from this tradition. Though I had always read a lot, I was a completely uninspired and stunningly average student who seriously thought, in my senior year of high school, that after graduation I could perhaps make a passable living pumping gas.

Despite my less than stellar academic record, Shimer accepted me into their Weekend Program, and after my first semester I never looked back. I totally immersed myself in the life of the College, learning, laughing, loving, and making the most worthy of friends along the way: friends like Aristotle, Shakespeare and Nietzsche within the covers of books, and many more outside these covers—my partner in life Sharon Vlahovich, our best man Bill Paterson, and so many others, but especially those friends without whom none of this could have happened in the first place: the faculty and staff who have shepherded Shimer College throughout the years, and most especially those who brought the school to Waukegan for a time, on the way to its new home in Chicago. You came to *me*, and you taught me the Great Books, but you also taught me about love and a level of commitment and devotion that is so uncommon in our time. Without you, the College would have never come to be here, or in Waukegan, for that matter; without you, it would have died a quiet death in the Elysian fields of Mount Carroll. Without you, I would have been deprived of so many friends, both inside and outside of books, and a loving companionship that has so far lasted fifteen years. Without you, I would have remained ignorant of the wonder of philosophy. Without you, I would have never found myself in the private room of an Oxford don, who with typical British understatement one day told my astonished ears that I “should think about graduate school.” Without you, I would have never thought of taking up this advice and further pursuing my passions, which have led me back to the sacred space of the college classroom. Without you, I would have never discovered just how large the world is, within which I found nothing less than my very self. I owe you everything. And I thank you.

All this being said, one might observe that it's difficult to come home again to a college so frequently on the move, but this would be to confuse place with mere space. Shimer College may have inhabited slightly different longitudes and latitudes over the course of its one hundred fifty-six year history, but from what I can discern, wherever it has ended up, it has always made its presence felt in a very profound and hospitable way. Heidegger has a word for this, which figures prominently in his later works—dwelling. For Heidegger, to dwell is to be immersed in one's environment, to take up the things around one in an intimate, familiar, neighborly way; it is to make a home, to *be* at home, through one's concernful activities. But most of all, dwelling is about *caring*, more specifically, about caring *for*, in the sense of offering shelter, or, better yet, cultivation or nurture. The Shimer College I remember, the one in Waukegan, was always neighborly, even if its neighbors were stand-offish at first. I recall the intense intimacy of the education I received there, the cultivation of my intellect, the nurturing of my writing, the easy familiarity obtained between co-inquirers, the caring for each and every student, and above all, the sheltering of a style of education that has very few congenial homes in contemporary higher education.

Clearly, I have a deep and abiding affection for the College that centers on its dwelling in Waukegan. But can the College come to dwell in Chicago? And can my affection for the school endure, in light of its new place? As to the first question, it seems clear to me that the answer is *yes*. After all, many if not most people make more than one home over the course of their lives. I myself feel strongly rooted to three places in my life: Waukegan, of course, but also Pittsburgh (where I did my graduate work) and Detroit (where I have lived and taught for the last ten years). If people can dwell through their concernful activities in more than one place, why can't a college do the same?

I recall that when I first started at Shimer in 1985, there was still a number of Mount Carrollians who simply could not accept the idea of the College existing anywhere other than Mount Carroll. Many shunned Shimer in Waukegan, much to our dismay and confusion. Many of us made pilgrimages to the bucolic campus in Mount Carroll to feel the lingering spirit of that place, and returned to our admittedly more gritty Waukegan location with a better understanding of what the Mount Carrollians had lost. Yet we still wondered if the spirit of the College could be bounded by a specific place. After all, our friend in common Socrates did not restrict his concernful dialogical activities to one, specific place; he roamed the *agora*, seeking wisdom wherever he thought he might find it. It was this Socratic spirit that we had in common, and which animated both campuses, however different they might have been. So, just as many of us Waukeganites sympathized with those from the Mount Carroll years over the loss of their campus, so *you* might understand the sadness that some of us from Waukegan feel over the loss of ours. But even though sad, I don't think any of us would declare that Shimer could never exist anywhere else, because it plainly *did exactly that*, in Waukegan. And now the College is *here*, and that same inextinguishable Socratic spirit is taking root *today*, in this *new* place. Shimerians of all stripes—Mount Carrollians, Waukeganites, and now Chicagoans—must surely rejoice in this transient but stubbornly existing institution.

Rejoice, yes—but *have* I come home again? The second question I asked a moment ago persists, and is more difficult to answer: can my affection for the school endure in light of its new place? I strongly suspect that my Shimerian heart will always remain in Waukegan; our memories are so tied to place, which makes me think I will never feel completely at home here, in Chicago. But in all honesty, I must confess that even when I occasionally returned to visit Shimer in Waukegan, I never felt completely at home there either. The campus and its buildings were the same, and there were many familiar faces among the faculty, but I felt as if I no longer fit in. Just as I had moved on after graduation, so too had the College. For me, these were Hericlitian moments—you can't step in the same College twice. I suspect this is true of all colleges and universities, because despite certain institutional constants, the student body is in a regular state of flux. But because Shimer has always been so small, a school where everyone knows everyone, the flux of its students is more acutely felt by the entire community. It's not as if I didn't recognize something of myself among these new students; it was more simply the case that they were there, reveling in the classrooms where I once joyfully resided, and I was not. I had passed on from this part of the school's life. It was like returning to a house I'd grown up in, intimate and familiar, only to look through the windows to see other people inhabiting the rooms within. Like a ghost, I silently haunted the corners of classrooms and common areas, hallways and dorms, present but standing outside the vibrancy of the concernful activities of the school's latest students. These visits raised in me a flood of memories tinged with sadness, but also the bittersweet realization that this is the only way it could possibly be, and far better to return to my Shimerian house (wherever it might be) to find it still a home for a new generation,

as opposed to finding a collection of cold, empty rooms. This is *your* place now. Keep it full and warm and safe. Sustain it. Live it. Dwell in it.

In closing, let me say that there is one sense in which this is an unambiguous homecoming for me. Since graduating from Shimer almost twenty years ago, I have come to know the larger world of American academia, and I've come to appreciate why experienced professors sometimes leave this world and come to Shimer, despite the College's long history of crises and its occasional relocations. Earlier in this talk, I briefly referred to Shimer as being viewed by outsiders as a kind of cult. In retrospect, we should be able to see that Shimer *is indeed* a cult, if we bear in mind that cults are in part defined by the degree to which they fall outside of an orthodoxy. And it is hard to overstate just how at odds with the academic mainstream Shimer, and a small handful of schools like it, finds itself. The landscape of contemporary higher education in this country is increasingly dominated by a narrow vocationalism that relentlessly judges the humanities by a strict standard of "usefulness" as defined in strictly economic terms. Even at my Catholic university—a university co-sponsored by the Jesuits, who have long been friends of the arts and sciences—I have found myself embroiled in a bruising battle for the past four years, trying to preserve the integrity of a core curriculum that would be considered anemic by Shimer standards. That this long constriction of general education continues unabated now, at a time when so many of the crises besetting our complex world are being exacerbated by the narrowly-educated, is deeply troubling.

Despite this dark thought, it with a light heart that I return to Shimer today and claim it as my home—wherever it may be, now or in the future—as it stands as one of the lonely outposts in academia that insists on an education that broadens rather than narrows a person's horizons. I think this is vitally important, because my sense is that the future is going to need people who can see far, and for the most part I see more myopia than far-sightedness in higher education. In this, Shimer is engaged in a heroic task, and I don't use this term lightly. Anyone familiar with the College's history knows that it is replete with heroics large and small, born of trials and sacrifices that commenced in its earliest days. No matter how ominous the challenge, the College has managed to prevail, time and time again, a Phoenix that has arisen many times.

As I reflect on the College's many tribulations and its future challenges, I find myself recalling the St. Crispen's Day speech, which occurs near the end of Shakespeare's *Henry V*. You remember the scene: It is just before the Battle of Agincourt. The English troops have fought their way across France, and they are tired, cornered and outnumbered by superior French forces. Morale is low, and on the morning of the battle, St. Crispen's Day, King Hal enters to address his army. The speech is one in which Hal concedes several times that victory is highly unlikely, given the forces arrayed against them, and he goes on to talk with great feeling about his comrades and companions, about honor, about the legacies that many of his men were about to leave behind, and about how they will be remembered. The high point of the speech, and the part that always reminds me of Shimer, is when Hal turns with glassy eyes to look over the heads of his soldiers, and with his voice choking with love and fellow-feeling, refers to those assembled as "We few, we happy few, we band of brothers" (and here, today, sisters too).

I'm honored to stand before you today. I'm honored to be among you. I'm honored to be *of* you.

We happy few.