

Lasallian Commencement Address
January 2000
Presented by: Robert Fell

As tempting as it might be to concentrate on that which lies before us, my purpose is to invite us to look back to a significant experience when we were profoundly affected by another person, a person who changed our point of view by allowing us to experience the best they had to offer. This phenomenon is called transference: the ability of each and every one of us to significantly impact another by sharing ourselves. Such transference can be quite unintentional. But in its most influential state, transference serves to provide us with the experiences and feelings from which we can derive our deepest beliefs.

In my second year at Lewis, I was heading to class from my house in Lockport. I am always running late. I knew exactly how many minutes I needed to arrive at class on time. This was just one of those mornings when everything seemed to go wrong. I woke up late, my brothers had used up all the hot water in the shower, and I had no chance to grab breakfast. When I finally got to my truck, I discovered that my gas tank was empty. But, even with gassing up, if everything went perfectly, I just might make it. Then I turned the corner and up ahead was a stopped school bus. Still, I figured that by the time I got to the bus, it would be moving.

No such luck. The bus just sat there and I was stuck behind it for what felt like an hour and I found myself getting aggravated and angry. I turned to my right looking down the sidewalk to see if I could locate the stupid kid who was holding everything up.

It was then that I saw a young boy, about nine or ten, and his mother making their way toward the bus. I say "making his way" because the boy really wasn't walking. You see, he was on crutches; the type of crutches that you knew he had had for a long time, the kind that lock onto the forearms and have hand and wrist grips; he also had braces around both knees. I couldn't help but stare at this little kid, as I was sure most of those on the bus did everyday. But instead of being embarrassed, he greeted the people on the bus by propping his forearm on his crutch for support and waving, to sort of say, I'm coming.

I felt sad and pretty foolish sitting in my truck staring at this kid thinking how he would

probably never drive easily, never play sports the way most kids do, and even have a hard time going to a homecoming game or a prom. I really felt sorry for him and then suddenly he captured me. The moment it happened it was as if everything had shifted into slow motion. As he dragged his legs up the sidewalk, I thought to myself that his arms must be getting tired, and what an enormous pain it must be to have pull yourself around as he had to. But, then he looked my way and he smiled, a smile bigger than I'd ever seen anyone smile. I knew he wasn't smiling at me. We never made eye contact. But never in my life has a look captivated me as his did. Here was a kid who could have been embarrassed at being the focus of so much attention, or angry that he was stuck with those crutches, or just tired from the long trip from his house to that bus. Instead, he was obviously happy.

I was so self absorbed by my own minute problems and by my foolish anger that I had forgotten about that which was really important. Of the two of us, I was the one with the real handicap. Of the two of us, I was the one who was letting the little things get the best of me. Of the two of us, I was the one who was not happy with all that I had and, more importantly, all that I was.

That boy was gifted by God with a joyful heart, perseverance, a ready smile, and an aura of innocence. God's providence had provided for him, and, on that day, had provided for me through him. That encounter changed me. That little boy taught me a lot about putting things into their proper perspective. We all have gifts. Some are more tangible than others, but the hidden and subtle gifts can be just as transforming. We are all uniquely valuable.

We graduate today from a University whose Lasallian traditions and faith based heritage invite us to consider carefully the Providence of God, what God provides; and in doing this to consider where God fits into our search for truth.

I am graduating with a Bachelor's of Science in Physics, with minors in mathematics and business administration. Yes, I saw a number of you cringe when I said "physics" but it's really not that bad. Physics is actually the poetry of the universe. It's a way to make sense of that which often appears to be chaotic, but is, in fact, systematic and, in many ways, beautiful.

Where does faith fit into this? I believe that physics provides us with an understanding of the how, not the why. In every science, there are two questions that will never be answered. What was before all this, and what

will come after it? For me what was before, and what will be after, is God, the first source, the prime mover. We can't test my theory. If we could, that would be science. This theory, I do believe, is a matter of faith.

I am not alone in this. Three weeks ago, TIME magazine named its person of the century. It wasn't Babe Ruth, or Michael Jordan. It wasn't Franklin Delano Roosevelt or Mahandas Ghandi. It wasn't even the number one nominee of TIME's readers, the King, Elvis. It was a physicist, probably the greatest physicist of all time, Albert Einstein. $E=MC^2$. It's probably the only scientific formula which almost everyone has heard of.

Those three letters (and a lot more math and physics which very few people understand) redefined the universe. Isaac Newton's understanding had been so concrete, so tangible, and so provable, that when Einstein introduced his first equations about relativity, the world of science was sent into a tailspin. His understanding of a universe constantly in transition affected not only science, but philosophy, art, literature, and culture. Talk about transference.

TIME noted that Einstein also bridged the gap between science and religion challenging those who claimed atheism was the only way to truly be a person of science. You see, the genius of Einstein's theories was that he felt them in his heart (heart) before he wrote them on paper. Most of his theories were derived through what he called "thought experiments" which used math and his imagination to explain phenomenon in the intangible world. It would be years before technology would catch up to what time described as his "embodiment of pure intellect" and provide the means to test his theories. The point is that mathematically they worked, and Einstein had the faith that in the physical world his theories would hold true.

Einstein defined his work as his attempt to understand how the Lord (or as Einstein referred to him, der Alte, German for the Old Man) shaped the universe. Einstein confirms for me that it would be difficult to be a person of science and not be a person of faith.

Neither that small boy making his way to a school bus, or the world's most important physicist have any idea how much they have affected me. In fact, most of those whose gifts, in the act of transference, are shared with us do not know how they touch us, just as we rarely know how we change others. But there are exceptions. I really wish I could thank that kid, and, while I'm at it, give Albert Einstein a pat on the back as well. But, I can't. All I can do is acknowledge and recognize those who I am able to thank. And so can we all.

I owe much of my understanding of the nature of physics, both as science and faith, to someone who made me promise I would not mention by name. But if you know a short, highly energetic, Franciscan sister who thinks everyone should be a physics major, you know who I am talking about. (Note Mr. Fell is referring to Sister Noel Dreska, chair of the Physics department at Lewis University). I also want to acknowledge several other professors who encouraged me to alter my points of view, who encouraged me to just drop in and talk, who demanded my best efforts and drew from me much more than I thought I had to offer. Of course, I am grateful, each day, for the foundation which my family has laid for me