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Culture of Life and Culture of Death in College Life

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I'D LIKE TO START OFF WITH A PRAYER that was given to me today. The person who gave it to me didn't know what I was going to talk about. You may think it's a little strange at first. This is from Julian of Norwich: "With a kindly countenance, our good Lord looked into his side and he gazed with joy. And with his kind regard, he drew his creature's understanding into the side by the wound, and there he revealed a fair and kind place, large enough for all humankind that will be saved." It's about wounds and about our frailty that I'd like to talk, but especially in the context of culture. The title, "Culture of Life and Culture of Death in College Life," is much more complex than it immediately looks like. All these words are very complex and very complicated.

Culture itself is a word that people use a lot, and I'd like to have you reflect a little bit about the word "culture" and where it comes from. Clyde Kluckhohn, a sociologist, had a book called *Culture* that was about 400 pages. In it, he had about 20 pages of definitions; there were a few hundred definitions. But all of them came down to the fact that culture is basically human artifact; it's human product. It goes back to a Latin word, *colo*. If there are any Latin scholars here, you'd tell us: *colo, colere, colui, cultus*. *Cultus* is an interesting word too: a cult. And there was an agricultural cult at the time for the farmer, the *agricola*, the cult of productivity. We get agriculture out of that; we cultivate. Notice what happens in agriculture. Agriculture is something that human beings do. And notice what they do: they cultivate their product, and then their product feeds them. Their product keeps them alive. And really all the living parts of culture are the things that keep the human body and spirit alive.

In some ways, agriculture is the way we avoid death, and, in many ways, culture is the way we avoid death. Culture, you see, is all the artifacts we have: our institutions, our produce, our products, our production, the works of human hands. Glorious as the human mind is; as far ranging as the human heart is. And so we plant these works: we build our institutions; we build our nations; we construct our tribes; we do our things; we make our art; we do our literature; we do our science. All of which really is a way of feeding us not just food, but meaning—feeding us and sustaining us with ways of confronting death. Culture becomes our symbolic feeding of ourselves.

Culture, of course, can become like a cult, in which it holds you in its grip and becomes a religious artifact. It becomes what you worship. This is a difficulty with culture because, in some ways, we can use culture to avoid death, whether it's agriculture, science, music, hospital systems or educational systems. So it helps us resist death, but at the same time, there's a danger that we can start using culture as an instrument of death.

This is where there is a paradox between the culture of life and the culture of death. For example, science or medicine or education in many ways helps us to process what it means to be men and women on the journey, to try to understand who we are, understand what our destiny is. Things that prolong our life, like medicine, are wonderful because they help us extend what we are and extend our product in the world. But the danger of all these things—whether it's the culture of science or the culture of nation or politics—is that we can use them to repress death itself. This becomes a strange paradox in us. What happens is, we start out with culture by affirming life and trying to extend our life, and we can start relating to it in a way that we begin to turn culture into an instrument of death, so that we don't have to face our own death. I'm going to try to explain this a little bit.

One of the great books I've read this year, perhaps the best, is a little book by Annie Dillard. She's a wonderful writer, and it's a most troubling book. It's called *For the Time Being*. It's a series of meditations about death and the cultures of death. Death is

unavoidable for us, as long as we've got these bodies. Annie Dillard gives you this litany of all the death of humanity. It's awesome to read about how frail we are, how passing we are, to think that 94 percent of the people who have ever lived are dead. They're all dead. We're a minority. Of those 94 percent, 60 percent of them were under five-years-old. This is an incredible lottery of life. It's just awesome to think of our human frailty in this way.

She goes through this great litany of physical losses: the ache of human growth, the pain of children, the unmanageability of our bodies, the terror of change, the great evolutionary powers of the earth, the tidal waves that wipe out 200,000 people, the volcanoes that bury cities, the quirks of evolution itself, the quirks of mutation. She goes through all the different kinds of human babies that are born that have been classified as medical monstrosities: little babies who are born with brains outside their head, other babies who are born and look like they've got the head of a bird rather than a person. This is the great lottery of our genetic system. You see the terrible fragility of our life, not only in terms of extending our life, but the fragility of our being born and the unlikelihood of our being born.

Dillard doesn't talk about this—she talks more about death—but, have you ever thought of the unlikelihood of you not being born? They say, as far as I gather, that in one act of human intercourse, there are about 100 million sperm. This is probably why men feel so inadequate—because an ovum is really worth something. There is one ovum. By the time these sperm reach the uterus, they're down to 100,000. 99,900,000 are gone. By the time they reach the area of the oviduct, ready to meet this ovum, they're down to a couple dozen. One hits. And that was you. All of the others would have been someone else. 100 million to 1. It would have been like a brother or sister, but not this center of life. And when you add to this—I've had a physicist friend of mine do the enumeration of this—the times that people make love, the possible partners they could have had as a spouse, the different periods of a woman's life, the unlikelihood of you being born would be like you winning the national lottery every day for a year. Our lives are absolutely frighteningly contingent.

So Annie Dillard is writing about human contingency, the great fragility of our life. And then she goes through a catalogue of human evil, which is a catalogue of the cultures of death. The cultures of death are ways men and women use culture to repress their own death by killing others, by domination, by pretending that they're not human beings, that they're not fragile, that they're not creatures. She goes through the Wall of China and all the people buried in that wall, of all the mass graves of the different civilizations, of the great hordes of destruction: the Mongols coming down and wreaking havoc over Europe, the Romans, what Catholics did to non-Catholics, what Muslims did to Hindus, the killing of 10 million in India right after they made their declaration of independence. The great slaughtering block of history. Not the lottery of our genetic fragility, but the lottery of life—of all the people victimized by starvation, by the inequitable distribution of wealth, war. Those incinerated by the bombings at Hiroshima and Nagasaki were gone in an instant and others were left to live terribly excruciating lives of pain. She brings these cultural artifacts of death to bear.

There's this one great moment when she recounts the story of Nehru, the leader of India. He goes to Mao Tze Tung to try to convince Mao Tze Tung not to use the atomic bomb. Nehru, in the tradition of Gandhi, wanted to be a pacifist, and he pled with Mao Tze Tung. He said, "We could lose millions of people within a nuclear exchange." Mao Tze Tung said, "I can lose 300 million." Nehru turned ashen as he realized that people were like dust, and that a person in a culture of death could consider 300 million people totally expendable.

When a person like John Paul II speaks about cultures of death, he knows and understands these artifacts of the culture of death, but he's really getting at more than that. He knows the history of cultures and death, and he knows our contemporary atrocities: he knows what happened in Cambodia; he knows what happened in the Third Reich; he knows what happened with Stalin; he knows what happened in Rwanda, Chechnya, Uganda, Kosovo, and now Palestine. You've got the culture of death at war there.

Imagine yourself a Palestinian. Do you think you're worth anything? Do you think you have any rights? Do you think you have any value? Imagine yourself on the other side: the terrible losses your own people have felt incinerated, wiped out, discarded, and treated like nothing. The cultures of death are at war now and it will not stop. It will not stop as long as we use our cultures to perpetrate death so that we do not die. This is the problem.

But John Paul II is also speaking of another problem—to us in the Western world in a special way. The United States and Allies won the Second World War. He knows that we won the Second World War by inflicting more death than the enemy. That's why we won it. We were able to kill more. Of course, there's the issue of it being a dangerous bargain. We can say, "The right side won," and I suspect that the right side did win, but it was done at a terrible moral cost. When you start reading about the bombings of Dresden and Cologne, Hiroshima and Nagasaki, you can understand that we won because we were the better killers. Mutually assured destruction came after that, the two cultural forces of death.

We can look at some terrorist who thinks that the bomb is their only security, but many of us live by this. I was in a debate with a famous Catholic debater, Phyllis Schlafly. She's a great debater. In fact, she's so great that they thought I was nuts for getting into a debate with her. They called me up on a local T.V. program and they said, "Would you debate Phyllis Schlafly on nuclear weapons?" And I said, "Sure." They called me back an hour later and said, "Did you say yes?" Then the director of the station called me. He said, "Are you sure you want to debate Phyllis Schlafly?" I said, "Sure." They were right.

She said, "God gave us this bomb. This is our great gift. It's easy for you to say Father, since you don't have any kids, that we shouldn't have the bomb. But if you had kids, you'd know the difference." She went right for the jugular. But what was she saying? Only in the bomb will my soul be at rest. The bomb is my hope and my salvation.

The power to inflict death becomes our hope, and the cultures of death—which pose as our hope, security, and salvation—lead to the massive degradation of human existence. This is what happens when a culture is not oriented in life, but death. In our present time, it's very clear. We brought Belgrade to its knees, bombing their cities. We're celebrating now the election. Wait to see what it sows. They've been reaping the culture of death for the last 2,000 years. In our own culture, to preserve our way of life, we went to war in Iraq and we think it was a great success. We're still reaping what we sowed there—Desert Storm. Ninety percent of us supported that. And now, with these sanctions in Iraq, there are apparently about 5,000 children that die there a month because we destroyed their infrastructure. We can blame Saddam Hussein and say, "He's doing it and we're trying to get rid of him." It's only the culture of death that says, "I will get rid of the terrorist by shooting through innocent children to get at the terrorist." That's the logic of death, and it's the logic of making people pure instruments.

The logic of death is in our own culture. It's amazing to read someone like George Will say, "We prove our respect for life by having capital punishment." You prove your respect for life by having capital punishment? You solve the problem by killing. It's the culture of death. We solve the problem of suicide by killing them before there is a possibility of suicide. We solve the problem of injury by killing the injured. This is what is often proposed to us in our culture—even the challenge of the unborn. How many problems are solved by the culture of death? That decision is rarely undertaken without serious consideration. It's always taken because it solves a problem. Death solves the problem. That's what happens when you have a culture that has developed its own symbol system to confront death by eliminating the things that threaten it.

There's a deeper kind of dying, and it infiltrates all arenas of a culture of death when it becomes more and more systemic. In our desire to kill something that reminds us of our creatureliness, of our frailty, of our vulnerability, of the fact that we could die, that we're not in control of our destiny, we have to kill things which remind us of our frailty. The question is, "Has something even deeper died within us?" There's one book by a philosopher called *The Death of the Soul*. I often wonder if there is a process of killing the interior life of our own people in this culture. Walker Percy, the great novelist, has a

book called *Lost in the Cosmos*. It's called the last self-help book. It's a great book. His whole point is that our culture is giving us so many things to kill our interior life—our interior feeling—that there's nothing here within me, that basically I can be bought or distracted to death, but there's nothing within me that makes me irreplaceable. There's nothing within me that gives me value simply because I exist, by the fact that I am a human being.

Our value, so often in this culture, is constantly taught to us, taught to people who, when they start discussing values, almost all the time are talking about two things. One is the use value that they put on things or that other people put on them: I am useful, I am productive, I have value; I get good grades, I have value; I am young, I have value. These are instrumental values of my worth. I am worthwhile because of what I make or the way I look or because I am young. The other thing is that we often talk about values in terms of our interior feelings. If I feel valuable, I am valuable. If I don't feel valuable, I am not valuable. This is very interesting. If your value and your worth and your dignity totally depend on external productivity or whether other people think you are useful as well as how you think about yourself, then there's nothing within you that is worthwhile. This is why people have crises in their value when they stop producing. This is why people think they have no worth or dignity when they are not making the money they should have or when they don't have the lover they want or when they're not as thin as they want to be or big as they want to be. So much of our value has been squeezed out of us by a culture that does not enthrone the living person, but enthrones the objects that we are led to believe will save us and prevent us from our great wounds.

We fear our vulnerability and our wounded-ness. I don't know if you've ever read *The Death of Ivan Ilych*. It's an amazing thing. The poor man did everything in his ability to distract himself from his creatureliness, from the fact that he could die. He could think about other people's deaths, but he never wanted to think about his own. This is why the great spiritual writers say, "Get in touch with your own mortality." You learn how to live. Ignatius said this. Teresa of Avila said this. Tony De Mello said this. Tony De Mello thought that if you could get in touch with your death every day, you'd learn how to live. But rather than face what death means—wounded-ness, loss of control of our

life—we run from our interior life. We run from our own vulnerability and our own contingency as persons. What’s really sad about this is that we lose what is really our life-giving source.

I often think of the great example of Peter in the Gospels. What is really irreplaceable about a person? What is God interested in? What are you interested in about a person? How we look or appear or perform? Some of the strong narratives on death and life are the resurrection narratives. It’s amazing what God is interested in even after Peter fails in everything in terms of achievement and production, after he betrays even the things he loves the most. When Jesus goes to him, he doesn’t try to iron out the past or talk about the future. All that Jesus says is, “Do you love me?” This is part of our problem. When we realize that the only thing that is unique about us is our personal gift of love, this becomes very frightening. It’s much easier to do something that we can measure, something we can point to, some kind of grade we can get, some kind of quantitative analysis of worth rather than something that is rooted in our frailty. As Saint Francis de Sales said, “All love is destitution.” Rather than experience the destitution, the poverty of our humanity, we turn to the ways of avoiding our death, our frailty, our poverty, and we avoid our interior world entirely.

This is mirrored in another thing that in many ways dies in a culture of death—and that is relationships. In relationships, you’re going to experience dying. Jean Vanier says this about relationships in the L’Arche community: “As one married man said to me after being married ten years, he said, ‘You know John, if you’re going to get married and have kids, you’re going to die a thousand deaths.’” If you’re going to care about anything, you’re going to really experience dying: dying to egoisms, dying to fears. Rather than care that much, rather than enter into the frailty of our relationships as men and women—as persons—we avoid that. A relationship can die as a result. People wind up not experiencing the great joys of what we give to each other in relationships, which is often the poverty of our ability to love. As C.S. Lewis wrote in *The Four Loves*, “If you don’t want to experience your vulnerability, if you don’t want to experience pain, never love a person. Don’t even love animals. Love rocks.”

Think of our culture and what we give our affections to—what our passion is about. Do you want to marry a millionaire? Who wants to be a millionaire? It's like Plato's cave—all these people chained down looking at images of images of images and thinking its life. They're not in touch with their own spirit or the person next to them because they're mesmerized by this world of product. That's what the cave is—artificiality. What happens in relationships is a very powerful experience of one's frailty.

Even professionally this occurs—in the suicide movement, for example. I have suicide tapes and there are a number of people who commit suicide in these tapes. It's amazing to see some of these doctors and social workers and friends. For example, there's one doctor who's preparing this man who is about forty-five years old. He has AIDS. He could live for another eight years, but this man has decided that he never wants to have to depend on other people and that he's losing his attractiveness. He's decided he wants to die on January 26th. It's an important date for him. You know this guy wants to be challenged. He's depressed, although the doctor won't admit it. At one time, the guy says to the doctor, "Is this difficult for you, Thomas?" The doctor goes to his fellow doctors' group and says he has to do everything in his power to repress his feelings. He has to repress relationship. All that this man hungers for is relationship.

To another man who has very early Alzheimer's, they say, "Do you want to die?" He says, "No, but I have no reason to live." His friend, a social worker, says, "Whatever your choice is, I'm for your choice." Won't anybody say, "It makes a difference to me?" Won't anybody say, "It makes a difference?" Have we so secluded ourselves from each other that we will not challenge each other? We hunger for someone to speak to us. We hunger to break across the abyss. We're told in this culture:

Kill the hunger. Suffocate yourself with toys. Learn how to be a millionaire. While away your life looking and watching and observing. Never feel passion. Never love. Never care. Enter into the life of deadly tolerance so everything is acceptable and nothing is loveable. Nothing is worth dying for and everything is worth killing for if you can avoid your frailty, if you can avoid the pain of being human.

The sad thing is, in relationships, you see this great power. I had a student this past year who asked her friend to come see me. Her friend was a woman who was pregnant and felt that her family would be upset if she had the baby. She was going to terminate the pregnancy. Her boyfriend was willing to give her \$200 on top of it. She really didn't want to have it. Her roommate had argued the case for not terminating the pregnancy, but she wanted me to talk to her. I didn't argue the case. All that I said was, "Are there any people in your life that you'd love to share this with? You can say that your mother and father would be upset, but wouldn't you like to at least share it with them." She thought the mother would like her to terminate the pregnancy. And I said, "Don't you think it would be good to talk to her? She's probably the most important person in your life. Would you like to even share it with her?"

She had been depressed since she started having morning sickness, so it was about a month—and that's why it came to the crisis moment. She talked to her mom and later said, "My depression has totally lifted. I've never talked to my mother like this in years. In fact, she wants me to have the baby. She says we'll be able to deal with it: 'It's sad. I wish it would be otherwise, but this is your life and we'll work through it.'" What's so interesting is how, if there is relationship, it is so powerful. But if relationship is dead, we will never speak our hearts to each other.

We can talk about issues like capital punishment, the termination of life, militarism, but the issue is a systemic thing. Does the culture of death touch us in our relationships to each other? What is the culture of life like? It comes through relationship, just as Peter experienced when Jesus said to him, "Do you love me?" That's what he's interested in. That's the gift we give. Relationship is so powerful.

There was this girl whom I heard about through a midwife. The girl was a pure product of the culture of death. She was used sexually since she was eight or nine-years-old. She didn't even know she was pregnant, but she was six months pregnant when she came to the midwife. She had been sexually active so young, and she was abused so much that she couldn't get pregnant. Finally it happened. She was fifteen. This was a girl with no family, no guy around, and she had been badly used in her life. The midwife said to her:

I've got news for you; you're pregnant. I tell you what. If you come in three times a week, more if you want, we'll talk for an hour, and I'll try to get you ready. I'll tell you what it's like to be carrying this baby and how it's going to change. I'll try to help you with your diet, and I'll be with you when you have the baby born. You can come to me as long as you like after the baby is born. I'll show you how to feed it and clean it and take care of the baby.

So this kid did this. She came in for the next three months and had the baby; the midwife was with her. She came for another six months and disappeared into the culture of death. It was about four or five years later that the midwife called me. She said, "Guess who I heard from? The girl who disappeared." I said, "Oh that's great." She said, "It's an invitation," and she read me this invitation. She said, "I'm sorry I never wrote to you or got back to you. I wanted to surprise you and that's why I'm inviting you to my graduation as a practical nurse. I wanted to be like you because you're the only person who ever cared about me."

There's nothing like this power that comes out of our frailty. Notice it's not an artifact. It's not a protection device against death. It's a willingness to die, a willingness to care. It's the willingness to die that transforms fear of death. We're so afraid of the wounds. This midwife is a great image in the culture of life—the life-bearing thing, to bear the Word Made Flesh in the world. In so many ways, it's our willingness to enter into relationship that establishes a culture of life in our own lives.

Finally, it's in our social world. This is a particularly interesting part. You see, we've got the political issues I mentioned: wars, the terrible things that happened in Rwanda, and capital punishment. But there's a more subtle tactic going on that I want to reflect on with you just a little bit. What's going on in our culture in science, medicine, politics—I think—is a movement to exclude the broken, the vulnerable, the undeveloped, and the wounded from our human community. This is a very subtle thing. These are the people who remind us ultimately that we cannot control our lives. MacIntyre has a book called *Dependent Rational Animals*. He says that one of our difficulties is dealing with our own dependency. We're getting very uncomfortable with dependent people—people in diapers, for example, infants and old people.

What happens is there is a systemic attempt to exclude them from the personal community. The prophet of this is Nietzsche, who has become newly fashionable in our culture. Nietzsche wrote this in 1889:

The sick person is a parasite to society. In certain cases, it is indecent to go on living, to continue to vegetate in a state of cowardly dependence once the meaning of life, the right to life has been lost. [The sick person] ought to be regarded with the greatest of contempt by society. Doctors, for their part, should be agents for imparting this contempt. They should no longer prepare prescription, but every day administer a fresh dose of disgust to their patients. A new responsibility should be created, that of the doctor, the responsibility of ruthlessly suppressing and eliminating degenerate life.

What's very interesting about this is the theory of human dignity that is now catching on in our culture that, somewhere along the line, you're going to lose your dignity. It's usually when you're going to be dependent; it's usually when you're helpless. That's the thing we're all afraid of: dependency, helplessness, and old age. You know why? Because we're afraid of the margins of our existence, and we're afraid of anything that reminds us that once we were in diapers and we're going to be in diapers [again]. We're afraid of this body; we're afraid of our animality. That's why you have so many scientists trying to say that a human being really is mental brain states, somehow denying this fact that we're flesh and blood and that what's great about being a human being is the frailty of our animality. At the same time, Nietzsche—and our culture too in many ways—is teaching us to be suspicious of the frailty of what it means to be a body. I'll try to give you some suggestions of how this ultimately is taking place.

Why is it that we are repressing massively our connection with unborn human beings? We have a number of philosophers—like Peter Singer who has the Chair of Ethics at Princeton—who are basically saying that infants are much more like fetuses than real humans, so infanticide is not wrong either. What is this about us disassociating ourselves from not only infants, but from the pre-born? It's amazing the disassociation that we have here.

Last year's Christmas issue of *Life* magazine had a tremendous issue. You open it up and there is a huge mound with a hand reaching out from it. They're operating on a little girl—she had a name at 24 weeks. Her hand, about the size of my finger, was around the doctor's finger reaching up through the womb. They had removed the stomach and the womb and made an incision. They were working on her spina bifida. This was not the paw of a bear. This was a patient. And our Supreme Court was deliberating whether it's better to cut that patient up inside the womb or outside the womb. What has stilled our sensibilities? What has enabled us to distance ourselves from these people? We always do this to the enemy. We do this to criminals; now we're even doing it them. In a way, I think it is fear of origins, of this great contingency of life. This patient is healed, put back into the womb, and she is born a number of weeks later.

What's interesting about this is that we can generate more sympathy for mice, for whales. Why is this? What is our problem with our origins, our animality? These are little animals—at least treat them like you would treat an animal then. Right? Don't they at least count as an animal? What is it? There's a block here and it's us. We're afraid of these bodies—of their brokenness, their origins, their destiny. We want to be these Cartesian minds.

There is a dream of some people in molecular electronics that someday we could download all of the contents of our brain into a machine. This is very nice if you are the contents of your brain. Notice you'll never bleed; you'll never die; you may run out of battery; and you'll never love, touch, or weep. It's this body that's the problem. Bill Joy in *Wired* magazine said, "If we could fabricate our bodies and live for 200 years, I'd take it." It's our bodies that we have the problem with, our creatureliness.

That's why we have problems at the end of life. Judge Reinhart of the 9th Circuit Court of Appeals says, "When you're at the end of life and you're diapered and dependent and incontinent, obviously you have the right to a dignified death." When do you lose your dignity? When you stop producing? When we can't control anymore? When we can't manage? If we lose our dignity, it's not rooted in our humanity; it's rooted in our managing.

I often think of this. This young woman that I knew was one of the most beautiful human beings I ever knew in my life. She was a photo journalist filled with passion and zeal. She photographed the poor around the world. She was such a great speaker. She was invited to World Youth Day when the Pope was in Denver, Colorado. She had beautiful black hair and a dynamite personality. She came down with brain cancer two years after she was married at the age of 32. I often wonder when she lost her dignity. When she could no longer talk? What about before that—when they cut off her beautiful hair? All this beautiful long hair is cut off and she's got this big, red scar—half of her head is like a red strawberry. Is that when she lost her dignity? So Judge Reinhart might think.

Or did she lose her dignity when she could no longer walk and we had to carry her to receive her reward for [being] an outstanding Catholic woman? Is that when she lost her dignity? Or when she finally could no longer speak and she had to point out “yes” and “no” on a little machine? Or when instead of saying “yes” and “no,” she could only mumble. Is that when she lost her dignity? I'd like to ask Peter Singer this. Did she lose her dignity when we had to take care of her around the clock, when we had to move her, when friends had to wash her? She squeezed their hands and all she could do was receive love. Was that when she lost her dignity? Maybe that's the problem.

In the end, she became like the poor that she loved. She who wanted to give them vision lost her sight. She who wanted to give them voice lost hers. All that she had was what she shared with every mother's child: the power to evoke our love and the power to bestow it. Nor did she lose her dignity the night before she died when all she could do was squeeze her husband's hand as he read to her the Song of Songs. Don't buy this bill of goods of dignity. There's an ideology behind this. Dignity is not a function of what we produce, not a function of cultural artifact; it is of what we are and of how we were made and of our origins and of our mighty destiny. This mighty destiny of the eternal word is made flesh in us. Consequently, a culture of life involves our own willingness to face what our culture thinks is the worst thing possible—helplessness.

By the way, before we move on with this, I'll just say a couple of other things. I don't know if you're aware of this fact. There are these ads out on Harvard and other Ivy League schools that [say] if you're a woman, you're over 5'9" and have an I.Q. of over 140, you can get \$50,000 for your ova. But you've got to be 5'10", blonde, and have an I.Q. of over 140. We are already restructuring ourselves thinking that we can get around the frailty of our human bodies. This becomes very problematic. Jocelyn Elder said, "Thanks to abortion, the rates of Down Syndrome children has gone down." Now we have selective implantation. You can cull the ones [you don't want] prior to birth. Peter Singer says, "Wait until about two or three weeks after they're born. If one's a hemophiliac, get rid of him and raise one that is not a hemophiliac." This is Peter Singer. This is a reputable scholar at Princeton.

Are the stakes high, friends? They're high. They're very high. Part of this, of course, is our whole understanding of this marvelous thing, the [Human] Genome [Project]. It's just absolutely splendidly marvelous, you see. But I often wonder, would the world be better off without Down Syndrome children? I've not been able to convince myself of that. I don't know why. Maybe it's because they have evoked my love in ways that others have not, and it depends on what we think the Culture of Life is about. Is it about control? No. Because the Culture of Death is a culture of control. So it's necessary then to go into the frailty of our life.

One of the great people who did this, who I'd love to call your attention to, is a woman named Sheila Cassidy. She's a physician from England. Sheila Cassidy wrote a book called *Journeys*. She continued to be a doctor, but she started working with people whom Nietzsche calls degenerates or whom Judge Reinhart thinks are right to die since they've lost their dignity. This is what Cassidy says:

It's difficult to explain the love/hate relationship we have with those specters at the feast of life, gaunt figures with their tissues and their vomit bowls, oblivious to the appalling stench from their foul necrotic tumors. We are not immune to the smell of decaying flesh, and like anyone, we long to escape to where the air is pure. And yet cohabiting peacefully with our distaste is a real love for these broken people. People mutter, 'How awful. If it were a dog, you'd put it down.' But then, the patient's

not a dog; the patient's a woman with cancer in her mouth, a man living out his last precarious days, loved and cherished in a way often that he has never known before. It is in this lavishing of love on patients that the hospice movement stands in a prophetic relationship to society at large. For it affirms the value of the brain damaged, the mutilated, and the old to a world which values the clever, the physical, the beautiful, and the athletic.

The question is: Will we ever truly learn to love ourselves if we cannot learn to love our margins, if we cannot learn to love our bodies in all of their frailty and animality? Or will we succumb again even to a new technological movement of death so that someday we can redesign ourselves so that we will not feel pain, maybe never even temptation, maybe never even need redemption, maybe never have fears and never enter into the mystery of what it means to be this most marvelously endowed animal that we call the human person who is made in the image and likeness of God?

I'm going to end because I've been going so long. "College" is an interesting word. It comes from *collectum*, and it's a passive word. You're a *collectum*; you're a *mixtum gatherum*. To really cause a culture of life, you've got to change the *collectum*, the collective, into a *communitas* or a *communio*, where you have men and women who are unafraid, first of all, to face their own interior life—our frailty, our fears, our deepest hopes, our deepest longings—and unafraid to share them in covenant and community, where we enter into all of the frailty and the risk and the challenge and the dying and the birthing of that. That's the *communium*. Finally, they are unafraid of solidarity with the wounded who cannot hide their wounds because the wounds of relationship and the wounds of the world need not be run from. They can be transformed, you see—not repressed, transformed. We understand the Culture of Life as a resurrection people.

Remember Thomas, this poor guy who lost his faith. He still was in the Church, but he disbelieved the major doctrines. He was still hanging around; they didn't kick him out. He's there. He does not believe in a resurrection. You know what his problem is? The wounds. The wounds are the problem. So Jesus comes. "Hello Thomas." It's very interesting what he says: "Thomas, enter the wounds. They're still there, but they're

glorious. Enter the wounds of humanity, the wounds of yourself, the wounds of this Church, the wounds of my body and have them transformed.”

What’s so paradoxical about the Culture of Life is that it is only found where you are willing to enter into the valley of death in faith, in hope and in love. That’s why Paul could write that there are only three things that will really last: faith, hope, and love, and the greatest of these is love. That’s the only reason why he could write to the Romans that no height, no depth, no principality, no power, nothing past, nothing yet to come can ever separate us from this radical reality of life. Once we do this, we face these wounds and experience a re-healing of our life in such a way that we know that death is not the last word.

So I leave you with a last image. One of the people that taught me this most was Sr. Ann Manganaro. She was a doctor and she was a nun. There was a premie born at 25 weeks. Tomika was her name. Sr. Ann was a resident in neonatal intensive care and she got me to go see this premie. Tomika was about the size of my hand, filled with plugs. She survived for about five weeks because her lungs never developed. I saw her a couple of times. Ann would see her every day after she finished her work. She used to take Tomika and sing to her and hold her in her hands. Then Tomika died and Ann asked me if I could get some money for a cheap funeral because there was no family. It was the most pathetic thing you’d ever seen. Here’s this celibate priest, celibate nun, the funeral parlor director, and Tomika. That’s it. Talk about the Culture of Death clouding over me. I was taking Ann back home—she was living at the Catholic Worker at the time—and she says, “What’s wrong with you?” And I said, “Tomika had nothing. She never breathed air. She never took food. She never saw her mother. It was just utterly meaningless. Her life was meaningless.” Ann looked at me and she said, “You forgot one thing. Tomika had the power to evoke my love.” That’s the Culture of Life. It transforms even death.

And then, six years later, Ann herself was dying of cancer at the age of 47 and it was all taken away. Her great brilliant mind: she was first in medical school in four departments. Her great zeal: she went down to South and Central America to start clinics. Her great

beauty: now frail, sallow and yellow because she had liver cancer. And all that Ann had left was what Tomika gave her: the power to evoke our love. The day before she died, Ann said to a friend, “I finally understand the wounds.” Her friend said, “You mean your wounds?” Because she had had a mastectomy that started as breast cancer. Ann said, “No.” Her friend said, “You mean the wounds of Salvador?” Because Ann had to do emergency surgery during that war. She had to do so many trauma surgeries. And she said, “No, the wounds of us all. I finally understand.”

What I’m trying to suggest is that the Culture of Love is being fed by this truth. It’s a different kind of food. It’s very similar to the Eucharist. It’s also very similar to the fact that we receive the very body and blood of Christ under the images of food, but we also receive the body and blood of Christ under the image of the least of us, even the most broken. Often it is only those people who can call forth from us the fearlessness—that we can let go of our utter terror at the thought of not having control, of not managing, of not producing, and finally into the mystery of the wounds that become glorious. The college then becomes the community of faith and it becomes a leaven of life and it becomes men and women—even if there are five or ten out of this group—who are the cultivation of life that’s rooted in these great virtues of faith, hope, and love. You’ll transform the world, and you’ll make it worthwhile for this university to have existed just by those four or five people that God might raise up in our midst.

Thanks for listening.