

**"Growing Up" Spiritually**  
**Bryn Athyn College Commencement Address**  
**Becca Smith**  
**May 23, 2009**

Good morning, graduating classes. This day is about each one of you. About how hard you have worked for the last few years, and about your potential to use what you have learned to serve others. Why do we go to school? Why did you go to school? In the most basic sense, the point of school is to bring your level of knowledge up to the level of your love so you know how to accomplish your goals. We all want to be good people, but on a day-to-day basis, it is not necessarily obvious how. That's where religious study comes in.

Chancellor Kline, President Carswell, Deans Lindsay and Dibb, members of the board, members of the corporation, faculty, students, graduates, family and friends, good morning.

Good morning, graduating classes! This day is about each one of you: about how hard you have worked for the last few years, and about your potential to use what you have learned to serve others.

Why do we go to school – why did *you* go to school? In the most basic sense, the point of school is to bring your level of knowledge up to the level of your love so that you know how to accomplish your goals.

We all have the goal, presumably, to be a good person, but, on a day-to-day basis, it is not necessarily obvious how. That's where religious study comes in.

I decided to talk about religion this morning because the choice to make spiritually-based decisions keeps coming up for me as a young professional in my field, as a wife, as a mother, and as a New Church community member.

I have to date attended four tertiary institutions...and I'm not sure if I'm done yet: Bryn Athyn College of the New Church, l'Université de Tours in France, the University of Massachusetts at Amherst, and the George Washington University in D.C. Each of these institutions was helpful to me for different reasons. Looking back on Bryn Athyn College, I realize that it offered something that no other college was designed to offer, namely, the opportunity to formally study the work of Swedenborg and to read the Bible in this context.

As you plan to leave Bryn Athyn and its amazing spiritual support networks, will you be responsible for the health of your own spirit?

It would have been clever if I had asked myself this pointedly as I graduated from Bryn Athyn College in 2003. Instead, it took a few years of wandering in the relative mental wilderness to gain some clarity.

Something my husband Lincoln and I discovered when we left Bryn Athyn College was that if we wanted to keep the Lord and the Word in mind, we had to seek it out. We had to work at it. No more spiritual food for sale, as it were, in neat 3-month packages as it was at college. I found myself going back to hunting and gathering.

I missed the structured, in-depth study of Bryn Athyn College's religion classes. Out on my own, nobody told me to read 20 or 30 pages at a time. I might be reading the Word, but was I processing it? Or getting distracted with other thoughts? Was I even awake? Would I remember it later?

When I was at Bryn Athyn College, being spiritually conscious was so easy. Take, for example, religion classes: Reverend Stephen Cole frequently asked probing questions that revealed inconsistencies and superficiality in my thinking. Reverend Grant Odhner drew diagrams on the chalkboard that clarified how the Lord redeems us and how He progressed through states of separateness and oneness with His Divine soul, the Father. Coach Silverman and Mrs. Coach told the story of how they discovered New Church teachings about marriage – and they taught me, by their own example, that love in marriage is a renewable resource! At Bryn Athyn College, I had abundant opportunities to engage with others on New Church doctrine and its application to my life.

When we left Bryn Athyn, one of the choices Lincoln and I made that has worked for us was to head for one of the established New Church communities. We chose Mitchellville, MD, because I planned to attend school and find work in DC. We found a home within walking distance of the church. (Which enables us to be among the latest to church every Sunday morning.) Thanks to the warmth of the community members, and our physical proximity, we soon felt at home.

Choosing to be near a church was helpful for my emerging goal to wake up and stay awake spiritually. Still, nobody was testing the quality of my mental activity on religious subjects, and I certainly didn't have to write any papers. Even as part of an established New Church community, I found that I had to work at getting exactly the spiritual diet I was looking for. Then, when we participated in the Journey program (thank you, Office of Outreach!) we realized that what we had been missing was small group study with others of our generation, not just during the 7-week campaign but year-round.

So our small group decided to just keep going. It's a great feeling to know we are all there because we want to study religion with our friends. Reading together and talking about spiritual life has become one of the staples of our spiritual diet. It has created a sense of companionship with this group of peers that we did not have before. It's often a stress reducer, not simply another time commitment. We don't call it "doctrinal class" but I now understand why my parents' and grandparents' generations created and sustained that tradition. In our informal spiritual growth and study group, we recreated what Lincoln and I valued most about our education at Bryn Athyn College: it brought a spiritual perspective back into daily life.

Soon, our daughter will be starting preschool at the Washington New Church School next door (once again, giving us an excuse to be among the latest). However, going to a New Church school does not mean she will incorporate this faith into her life, just as getting a two- or four-year degree

at Bryn Athyn College does not mean that you will choose to stay actively engaged in the New Church. If we were not free to reject religion, if we were not free to be passive, we would not be free to willingly choose religion, either.

What do you intend for your mental and spiritual life in the coming years, and how will you achieve it?

Every person's story is different. We got married, took turns going to graduate school, had a kid, and entered the working world. Some of you are still wondering, "What will I do after graduation?" Some of you have a plan. Some of you have plans that will change, as ours did. Some of you have been accepted to your next school. Some of you are done with school forever! Some of you will try out different jobs looking for one that fits. Some of you will start a family. Some of you already have a family. Some of you will go back home. Some of you will travel the world. In terms of church activity, some of you are fully integrated into a community, while some of you might classify yourselves as seekers: geographically, philosophically, or both.

Wherever you go, whichever occupation you choose, whatever grand projects you take on, you alone will be responsible for the quality of your own spiritual life. It's up to you how you live your religion, or whether you have a religion at all.

For example, when you are put in the lead of a team project at work, and one of your colleagues is not contributing reliably, how will you treat that person? Or how will you react when someone questions your ideas, or worse, your work ethic?

When your toddler discovers death, gets worried, and says things like: "I don't want to die!" and "Mom, are you going to die?" ... What will you say?

If you are married and someone else seems more attractive than your spouse, physically or emotionally, will you dwell on what your spouse lacks? Or protect his or her status in your heart and in your thoughts? To me, these are the situations where religious principles have practical value.

After graduating, if you want to lead a life of religion, where do you plan to look for spiritual guidance and community? Will you stay in Bryn Athyn for a while? Will you join an online New Church community like Pulse? Or keep in touch with friends through Facebook? If you have benefited from the "Sunday Night Thing," will you continue the spiritual exercise you have found there? Will you stockpile the Writings? Will you find likeminded people of different faiths? Will you gravitate towards a New Church congregation? (I highly recommend Mitchellville.)

Many adults find themselves asking not once but numerous times, "What do I want do, who will I be, when I 'grow up?'" Similarly, it is important to ask periodically, "Who do I want to be when I 'grow up' spiritually?"

And what does it mean to 'grow up spiritually?' Returning to the example of leading a team project, we know from Swedenborg that we need to guard against the tendency to control others (AC 1749, DP 217) and that the commandment not to murder is also a commandment not to kill

someone's character. So 'growing up spiritually' might mean: (1) refraining from badmouthing my colleague behind his back, (2) looking at where his strengths are, and yet, (3) recognizing that I do not have complete control of the outcome.

Returning to the parenting example, we find ourselves telling our children what to do, and – which is scary – influencing what they think, but we know that compulsion, especially in worship, will not last (NJHD 143). We know from the Word that even though the Lord's life flowing into every person is the same, recipient vessels vary (DLW 54), so no two people receive God the same way. 'Growing up spiritually' as a parent might mean speaking simple, comforting truth to my anxious child, but keeping in mind the subjectivity of my own understanding of truth.

Returning to the marriage example, the book Conjugal Love teaches that men and women are equal under God (CL 125) with unique gifts (CL 127, 159), and that marriages are to endure until the end of life (CL 276). Swedenborg also teaches that laying down your life for your friend (John 15:13) means to lay down your selfishness for his or her sake. To me, 'growing up spiritually' in marriage means remembering the "give" part of "give and take"; at times it means deliberately seeking things to admire and respect about my husband; and it means being loyal to him whether or not he appears to be meeting my needs on any given day.

And so, as you move to the next phase of your life, you are *free!* And you are *rational!* Bryn Athyn College has sought to nurture that. Freedom and rationality are a gift from God: we have the *option* to intentionally respond.

I wish each of you the very best as you allow the bounty of the Lord's blessings to pour in. Thank you.