

DISPUTATION CLXXVII

February 1, 2018

Dear Peucinians:

Welcome back from our winter recess. I invite you to the season opener for round II of this strange but wonderful thing of ours. It goes without saying that I've missed you all and cannot wait to begin what promises to be a whirlwind of a Peucinian semester: we have much ahead of us. I understand that many of Mollie's vegetarian converts have kept their pledges thus far. Kudos; I am impressed.

We welcome Stephen Girard to the lectern for the first time, claiming his spot as the third member of the Class of 2021 to dispute. Stephen's opponent is St. Dominic, whose mere expression of disagreement is cause for me to reflect seriously on whatever I've just thought or said. The question tomorrow evening is the one we ask every week—how ought we live our lives?—but without any dressing. How we come down on this disputation is a judgment on what we feel our purpose (that is, the Peucinians') should be in this life. Many of us desire to live satisfying lives and help others. What's the best way to do it?

RESOLVED: WE OUGHT STRIVE FOR GREATNESS IN OUR LIVES

Affirmative: Stephen Girard '21 of Marblehead, Massachusetts

Negative: St. Dominic de Guzmán '19

I have confidence in the disputants' explicative abilities, so I will not indulge in an extended summary of their arguments. Stephen and St. Dominic agree that we ought find purpose in our lives, but they diverge on how to get there. Greatness—a complicated notion, to be sure—presents one path forward. With discipline and drive, sacrifice and endurance, we can push the boundaries of human achievement, touch the lives of others across civilizations and generations, and secure a lasting legacy. Reflection on what exactly the end of greatness is suggests another way to find meaning and purpose. Helping others, living with compassion, appreciating the small things, and connecting with people as our equals: here lies a sublime life of peace and happiness.

Both ways of life may be good. But which one is better for Peucinians, for you? At first take I found myself siding with Stephen, but after talking to St. Dominic this afternoon I have, naturally, rethought things. I'm going to walk in to Mass Hall tomorrow night thoroughly confused. Would I be so lucky to leave the same way.

Peucinians, what is the good? How can we be happy? What should we *do*?

Thursday, February 1, 7:45 p.m.

Third Floor of Massachusetts Hall

Semi-formal attire

PLSH,

Jean-Jacques Rousseau

P.S. Let's continue the practice of congregating around the couches until the Provost's gavel. We'll take 15 minutes of camaraderie before beginning.

P.P.S. With great sadness we bid farewell to William Jennings Bryan, who is hopping off to Toulouse, France, for the semester; Louisa May Alcott, who is spending the semester in Bath, England; and Reinhold Niebuhr, studying abroad in that magnificent city Rome. Fortunately, we heartily welcome the return of Mary Shelley from Japan, Madame de Staël from Costa Rica, and Theodore Roosevelt from Barcelona!

P.P.P.S. Please continue to let me know if you'd like to be removed from this email list.

FINAL THOUGHT: Thinking about this topic sent me back to the final chapter of *The Power Broker*. Do not continue if you want to avoid spoilers, although this is a history book. Robert Moses was one of the most powerful people in American history, the man more responsible for the *greatness* and grandeur of New York City than anyone else, the man who built state parks, highways, stadia, world fairs, bridges, and tunnels, the man who skirted the law and human decency in his quest to *get things done*—and a man as concerned with his own greatness and power as with the recipients of his beneficence. Here is what biographer Robert Caro wrote about the final years of Moses's life:

He was forgotten—to live out his years in bitterness and rage.

In private, his conversation dwelt more and more on a single theme—the ingratitude of the public toward great men. And once, invited by the Church to speak at the dedication in Flushing Meadows Park of the Excedra, a huge, marble bench for reflection donated by the Roman Catholic Diocese of New York, he gave vent to his feeling in public. Turning to a high church official who was also an old friend, his voice booming out over the public address system, he said:

“Someday, let us sit on this bench and reflect on the gratitude of man.”

Down in the audience, the ministers of the empire of Moses glanced at one another and nodded their heads. RM was right as usual, they whispered. Couldn't people see what he had done?

Why weren't they grateful?