Good afternoon.
Dean Boden and President Eisgruber, thank you for your welcome to my husband Home and myself.
This year I celebrate my 25th reunion, and I want to thank the University for keeping Princeton in this state of timeless beauty for alumni. Although Whitman College was completed eight years ago, it looks so familiar I am convinced I had actually lived there. Such is the intoxicating beauty of Princeton that time stands still. However, President Eisgruber, there is one place on campus where your powers to stop time falters: I was in the washroom a moment ago, and I looked into the mirror. I didn’t count on middle age being so challenging.

I had graduated from the United World College, of which Queen Noor is our current patron, finished two years of military service in Singapore, and arrived in Princeton in 1986 as a scholarship student. I graduated from the Woodrow Wilson School, and went on to Union Seminary and then Harvard Divinity School. Bishop Fred Borsch, Class of 1957, the former Dean of this Chapel ordained me an Episcopal priest. Keen to have a broader impact, I pursued an MBA at Harvard Business School, and for the last 14 years, I have worked globally as a leadership and management consultant.

As a priest and as a consultant, I am in a double bind: much of what a priest says nowadays, nobody really believes in; and as a management consultant, much of what I tell you, you already know.

Is there anything sensible one can ever say about death and loss? Looking at the program sheet, I understand I have lost two classmates, who were surely loved by many, but whom I didn’t know, and now never will. My own mentor and friend who has known me for half my life, the civil rights activist and author, the Rev. Malcolm Boyd, had life support pulled from him, just one hour ago.

Death comes too soon; sometimes, not soon enough. And what can we say to Princetonians for whom death is routine---those fending off death in hospitals, or inflicting death on battlefields?

Perhaps you will permit me the lame excuse that Princeton didn’t prepare me for death. Princeton, however, did teach me two lessons about living life, and I hope my meditations on these might be helpful to you.

The first lesson is to be found on Prospect Street and our Eating Clubs. You may or may not have liked this vaunted tradition of like-minded people getting together to eat---and then some. Other schools teach the same game, but we at Princeton give the Game a name: prospecting.

We prospect for a place to belong—a club, a community, even a company or country ---where through shared values, we might achieve something larger. For all the controversy over exclusion at Princeton’s Eating Club, bicker---you have to love the word! ---bicker is in fact a rehearsal for the real world, because many of the prizes of success can be had only through bickering, whether that exclusive pre-school or that board-room seat.

If we now remember with sheepishness what antics we performed in order to get into an Eating Club, motivated no less by some beautiful skirt or sexy pair of boxers, we now know that Prospect street is a rehearsal for the chase. It matters not whether we have chased money and privilege, or intellectual or social influence, or a great and all-consuming love of a cause---we chase to win. Whether in tie-dyed shirt, cool ripped jeans, or a preppy dinner jacket, whether through charm, or care and character, prospecting is the exercise of our vitality and virility---to seek, to find and not to yield.

Great achievements come from great prospecting and today we honor the living with medals and the dead with our prayers.

But prospecting is double edged. Not because prospecting is self-interested---we are all self-interested, and will always be versions of bickering sophomores. Rather, the flaw lies in the small deceits and tiny acts of betrayal
that are part of the Prospecting Game. Indeed, our very character has been formed as much by what our striving has accomplished, as by these tiny deceits.

We seek to be the best in order to win, but may win without ever being at our best. Conquest and market share may have very little to do with excellence.

The shared values and goals of our “group”, however lofty, may look no different than shared vanities, and a life of vanities can yet look like a respectable life well lived. Who, then, will we allow to tell us we have become vain?

We subject our psyches to neurosis and depression, by letting ourselves be relentlessly measured by others, yet we play the game with ever more gusto, because the Prospecting Self also likes measuring other people back.

In the prospecting chase, our eyes are seduced by tomorrow, distracted by what greatness, or goodness, we might yet achieve in the future. We then miss the richness of today---the telling of this bedtime story, the extraordinariness of this familiar hand now held out to us, the miracle that is the face looking at us in the mirror.

But the conceit about the importance of striving for tomorrow is that it’s often about my tomorrow, and seldom about your tomorrow. And so, while our prospecting powers achieve glory, the world starves for kindness, and the greatness that kindness might yet bring.

To prospect is to ask to be measured, and on Alumni day, we take the measure of those lives, as well as our own. It is not that we can then say, here is the good, a medal for you, and over there the flawed, no medals. No. We have all striven, and striven for the most parts to do good, even a lot of good. But the good which we are, is flawed.

It was on one of those prospecting Saturdays in Freshman year, close to midnight, that I stumbled into this Chapel and learned the other lesson from Princeton. I found this Chapel drenched in darkness, but with these choir stalls behind me lit with light and song. A motley crew of university and town’s people, only half of whom were Catholics, were cramped into every seat, and overflowing into the darkened pews you are sitting in.

Father Robert Ferrick, a Jesuit priest, was celebrating Midnight Mass.

Bob paced back and forth, and he said: I am a recovering alcoholic. I know the depths of despair. You are gifted, or you would not be here.

For a small instance, I felt triumphant—I am not doing too badly at Princeton. Thank God for those who are stupider and uglier. And then I lost it, and judging by the sniffles around me, I was not alone in my feelings.

By being vulnerable and transparent, Bob had cracked open the door for us to enter into a different world, where we could finally drop our Prospecting Selves like some party costume. Facing another man who was naked in his vulnerability, what could we do but also be honest?

Honest about ourselves. Honest about our hearts. Honest about secrets. And that most secret of fears, that we are not who we dreamt we should, or might, or could or had to be. How long had we lived in this prison of not being enough---not worthy enough, not talented enough, not loveable enough? Not good enough of a parent with not good enough kids and a not-good-enough lover.

One of the tragedies of life on any Prospect Street is to find beautiful people chasing other beautiful people who don’t think they are beautiful at all.

There are invisible prisons which the Prospecting Self locks us in and it matters not whether we achieve success, we cannot escape the bars. You and I know people in our ranks for whom the hardening of the heart has turned success into arrogance and paranoia, instead of into generosity and gratitude.
Why are there those moments in which our personal suffering finds us imprisoned in anger, desolation or shame, while in other moments of pain, we find ourselves joined in a fellowship of kindness with others who also suffer? The difference lies in whether our hearts are opened or closed.

At that Midnight Mass, I learned something from Father Ferrick: a feeling of transparency, a softening of the heart, an invitation to live differently.

*I am a recovering alcoholic. I know the depths of despair. You are gifted or you would not be here.*

These words, ringing out at midnight when the rest of the campus was prospecting was an invitation to take off the armor. Only then might we know the grace of our giftedness which has nothing to do with accomplishments. We are gifted or we wouldn’t be here. Not just here at Princeton, but here, now, in this place and in this moment, in this life and with these people.

Father Ferrick’s own life was a struggle against the hardening of his heart. A gay man, he was bruised in his fight against the iron dogmatism of his church and died an unnoticed death in a Jesuit retirement home. ii

*You are gifted or you wouldn’t be here.*

To paraphrase T.S. Elliot iii: the end of all our prospecting, will be to arrive where we started and to know our Original Selves iv for the first time. We come into the world naked and vulnerable and will depart the same way. We are a tender rose in the midst of a crowned knot of fire, and the rose says:

*I love you.*
*I need you.*
*I am grateful.*
*I forgive you.*
*Forgive me.*

This is the prayer to remember today, and we say it to both the dead and the living.

Our hearts must open, and if it won’t, then we might crack it open upon whatever anvil we can find, and strike with a hammer, first and foremost, our pride. Only then might we find that here is yet friendship across the battle lines of animosity or indifference, which we may have inherited, but which we now have a choice to eradicate. There is yet forgiveness, from a past we cannot change, but which can be released towards a future free of its bonds. There is yet confidence amidst loneliness, if we let ourselves be surprised. We may yet live justly with each other, if we walk humbly and show mercy.

This is our gift to each other when the walls are down, the performance over, the prospecting ended. We can speak these words of salvation:

*I love you.*
*I need you.*
*Thank you.*
*Forgive Me.*
*I forgive you.*

*Dei sub numine viget* v

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i From Tennyson’s *Ulysses*. In a different version of the Ulysses/Odysseus story, which Helen Luke in *Old Age* expounds with great insight, Odysseus leaves the sea, scene of his ‘prospecting’, and walks inland carrying with him his oar (symbol of his prospecting), until he comes to a place where no one has ever seen a sea farer, and someone asks him if what he carries is a fan. (No one cares about his prospecting achievements.) There he plants his oar in the ground, and lives a
different life as a farmer in a village. It is symbolic of living life differently than mere prospecting but instead through cultivating the self in the second half of life.


iii T. S. Elliot, Little Gidding

iv Original Self is my paraphrase here of Original Mind or True Self, as found in several Eastern philosophies, including Hinduism, Buddhism and Taoism, but also in the esoteric and mystical traditions of Christianity. Sometimes also known as atman, Buddha Mind, the Tao, or Mind of Christ. These all refer to an experience of our “selves” as not separated from other beings, but continuous with all of existence, and enfolded in the Divine or God. Prior to the arising of egoic mind that differentiates self from others, and thus also discriminates between good/bad, like/dislike, me/you, friend/enemy, success/failure and all dichotomous and binary forms etc., we are in Unitary Consciousness with all of existence or Being. Thich Nhat Hanh calls this inter-being. In Christian terms, when the flesh/ego is crucified, we put on the Mind of Christ, and are in communion with all the saints and with all humanity and God, and from this place, we know unbounded grace, and the capacity to act with charity and power.

v Princeton’s motto, variously translated as “under the numinosity of God, Princeton flourishes”, is in my mind one of the most astute understanding of the spiritual life. We humans flourish, when we can touch and tap into a deeper source of power, beyond egoic prospecting. If we can escape the sense of God as a dogmatic notion associated with organized religion, and instead understand that there are sources of sacred power outside of our egoic minds, we are enabled to really flourish in ways we never imagined possible, and thus to move through grief and death, and life, differently.