

Preston Rook and Laura McCann

ON THE OCCASION OF GRADUATION—2009

Thirty-seven years ago this past Spring I graduated from high school. My thirty-fifth year class reunion is a distant memory. Getting by and making do, I was the Class of '72. If you are not more careful than I have been, this is what you will look and act like thirty-seven years from now! Twenty-five miles south of Paducah in the heart of Graves County, Kentucky, I took the same Baccalaureate/ Graduation steps that you are taking. Your graduation has helped me re-live those days thirty-seven years ago. My eyes still haven't recovered from all the camera flashes of that commencement night and yours won't either....just wait. The Junior-Senior Prom and the Commencement Dance (back in the days before Project Graduation) were probably two of the best times my high school girlfriend, Nancy Carol, and I ever had in those last weeks of our senior year. Our class had a reunion last summer to reminisce about all this. All of the occasions surrounding my graduation have a bittersweet memory to them as they included many good-byes, which in some instances I hardly knew I was making. Some of the good-byes have proven especially painful. Good-bye to summer football practice--I never thought I'd miss wind sprints in 100 degree August days...but I did. Good-bye to my 160 pound body...I gained 25 pounds that summer after I graduated and I am still growing. No more cruising around town--oh, yeah, we still cruised, but after high school it never quite seemed the same. And, of course, good-bye to all the teachers and friends with whom I grew up and who grew up with me. Sometimes I still long to be with my high school friends who knew me so well and so long. Your graduation has brought all this back to me. THANKS!

Did you ever wonder about the outfits we wear for these graduation occasions? Why is it we wear this stuff? And...unusual stuff at that! It's not much more than a recycled bathrobe and a hat that looks like a square frisbee with a tail on it. And unbelievably, everybody likes to wear it! Well...almost everybody! It has an odd attraction for us and to wear it once or more in our lives is quite fun. What is it about these outfits that intrigue and captivate us so? I have learned in these thirty-seven years since my graduation that the origins of these outfits are in Europe in the early Renaissance period but I have a more contemporary explanation of their meaning. This graduation uniform is parade dress for those of us fighting against ignorance! Ugly, closed-up ignorance is the issue these outfits tell us is the enemy. These uniforms don't mean we know everything no matter how many times we have worn them; but it does mean that like a doctor who has a uniform for her work against disease, and a judge who has a robe for his work against injustice, and a minister has easily identifiable clothing for the work of

proclaiming God's redemption of the world, you too now have a special outfit for celebrating your battle against ignorance and a diploma to mark your first successful steps in that battle. In Scotland, where my academic hood and robe came from, we wore these to class everyday as a strong sign of our battle against ignorance. Now there is much ignorance around. Its most dangerous form is the ignorant person who refuses to be informed, who denies she can change, who hears only what he wants to hear, or who lets his or her own hates and prejudices control and define them. **ONLY THE ABILITY YOU LEARNED AND EARNED THESE PAST TWELVE YEARS, TO QUESTION AND EXPLORE, TO DISCOVER AND CHALLENGE, TO CHANGE AND CORRECT, TO GROW AND EXPAND; ONLY THESE ABILITIES WILL EFFECTIVELY ROOT OUT THE EVIL IN OUR MIDST!** This is what I see in the uniform you don to graduate from high school. This is the very reason we celebrate your graduation. I want to be among the first to welcome you to the right side of truth and question and exploration.

Now I'd like to share with you a parable, a parable about a town called Talkaholia. With a name like that you can imagine what their favorite pastime was. Talkaholics talked when they got up, they talked in their sleep; they talked at other people, they talked to themselves; they talked out loud, they talked in their heads. Sometimes they waited for others to stop, but sometimes they talked while others talked. Sometimes they waited to finish eating, but other times they talked with their mouths full. Sometimes they had something to say but most of the time they talked to hear themselves speak and to get away from the quiet. Now you can imagine the situation in that town, for with everyone running around talking, it made for a hopelessly confusing sound. Words became the way a person made him or herself unique. Words were the way they made a name for themselves. With words alone they puffed out their chest declaring just how special they were, and in reality with everyone running around talking about their own way and claiming to have the only right way, well, the words just clanged into each other and fell to the ground impotently. There, in Talkaholia, it sounded like a choir who missed its notes or who sang different stanzas at the same time. The words flew every which way, clashing and crashing into each other communicating only conflict and division. It is the noise of a proud, but sad, **loneliness!**

Now, I am afraid we all live dangerously close to the land of Talkaholia. It is not a hopeless state but it borders on Godlessness, which means it is a pretty dangerous place to live. For you see what Talkaholia has yet to discover, is that gracious gift of Godly listening. Without listening, without ears that really hear, how can one know the way ahead for all of us? And in our world of Talkaholics this sort of listening is no easy task. Now I've been to school several years and I've learned at least one thing about why we go to school. We go to school not so much

so that we can talk authoritatively about some subject, but rather we go to school **TO LEARN TO LISTEN**, to learn that everybody has something to offer, if we could only take the time to listen. Some dummies, like me, need a lot of schooling to learn this; while some wiser ones learn this much quicker, perhaps for a rare few, even before they get out of high school. The fact is clearly this, that the mark of a Godly, educated person is the **ABILITY TO LISTEN!**

To what must we listen? What voices among us speak the truth for us to follow? I have a word I want you to hear unmistakably this glorious season of your life. We must, all of us, listen to the voice of God as it speaks that most important word of **GOD'S LOVE AND CARE** for all of us. I know well how Jesus must have felt when he looked out over Jerusalem and said, "How I long to gather you up under my wings as a mother hen gathers her chicks." How I want to gather you up and share powerfully this protection and care of God. I do not want you to leave home for a minute without having heard clearly the word of God's love for you. The preacher who spoke at my church when I graduated thirty-seven years ago, said this one thing and he said it clearly, so much so that I remember it still; "Before our lives can ever amount to anything, before we can take our rightful places in this world, we must know God's deepest love for us." The more I live the more I know he was right. We must feel and sense God's care and compassion for every part of our lives. We do God a terrible injustice when we make God out to be a tyrant, one who judges and accuses and condemns. The word of the gospel, at least as Jesus speaks it, is that we worship and serve a God of Love, a God who loves me and a God who loves you! We must hear this word of love from the Almighty or else we're destined to spend our lives like so many adult lives, bouncing restlessly from one activity to another or desperately mired up to our eyeballs in boredom and routine. Restlessness and boredom are but the early stages of the emotional breakdown and depression that are at epidemic proportions in our land. Restlessness and boredom find their relief eternally only in the love of God for each of us.

Also, we must hear this word of God's love or we will inevitably fill our days trying to prove ourselves. The thirst for approval is an unquenchable one and it surfaces when we live to impress our boss or our parents or our spouse or some other one who has authority or influence over us. God's love assures us of our worth as human creatures carefully crafted by our Creator with loving attention to every detail of our lives, and that it is only Tinkerbell whose existence depends on the applause she gets from the audience. If our unhealthy compulsions push us into spending our time proving ourselves in any way, then we'll hardly have time for the really important things of life—important things like loving our families, like spending time with our friends and our neighbors, like changing our enemies into friends; all important parts of abundant living.

We must hear this word of God's Love for us or else we'll mistake our up-stirred spirits for upset, and try to smother them in all sorts of typical ways—ways like excess food, excess accumulations, and excess activities. I am convinced our pre-occupation with Wal-Mart and yard sales, the busy-ness of our lives and our tendency to be overweight in this culture, says, more than anything else, that we have not heard yet that God loves us, unconditionally, and without qualification. This spirit that boils up in us all need not be quenched nor smothered; this appetite is fed only as we nourish ourselves on God's good love as offered in Jesus Christ. Only a living awareness of this love of God, only our hearing deep within ourselves of God's wondrous love for us, will keep us away from these dangerous pitfalls. Today, then, as you graduate, hear clearly the simple word of God's love for you!

Let's detour Talkaholia in your generation, for the freedom of speech we so highly value means nothing without good Godly listening. Words only communicate to those who can and will listen. Not everybody is a great talker, but each of us has been given deep within us that Godly gift of listening. Truly, there are more diseases now, more people in any hospital in the country whose healing potion is not some marketed medicine, but good Godly listening. How shall any of us find our way forward? **LISTEN, LISTEN, LISTEN...!** Let me paraphrase Paul in Romans 10, "Life comes from what is heard."

My gift to you as you graduate is to point out the gift God has already left you, a gift that can truly change your world. That gift--**God's deepest love for you and your ability to listen, to hear with your heart.** I've known you for quite a while now through church; I have watched you as you have grown into such a capable young person. I have highest hopes for you and high expectations for a future in which you flourish. I so enjoy the young adult you are growing into and I can't wait to see what you will become! I hope you will keep up with Nan and me throughout college and beyond. May you go from this graduation with the word of God's love for you ever on your ears. May your deepest dreams and calling never stop speaking within you and may you follow after it. May you be blessed as I have been blessed, with wise companions along the road of your life.

And may you have ears that really hear!

AMEN!