ADMINISTRATIVE REPORT OF THE COLLEGE CHAPLAIN
TO THE PRESIDENT OF THE COLLEGE - FOR 1979-80

In the late afternoon of June 30, 1980, the day this report was due, Wellesley College was slammed and pummeled by a towering thunderstorm that shook every sturdy tree to its outermost roots. The rivers of rain and flashes of lightening quickly moved eastward, over the golf course, and gentle yellow and gold hues from the setting sun flowed in over the peaks of Stone-Davis. With rain still falling and thunder still echoing off the front of the College Club across the way, my children and I cautiously emerged from the door of Homestead at 6:30 p.m. to discover, or to be discovered by, a brilliant, full rainbow, arching from one side of the sky to the other in front of the vast darkness that was still receding in the East. Since no one else was around -- such is the solitude of this campus in the summer -- we danced around on the college road, and yelled at every car that was buzzing by out front on Washington Street, in a genuine effort to halt them in order to show their drivers that sign of promise in the heavens above. But nobody heard us. Or nobody cared. They all were in a hurry.

This is an occupational dis-ease of mine, to be driven to think about death and life every time I take any time to think about anything. Would that I could simply pull some statistics together, how many came to hear Father Drinan on Sunday or whether most people had a good time at the Hillel mixer. Then I could write a report that others could reasonably handle in fifteen minutes. Then, also, I could go home right away, without further reflection, and have a nightcap with my spouse, like other mortals.

But this is the world I live with every hour, death and life. Noah is my soul brother, for better or for worse. As far as I know, to be sure, Noah was never asked to provide anyone with a year-end report. But I will persevere anyway.

You see, I am not able to provide "a concise statement of the activities of the office for the past year" without saying why we tried to do what we did. Nor can I consider telling about why without telling what I saw when I looked out at the world from the vantage point of my ark -- actually, this whole ministry of mine is a lower case spirituality, so I had better tell the truth. My ark is more of a raft, a flimsy vessel I barely had time to tie together before the rains came.

during my twelve years at Wellesley.

Then Lifton comes to the inner truth of this Protean character, which is nothing. "Intimately bound up with [this] flux in emotions and beliefs," he explains, "is a profound inner sense of absurdity, which finds expression in a tone of mockery." This, in turn, he feels, is closely related to "a suspicion of counterfeit nurturance." The Protean character, convinced of the inner meaninglessness of his or her life, both hungers for dependence on larger communties and on intimate personal relationships, and is profoundly suspicious of them. Mother Wellesley, do you wonder why your daughters, who need you so much as a community, and who thirst for all the intimate comforts your counselors can offer them, also hate you?

Camus tried to imagine that Sisyphus was happy. That always struck me as so much whistling in the dark. Lifton is surely right when he shows us ourselves in the mirror and we see ourselves holding out our hands for help, yet screaming a wordless rage from the depths of our souls, because we know no meaning and no purpose, many of us, and therefore deeply resent offers of love and affection that presuppose meaning and purpose.

Last December I attended a Holiday Dinner in one of the residence halls. Everyone wanted to be festive, but somehow it would not happen or it could not happen. People sang some carols and some Hanukkah songs. But the long silences between such efforts came to be more and more embarassing and disquieting to everyone, it seemed. Then, finally, one student -- apparently trying to be helpful -- jumped up in front the the group gathered in the livingroom and led everyone in some resounding rounds of Row Row Row Your Boat. The absurdity and the mockery, and perhaps also the hidden rage, of the Protean character were apparent, for any who had eyes to see and ears to hear.

When he wrote his essay in 1968, Lifton attempted to celebrate the promising possibilities of the Protean character, as well as identify its more ominous dynamics. In my judgment, we have yet to see the substantial realization of that promise. On the contrary, it seems to me that an essentially destructive trend that Lifton alluded to twelve years ago as a possibility, has now become a growing social reality -- <u>reaction</u>, the attempt to return to "the good old days," when things were allegedly more simple, when there were indeed larger communal structures, familial, religious, cultural, and national, in the context of which people could find moorings for their identity.

This trend is particularly apparent beyond the pale of the academy. In our society at large, the frantic rush to avoid the meaninglessness of

So I would actually prefer more work, please -- so I can be sure I will not have to lift up my eyes at any time to the hills, and see darkness, weeping and gnashing of teeth, and no help.

With such sentiments flooding my consciousness, my mind keeps coming back to the excruciatingly thoughtful 1973 book of Ernst Becker, The Denial of Death. He argued, following Otto Rank, that Freud, for all the latter's honesty about sex and aggression, himself skirted around -- repressed! -- the ultimate human anxiety and therefore the deepest human motivation, fear of death. The human species, like every human infant, originally faces the nothingness of death and, in fear, seeks to rise above death. Likewise, the human species, like every human infant, originally faces the nothingness of death and, in fear, creates all the artifacts and the systems of culture as a kind of "character armor," as a protection from the threat of death.

Add to these primordial dynamics the threat of Love Canals and neutron bombs and Three Mile Islands and genocidal wars, and we can see why people today, in the academy as well as elsewhere, want to work even harder than usual and to read the newspapers less and less.

This explains, too, why the venerable Liberal Arts Tradition, as we know it, is dead. The disinterested but passionate search for the Good, the True, and the Beautiful, as ends in themselves, presupposed an unshakeable belief in the immortality of the soul and, with that, the freedom or leisure(scholē) to recollect what one had forgotten, one's essential connectedness with the Really Real. But we are profoundly taken by the reality of our own mortality. Hence there can be no transcendentals with which we are essentially connected. Education becomes, then, sheerly an instrument for some mundane end, not an end in itself. The life of the mind gives way to the search for the job.

And more. The classical Liberal Arts Tradition was always elitist. It was essentially bound up with wealth, status, and political power. That kind of security is now beginning to crumble under our feet also. Given soaring costs, parents naturally are putting the pressure on their daughters; those who pay the bills are developing a heightened interest in the "cash value" of a Wellesley education. Is it worth it? The beautiful campus. The handsome, bright faculty. The twenty million dollar science center and the two million dollar counseling center. Dollar for dollar, does it all make sense for people with middle or low incomes? Especially when one has to travel after graduation on one's reputation and on the basis of one's wits, rather than with the assured credentials of a CPA, let us say. Gone are the days, surely, and happily so most people feel, when a senior could grauate into Daddy's firm

person already has. So both faculty and students urgently want to get to know each other better, but few seem willing to take the personal risks, above all to take the time, that genuine intellectual intercourse requires. In the meantime, for financial as well as existential reasons, faculty are dispersing themselves residentially to many distant places, either geographically or psychologically, and Wellesley is becoming, or perhaps it has already become, a commuter college forthe faculty.And, notwithstanding heroic -- and given the times, amazingly successful -- efforts on the part of our residence system to establish a living world of interpersonal and intellectual connections for students, the most passionate concern for many of our students, considerable numbers of whom are profoundly lonely, is to"find a single" as soon as possible.

I see many other things from the vantage point of my raft, as I look out on the world in which we all live at Wellesley. I see the investment of enormous amounts of energy by administrators, who deeply care about this place, and who must bear the brunt of the financial crises of these times. I see a faithfulness on the part of many in the faculty, to their teaching and to their students, which is all out of proportion to the constantly sinking level of professional gratification which they experience. I see an amazing verve on the part of many of our students, who struggle to marshal their energies in order to live the life of the mind while they are here and to reach out to each other with the hand of friendship. Behind it all the staff, from the libraries and the offices to the grounds and the police cruisers, dozens of dedicated individuals,bear the heat and burden of every day with a sometimes amazing diligence, so that others might find the leisure to study.

But throughout it all, sad to say, Proteus,and his doppelgänger Sisyphus, rule the soul of this community. Theirs are the unseen hands of our academic marketplace. So it happens that all roads, no matter how caringly and faithfully we pursue then, seem to lead to the same Nowhere, and that, like Ginny Babcock, our stories all have this in common, the sheer fact of always moving on to something different, we know not what, with little or no knowledge of who we are. Gnothi seauton, said the Philosopher. But we know ourselves only in passing. Gain the whole world and you will lose yourselves, said the Teacher. That is precisely what so many of us are so urgently engaged in doing.

Still, we can remember good old Noah. By Grace, surely, he found himself apart, off the eternally going nowhere track of Sisyphus, rooted in one place with one identity, unlike the many faced Proteus. He found himself living in virtue of the Absurd, building an ark on the dry land, gathering together

at the pathos of contemporary experience from the perspective of psychiatry, end up being two fascinating guides to the religious questions, if not to the religious answers. Becker, in particular, is captivated by Kierkegaard, perhaps more deeply than by Freud, and the former's image of the Knight of Faith. With the help of such guides, then, and drawing on the experience of our indivdidual traditions, where they are still viable, we seek to tell our stories to others. The Exodus experience of ancient Israel, for example; or the Resurrection experience of the early Church.

As we tell our stories, moreover, we also tell how living in terms of these stories -- living in light of the Absurd, inspired by Divine Madness, building an Ark on the top of a mountain -- sets us free from the necessity of investing horrendus engergies in order to deny death. By Grace, then, we find ourselves freed to care about others, particularly those who are excluded from the commonwealth of God's good earth. And we invite others to join with us in finding the time to care in these ways. Because it's free for the asking! You don't have to be on some expensive track to do it. You can do it anywhere, because you are held, you are supported by, you are rooted in the Ground of your Being.

Of course, as we tell our stories and as we seek to exercise our new found freedom to care for each other and to seek peace and practice justice in behalf of others, we on occasion get carried away with it all. Now and again, you will see us dancing in the streets, if you happen to drive by. And you will hear us crying out to you -- sometimes with what might sound like an annoying persistence -- that there is a rainbow up there, over your head, in the midst of all those dark clouds.

As I have been thus talking about our ministry at Wellesley this past year, I have been saying We. That is intentional, but it also requires some explanation.

Our activities in the Chaplaincy are divided into three areas: times for reflection, times for service, and times for community. We sponsor many events that allow people, we hope, to think about ultimate issues of life and death, however immediately personal or political they may be, whether it be discussions of death, dying, and bereavement or the arms race. We also sponsor many activities that allow people, we hope, to experience the new freedom of actively helping others, both individually and socially. But given the Protean character of this era, our rampant identity diffusion, the profound sense of people today that they are going nowhere and that they are no one, we naturally channel many of our energies into the process [illegible] for encouragement,

creating more and more protected and lonely places for specialization, more and more grindingcourses like the pre-med track, producing more and more workaholics, who one day will burn out or kill themselves with over work or join with other hopeless souls and push the button of nuclear Armagedon that will kill us all. Or we can try to begin to face up to death, before it is too late: to the death of the Liberal Arts Tradition as we have known it, to the death of the "college community" as we have known it, and to the threats of death posed to each of us, not only by nuclear war and Love Canals, but internally by the ticking time bomb of our own mortality.

That, in turn, must mean, as the insights of Lifton and Becker would seem to suggest, and as I believe, that the College as a whole will have to face up to the challenge of religion once again. Do we want to have a religious life on campus or not? Do we want our Chapel to be a living community center, where we can cultivate the particular foundations and celebrate the times of attained unity of spirit, or do we want it to be a pretty mausoleum to a dead god, an edifice that constantly reminds us how great things used to be? Are we going to be willing to explore the possibility of teaching religion and ethics to all our students in a way that speaks to their Protean character? Sophomore Bible will not do, surely, but who will care enough to work to establish some course of studies that helps students to learn that they are creatures of faith as well as objects of the marketplace? Are we going to try to organize our institutional life, furthermore, in a way that truly allows time for reflection, time for service, and time for religious community? Or are we always going to be too busy doing other things(what things?). More particularly, are we going to allow ourselves the time the explore our various religious roots, wherein our identity as human beings may well lie hidden, wherein we may find new vitalities to allow us to face the future? Good religion, like good sex, takes time. Are we going to continue to be 'too busy,' — for either one, for that matter? Will we continue to dabble, at the most, with Protean sophistication, in many "lifestyle options," without commiting ourselves to the exploration of any single one, ending up with little or no existential depth and authenticity?

Brother Noah, I have heard the thunder. I have seen the rainbow. I know that your God commands the floods, yet is full of mercy. I pray that you might intercede for us now, so we might have time and be granted the wisdom we need to decide. For I know that your God places life and death before us, blessing and curse, but that it is we who must choose. Help us to decide, and to decide