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Simple Connections: A response given on occasion of being named Elon's Distinguished University Professor in 2006

Let me begin with thanks—to Mike Sanford for the kind introduction; to Connie Book and the nominating committee, President Lambert and the Board of Trustees for the honor given to me tonight. I'm grateful and greatly complimented. I was at a meeting several weekends ago where the person who was being honored said that he wouldn't have voted for himself if he had been on the nominating committee. I feel the same way. Nevertheless, I am genuinely honored by the good people who are responsible for this investiture and by you, my colleagues, who have given up your evening in a very busy time of year—and an election night at that.

I must thank my wonderful family too, without whom I would not be here. In addition to Diane, I hope you get a chance to meet my daughter Hannah and my sons Benjamin and John. Child number three, Nathan, is in Chile, and number four is Joseph, my handicapped son, who from his infancy has not been able to share in the ordinary activities that we with normal lives take for granted. My guess is that Joseph's influence on my view of the world has been as strong as that of any other person's. You can imagine how such a child would become the focus of one's being. I think, most of all, he has brought me to a deep attachment to people who, for many different reasons, have been excluded from the mainstream and denied the fulfillment that life brings to the more fortunate of us.

I appreciate Elon's faith in me and its demands that I grow beyond what I was when I came here. Further, the University has grown beyond its old self too. It is a much better place now than it has ever been. In the remarks that they gave at their own investitures, two Elon giants, John Sullivan and Tom Henricks, both spoke wisely of the virtues of Elon as an institution. My thoughts are similar to theirs.

You, the faculty, administration, and staff, are much better scholars and professionals than earlier generations have been. You have created a distinctive institution with arts and sciences at its core, guided by a service ethic in the best traditions of a classical education from Socrates to Milton to our own day. You are better in personal commitment to excellence, to your fellow humans, and, I also believe, better in creation of community at Elon itself. There were good old days at Elon but none better than today.

Let's stop here a moment and look at what I have already said. I have thanked everyone, referred to my family, to Elon the institution, to my predecessors, expressed humility—all the things you knew you would hear when you agreed to come tonight. You have heard the equivalent of these opening words many times before. These remarks, in fact my whole talk, even the ceremony itself, are what a linguist might call "phatic," that

is, words and actions whose purpose is to establish social links rather than to convey information. When we say to someone, “How are you?” we don’t want a medical report. We simply want to say, “Here I am, there you are. I’m friendly and well disposed. Hope you are too.” I would guess that the greater part of each day is spent in phaticism of one sort or another. In fact, the effort to strip ourselves of this linking language, to get right to the point of our business, makes us seem humorless grouches, or at least uninteresting.

In the bonds that we create between each other as individuals, in our reaching out to another person because she or he is a feeling being, a worthy being, we affirm our own humanity and set a basic and indispensable example for the institutions in which we must exist. That is why phatic conversation and ceremonies like ours tonight are so important. It is on occasions like this that our own community, Elon University, establishes bonds among us all, as members of the institution and as celebrating individuals as well.

We laugh at the amount of food consumed at Elon’s lunches, picnics, and college coffees, but meals, like festivities, dances, and weddings, are structures of sharing among empathetic people. They carry few facts, and indeed all our lunches may actually interfere with the transmission of information, but they are the human bonds that underlie, that form the prior necessity for, our success as an institution.

Let me tell you two stories about my younger days, their point being to present myself as a human in addition to my role tonight as an institutional symbol and also to present my message in particular form, that is in terms of an individual narrative rather than just in the general and conceptual terms that I have been using so far.

Although I lived in a small city as a child, I spent my summers and many weekends as well on the farms in eastern Virginia where my parents had grown up. On summer nights my father would drive down the dirt road to the local country store to sit on its wooden porch and talk with the friends of his youth. At times he would take me, a skinny little boy with big ears, and sit me down on the end of the long planks that made up the porch floor. There in the enveloping humidity of a Southern summer night, in the dim oasis of light cast by a bug-speckled bulb, surrounded by the dark woods and the wall of sound made by strident katydids, I watched the men talk about crops and rain and old people they had known.

No important information passed among these men. My father’s city life meant little to these farm hands. What information was he to give them—or they to him? And sitting on the periphery of the porch, on the floorboards with feet dangling over the side just like me, would be a black man, maybe two. This was the South in the 1940s. What business was to be passed between those two races on the porch of a country store? Even politics would have been impossible; only whites could vote. Custom allowed them to say little to each other. Why, then, were they there? Why was my father, or any of the others, there?

There was no reason, other than their desire to be there, no reason other than the human need for contact. There were no constraints on these men to sit on that porch, hemmed in by the night and the impenetrable chorus of insects. Black and white separated

by rigid social codes, rural and urban, educated and illiterate, found in that little oasis of humanity the bonds that their very beings needed. They were there not because they had anything to say. They were there because they were human and the most important things humans can do are to establish contact.

The importance of that instinctive connection, what I am calling phatic, is especially clear when one considers the daytime relationships among these men. When the Southerners of my youth thought of alien cultures in terms of content and issues, the result was a creation of barriers. As a kid, I learned about the differences between Southerners and Yankees, I felt the encroachment of the commercial North on our rural values, I became part of the Southern reaction to the modern world that still exists. And then I went off from my rural eastern Virginia roots to, of all places, Cambridge, Massachusetts, where of course I reacted negatively, as most Southerners had reacted in similar situations since the Nullification Act of 1832.

My first two years there were spent regretting the strange people I passed on the crowded streets of Cambridge, until finally in the spring of my third year, one beautiful Sunday afternoon in April, I sat looking out on the Charles River from my room in Winthrop House. It was 1967 and there on the bank of the Charles was a be-in, one of those outrageous hippy happenings. Students and transients from who knows where thronged together giving each other bananas and flowers—and drugs. This had never happened back home in Virginia. And you can imagine my reaction. But maybe it was the fact that I had just passed my oral exams, or the fact that the long New England winter was giving way to the warmth of spring, but something happened to me as I watched. I had an epiphany; the scales fell from my eyes just as certainly as they fell from Saul's on the road to Damascus. I saw with great clarity that I was a cause of my own problems, that both the South and I had been wrong to define ourselves by negative reactions rather than by positive actions and creativeness.

I walked out from my room, out to the banks of the Charles, and joined the be-in, suddenly happy to be part of a ridiculous crowd that had no reason for its actions other than an affirmation of human connectedness, no reason other than celebration of common humanity. I think that deep down my father's instinctive understanding of human relationships on those summer nights planted the seed of humanity in me. He of course could not have handled a be-in, but he did handle its equivalent, what was possible for him in his day and time.

And I hope that we all can handle it in our own way, in our own day and time, that we can come to understand the value of pure connectedness, entirely apart from the business of life, that we can come to celebrate the joy and the transcending importance of simple human connections. And that of course is what Elon is doing tonight. And what you have done by taking time out from the busyness of your lives to share this evening with me and with each other.