

3. Dirt

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SCHOELLKOPF STADIUM

Graduating students, something is missing at this ceremony. Something important.

You are seated on an athletic field. It is a fine athletic field. But it is missing something that, I would submit, is essential to a quality education, essential to a life well lived.

I am not speaking about books—one would not really expect to see them on an athletic field. Rather, I am speaking about dirt.

Schoellkopf Field had dirt from its opening in 1915 until 1971, when the grass was replaced with PolyTurf, which had no need for dirt. In 1979, the PolyTurf gave way to AstroTurf. In 1988, the AstroTurf was in turn replaced with All-Pro Turf. And in 1999, the All-Pro Turf was replaced with the AstroTurf that is used today. It's outstanding AstroTurf and it is a great field. But the dirt is missing.

Fortunately for your education, Cornell has taken great care to preserve a copious supply of dirt outside the stadium. In the quadrangles. On North Campus. And especially on Libe Slope.

You can't escape the dirt of Cornell. If you tried to avoid it by, for example, spending all your time within the confines of Schoellkopf, you would never get a degree. As a student, you must get dirty, and you must learn to cope with that fact.

You get dirty, but not so dirty that your essential core is altered. And you wash. And you are sufficiently proficient at this cycle of getting dirty and then cleaning up that your friends and family still love you.

Of course, dirt can be metaphorical as well as literal. Dirt can represent evil. It can represent that which is morally reprehensible. And one of the challenges of life in the world of action is the challenge of ensuring that our essential moral cores are not contaminated.

Much great literature has been written about this challenge. I would like to take a few minutes this morning to discuss two examples from that literature.

The first text is the play *Les Mains Sales*, or *Dirty Hands*, by Jean-Paul Sartre.

In *Les Mains Sales* a man named Hoederer (H-O-E-D-E-R-E-R) lives in a fictional place called Illyria (I-L-L-Y-R-I-A) at the end of the Second World War. Hoederer is the leader of the local communist party, and he wants to cut a deal with right-wing rivals to consolidate power. Leaders of a different faction of the party disapprove of this tactic and dispatch a young party member named Hugo to kill him.

But instead of killing Hoederer, Hugo initially has an argument with him. Hugo charges that Hoederer's plan is bad because, to pull it off, Hoederer will have to do something that is wrong—he will have to lie to his comrades.

Hoederer counters that the lie he must tell is a noble lie, one that might save 100,000 lives. He asserts that in the real world people must sometimes compromise some principles in order to promote others. And he criticizes Hugo for his dangerous naïveté.

Hoederer says: “How you cling to your purity, young man! How afraid you are to soil your hands! All right, stay pure! What good will it do? Purity is an idea for a yogi or a monk. You intellectuals and bourgeois anarchists use it as a pretext for doing nothing. To do nothing, to remain motionless, arms at your sides, wearing kid gloves. Well, I have dirty hands. Right in to the elbows. You don't love men, Hugo. You love only principles. Your purity resembles death. You don't want to change the world, you want to blow it up.”

Hoederer's argument is seductive. He makes Hugo sound prissy, fastidious, and self-indulgent. This is especially true because the ethical principle Hugo is emphasizing—the importance of truth-telling—feels insubstantial when balanced against 100,000 human lives.

But in the real world, the moral calculus is often far more challenging than a simple balance of 100,000 lives against one lie. And during your time at Cornell our newspapers have been filled with the sad tales of people who got their hands dirty in the service of what they believed to be a noble cause and then were unable to wash up afterwards. For some, the cause was an employer's balance sheet. For others, the cause was preparing an enemy prisoner for interrogation.

How will you ensure that you do not wake up one morning and find that your soul has been polluted by choices you made in response to the crushing demands of life?

It will not, I submit, be by adopting the posture of Hugo, avoiding the dirt of consequentialist balancing, remaining safely in a metaphorical Schoellkopf Field. You will have to step out onto Libe Slope. You will have to struggle with the moral costs and benefits of your activities, worrying both about the activities themselves and also about the consequences of having them imitated by others.

And let me make a prediction. I believe that, over the course of the next few years, most of you will, at least once, choose to get dirty by relaxing a moral guideline that you ordinarily endorse. You will do so in order to promote what you consider to be a greater moral good. All I ask of you is that, if you do so, you think of Cornell on a rainy day. The Slope can be slippery. And recognize that, for some kinds of dirt, the effects on your soul can be cumulative.

The challenges presented in *Les Mains Sales* take on even greater complexity in the novel *Cat's Cradle*, by Kurt Vonnegut, a former columnist and managing editor of the *Cornell Daily Sun*.

In *Cat's Cradle* a man named Hoenikker (H-O-E-N-I-K-K-E-R) lives in a fictional place called Ilium (I-L-I-U-M) at the end of the Second World War. Hoenikker invents a new crystalline form of water. All of us know the crystalline form of water that melts at 32 degrees Fahrenheit—what we call ice.

Hoennikker calls that crystalline form Ice-1, and he calls his own invention Ice-9.

The Ice-9 water crystal has a different structure from Ice-1, and because it has a different structure it stays frozen all the way up to 114 degrees Fahrenheit. And it turns out that Ice-9 is a very natural form for water to take—if even the smallest sample of Ice-9 makes contact with liquid water at a temperature of less than 114 degrees, the water freezes into Ice-9.

Hoennikker makes a tiny sample of Ice-9 and puts it into a little bottle. He tells his three children about it and then he dies. The children divide the sample into three little slivers. And the book relates what happens to those three slivers after the children have all made their way to a Caribbean island called San Lorenzo.

The critical moment in the book comes when San Lorenzo's dictator commits suicide by putting one of the slivers of Ice-9 into his mouth. His entire body instantly freezes. The body then falls into the ocean, and all the oceans of the world instantly turn to Ice-9.

What is the moral significance of the way Ice-9 freezes the oceans? Ice-9 provides a useful metaphor for a popular but, I believe, troublesome form of moral argument.

In *Les Mains Sales*, the question was one of first-order contamination. It was a question about how our own actions, our own dirt, might contaminate our own souls.

But in the world you are about to enter you will also encounter questions of second-order contamination. Questions about what will happen if you make contact with someone who has acted badly in dealings that did not involve you. Questions about whether even the slightest contact might transmit the dirt of their actions, their choices, so that your soul becomes contaminated.

I will refer to these questions as questions of Ice-9 contamination.

Obviously some forms of contact do transmit one person's moral dirt to another, for example where the second person explicitly endorses the activity that produced the dirt in question. Or where the contact has the consequence of enabling the ongoing production of additional new dirt.

But Ice-9 contamination arguments of this form revolve around other, more limited forms of contact, forms that do not endorse or enable the underlying activity. They take the simple form, "Don't have anything to do with X because X is bad and if you engage X you will elevate X and debase yourself, X's name will be legitimated, and yours will be sullied."

Ice-9 contamination arguments sound in the emotional domain of disgust. In his book *The Anatomy of Disgust*, social historian William Miller observes, "Disgust underpins the sense of despair that impurity and evil are contagious, endure, and take everything down with them."

My primary message this morning is that you should be very wary of Ice-9 contamination arguments and the sense of despair that is implicitly associated with them. Let me stipulate that there is a special satisfaction one can derive from using them as a reason to withdraw from contact with the world. It is the satisfaction that follows from feeling a certain kind of moral superiority. But I would argue that this satisfaction carries a very heavy price. Yielding to Ice-9 contamination arguments will often, perhaps usually, lead us to miss opportunities to accomplish genuine good in the world through serious engagement.

Permit me to illustrate this point through two contrasting examples.

First, let me return to Jean-Paul Sartre. In 1965, Sartre was supposed to visit Cornell, to deliver the Messenger Lecture on the occasion of our centennial. The title was to be *Morality and History*. And, according to the scholars Stone and Bowman, Sartre's notes reveal that he would have talked about the possibility of individuals transcending the seeming constraints of their social circumstances, inventing new courses of action to achieve an ethical goal that they honestly believe they must attain.

But Sartre did not come. Three weeks before he was scheduled to arrive, he cancelled his lecture with the following cable: “The politics of violence practiced in Vietnam by the U.S. government with the approval of the majority of the American people constitutes for me a major obstacle to my coming to the U.S. Deeply regret being obliged to break the commitment made. Beg you to believe in my high esteem for Cornell.”

Sartre made an error. He succumbed to an Ice-9 contamination argument that he should have rejected. He preserved a sense of his own purity by not putting his feet into the dirt of a nation he thought of as militarist. But in doing so he forwent the opportunity to speak, to engage, to reason—about morality and history, even about the war he opposed. In a circumstance that called for direct engagement and moral argument about important issues, Sartre chose disengagement to protect himself from the taint of contact.

In contrast, consider the example of the Bridging the Rift Center, a joint venture among the nations of Jordan and Israel, Cornell University, and Stanford University. Through the center, graduate students in the life sciences from Jordan and Israel will come to Cornell and Stanford for training and will then work together in the Middle East to build a Library of Life, a network of databases that will include genetic and other information about each of the known species of life in the region and, ultimately, the world.

Within Jordan and Israel, it is easy to find Ice-9 contamination arguments for why each country should not enter into such a joint project with the other. Each country has reasons to believe that the other has “dirt” on its hands.

But the leadership of each country has properly rejected such arguments. Israel and Jordan are taking this project as an opportunity that is important and beneficial on its own terms. And they believe that there are additional benefits that flow from engaging in a positive way with a former enemy.

What will it take for you to resist the too-ready acceptance of Ice-9 contamination arguments? You will need confidence

in your ability to engage respectfully with others who have different perspectives or values from your own, without being required to endorse every aspect of that person, without being driven to somehow lose your own soul. You will need to be able to work with someone on one thing while finding appropriate ways to express your disagreements about something else.

There is one large implication of these two related examples that I have addressed. In the second part of my address, I urged you to reject Ice-9 contamination arguments, even though that is often quite difficult, which means I urged you to spend more time, not less, in the presence of dirt. And in the first part of my address I urged you to recognize that there are no simple solutions to the problems of how to manage difficult situations, and to recognize that the stakes can be very high.

I am asking you to make life difficult for yourself. It will sometimes take courage to reject the call for contented isolation and self-protection, and I am urging you to be brave. I am telling you to take some chances, knowing that they will sometimes go awry.

I want you to do so because our world needs more engagement and not less, more opportunities for discussion and not fewer. It needs more commitment to strive for common ground and shared progress across boundaries of mistrust and suspicion that can sometimes be framed in moral terms. In his comments yesterday morning, President Clinton spoke of the global interdependence that characterizes the twenty-first century. That interdependence will mean that your generation of leaders will be expected, more than ever before in history, to engage effectively with people who see things differently from the way you do.

Your time at Cornell has been an opportunity for you to experience the many moral challenges of dirt. You have had many occasions to engage the issues of first-order contamination, as you chose your courses of action and took responsibility for the choices you made. And you have had many occasions to consider the special issues of second-order contamination as you

reached out to engage others without needing first to verify their purity. You have seen how the exercise of engaging, disagreeing, and explaining your disagreement in a respectful way can strengthen your moral fiber rather than weaken it. You could not be better prepared for the challenges that await you after you leave Schoellkopf today.

So, in support of that point, let me offer one final example from *Cat's Cradle*. Towards the middle of the book, before all has turned to Ice-9, a couple named the Crosbys come to a hotel on San Lorenzo. They find themselves in an exasperating conversation with the owner, Mr. Castle. They do not engage well. Mr. Crosby says something intemperate. Mr. Castle responds in kind. Conversation breaks down. The Crosbys storm out.

Mr. Castle turns to the narrator and says, "I don't seem to be as good with guests as I might, do I?"

And the narrator responds, "I knew some people in the Hotel School at Cornell, and I can't help feeling they would have treated the Crosbys somewhat differently."

New graduates of Cornell University, you are about to embark on lives of service to a society that desperately needs you. As you go, let me conclude by sharing a few hopes that we, your teachers, hold for you:

May you enjoy the special pleasures of craft—the private satisfaction of doing a task as well as it can be done.

May you enjoy the special pleasures of profession—the added satisfaction of knowing that your efforts promote a larger public good.

May you be blessed with good luck and also with the wisdom to appreciate when you have been lucky rather than skillful.

May you find ways to help others under circumstances where they cannot possibly know that you have done so.

May you be patient, and gentle, and tolerant, without becoming smug, self-satisfied, and arrogant.

May you never be afraid to take the risk of getting dirty, but may you always be sufficiently sure-footed that you avoid the abyss of contamination.

May you know enough bad weather that you never take sunshine for granted, and enough good weather that your faith in the coming of spring is never shaken.

May you always be able to confess ignorance, doubt, vulnerability, and uncertainty.

May you frequently travel beyond the places that are comfortable and familiar, the better to appreciate the miraculous diversity of life.

And may your steps lead you often back to Ithaca. Back to East Hill. For you will always be Cornellians. And we will always be happy to welcome you home.

Congratulations.