

THE DAILY REPUBLIC

MITCHELL, SOUTH DAKOTA

Tribute to Plankinton's Class of 2003

Saturday, May 31, 2003

By Robert Duffett, DWU president

The following speech was delivered by DWU President Robert Duffett during a recent awards ceremony at Plankinton School.

Tonight we experience a paradox. We gather to celebrate the scores of honors and awards this class, the Class of 2003 of Plankinton High School, has accumulated. Some of you will need a box to carry home all of your awards. Yet earlier today, the funeral for Jeremy Thompson, a member of your class, was in this same gym.

And this beautiful school replaces the former one, destroyed by a conflagration that killed two people. By definition, a paradox is two contradictory ideas, statements, or events that cannot logically be linked together. Tonight we celebrate, yet in the shadow and presence of death and suffering.

Throughout the centuries, philosophers have tried to understand suffering, death and pain in light of the presence of what they call either moral or natural evil. Moral evil is the purposeful effort to destroy life. Adolf Hitler and Saddam Hussein's sadistic leadership are classic examples of moral evil. Natural evil is the destruction of life due to car accidents and exploding buildings. One of the great mysteries of life is, "Why do terrible things happen to decent people?"

The Plankinton Class of 2003 does not need a philosophic lecture on natural evil. You have too often lived with it. But the question looming large tonight is, "How do you go on with your lives?"

Let me tell you a story. In Greek and Egyptian mythology there was a striking bird called the Phoenix. It was as majestic as an eagle, and more beautiful and colorful than a peacock or a South Dakota ring-necked pheasant. Its feather garland was like the rainbow - orange, purple, gold, scarlet and royal blue. According to legend there was only one Phoenix in the whole world. Toward the end of a long life the Phoenix died by falling into a fiery furnace. Yet, in the midst of the flames of death, another Phoenix emerged. That Phoenix was young, renewed, more beautiful and stronger than the former Phoenix.

I wish I could somehow turn back time and alter the course of events that led to the explosion and to Jeremy's tragic car accident. I simply can't. These events have thrust you, as a class and community, into the flames of death, suffering, and natural evil. The legend of the Phoenix is a paradox from antiquity. You have lived one. But, like the Phoenix of old, there are signs of new life, new birth, and the climb from the fire to a future of hope.

These awards - athletic, artistic, and academic - are commanding confirmation that life will go on! The pain and evil you experienced are springboards to re-consecrating yourself to enduring values. And, like the Phoenix of old, you will become better, stronger and more compassionate people.

No matter how far you go from Plankinton, or what you do, I predict great success for each of you. Why? Because you have walked through the fires of suffering, hung together, and declared to yourself that evil will not win.