

**President's Fall  
Convocation Address**

**Principia College  
September 12, 1996**



I've given a great deal of thought to the matter of what to say today, especially since it's our first time together. After entertaining and rejecting a dozen ideas, I decided I'd try to perfect a couple of thoughts I've been fine tuning through a series of talks I've given here over the summer.

To be more precise, I've spent quite a few hours this summer reading and rereading and rereading Mrs. Morgan's *Education at the Principia* and Dean Leonard's *As the Sowing* – all in the hope that I could come up with a satisfactory answer to a question that has long interested me.

Here's the question: Why should I – why should any of us – be at Principia when there are exactly 3,203 other colleges and universities in the US we could have come to?

That may sound like a fairly obvious question and at one level it has a fairly obvious answer: because Principia is the only one of those 3,203 colleges dedicated to serving the Cause of Christian Science. If this were an exam and you gave that answer, you'd get an "A."

Nevertheless, I think there are deeper levels to that answer and that's what I've been plumbing all summer. I'm hardly the first to plumb them and I'm sure others have plumbed them more deeply. But since I'm the chief plumber for the moment, let me tell you what I've come up with.

I begin with a simple proposition: I honestly believe that Principia is the most important institution of higher learning in the country.

This is not necessarily a proposition I'd try to defend outside this auditorium. Nor, based on the criteria the rest of the world use, would I expect to see Principia listed along with Harvard and Yale in *US News and World Report's* annual ranking of

colleges.

[I wrote this last statement on Thursday. On Friday someone handed me an advance copy of the *US News and World Report* that hit the newsstands this week and there was Principia, listed as the fourth best liberal arts college in the Midwest. That's good news, and well deserved.]

*US News* or no *US News*, my proposition that Principia is the most important college stands, not only because of what Principia has achieved but because of what Principia has the potential to achieve – or to put it another way, what Principia is working toward. And what Principia is working toward ought to be a source of the greatest pride to everyone in this room.

There are all sorts of ways to measure what Principia is working toward, but three in particular have engaged me this summer. Let me see if I can explain some conclusions I've come to – first, with respect to academics, second, with respect to our global vision, and third with respect to our commitment to Christian Science.

### ***(1) ACADEMICS***

I heard an interesting talk last spring by a woman named Ruth Simmons. She's the new president of my wife's alma mater, Smith College, in Massachusetts, and she made an interesting point.

She said, "People ask me all the time what the 21st century will look like." She said: "I tell them I have no idea what the 21st century will look like. But I know for sure that the best possible way to prepare for it will be with a liberal arts education."

Well, I don't know what the 21st century will look like either but I share her conviction that a solid, rigorous liberal arts education will provide the tools needed to survive in it. But I think I know

something else: I think I know exactly what it will take to be a rock-solid, practicing Christian Scientist in the 21st century. And not surprisingly, it's what it has taken to be a rock solid, practicing Christian Scientist in the 20th century.

Here's an interesting coincidence between Christian Science and academics:

There's one thing we all have in common here: we're all scientists. A few of us are natural scientists but all of us are Christian Scientists.

Now, as scientists we have to operate in a particular way. We have to be clear, precise, analytical thinkers. Peruse Mrs. Eddy's writings and you'll see that she talks over and over about the need for the logical, rational, systematic thinking that is essential to the scientific method.

Look at what she says about Christian Science treatment. She says we have to discern the specific errors that need to be handled in any case and to array specific spiritual counter-facts against them. Next time you read her allegorical trial at the end of the chapter on "Christian Science Practice," notice the razor-sharp, pinpoint arguments used by the counsel for the defense, Christian Science.

Mrs. Eddy makes it pretty clear that there's no room in the Science of Christianity for soft or vague thinking. We have to be precise thinkers. We have to be conceptual thinkers. And here's the reason why: because precise, conceptual thinking is indispensable to prayer and because prayer is indispensable to human salvation.

And we have to be able to express this Science, orally and in writing, with equal precision. Reading from the platform, writing for the periodicals, delivering clear Christian Science testimonies or even public Christian Science lectures – we have to have the skill to do all of these if the Christian Science movement

is going to prosper and, incidentally, if the world is going to survive.

Now, here's the interesting thing that occurred to me this summer: If we do everything possible to develop the skills that we need in order to be excellent Christian Scientists, we'll be excellent at virtually everything else we do. If we're great thinkers, – rigorous, analytical, and precise – we can be great architects, great biologists, great lawyers, and great teachers. It's a matter of putting Christian Science first.

If – as teachers and students – we use every academic course at Principia as a vehicle to develop the scientific habits of thought and expression that we need in order to be powerfully effective Christian Scientists, then the academics at Principia will be as good as the academics at any college in the country.

Here is the point: If we place first what Mrs. Morgan says we should place first – namely, serving the Cause of Christian Science – we will catapult Principia into the top ranks of academic excellence, and that's exactly where the only college dedicated to serving the Cause of Christian Science should be.

## ***(2) GLOBAL VISION***

I said there were three things that struck me about Principia this summer. Here's the second: it's what we are doing – and what more we can do – to help all of us become the “world citizens” that Mrs. Morgan hoped we would become.

I think for a tiny school in Illinois, Principia has made a remarkable number of connections to the world: the School of Government/School of Nations; our annual Public Affairs Conferences; our abroad programs; through our international students.

This year, we'll add to this list. I'm happy to announce what I guess most of you already know: that through the generosity of a friend of Principia each of you, starting tomorrow, will be getting a free one-year subscription to *The Christian Science Monitor*. The *Monitor* will be in your mailbox every day.

Let me say a word about the *Monitor*. The paper was part of Mrs. Eddy's complete demonstration of the idea of church. As one legendary *Monitor* correspondent put it half a century ago, the *Monitor's* purpose is to provide two things that Christian Scientists "particularly need and can intelligently use: a discerning knowledge of human progress and a discerning knowledge of human needs." That's an important point to bear in mind.

Now, I urge you not to be daunted by having to face a newspaper every day. Here are a few tips on how to handle it:

First of all, don't feel that you have to read the entire paper from cover to cover. Just get in the habit of at least skimming the front page and leafing through the rest of it. Look at the headlines, get a sense of the contents, and that alone will give you a pretty good idea of what's going on in the world each day.

Meanwhile, try to pick out one or two articles that pique your interest. Keep an eye out for the occasional article that analyzes – rather than just reports – the news. And once a day force yourself to read at least one article about something you've never read about before. You'll be surprised at how quickly you'll broaden your sense of the world, and you can do all of this in just a few minutes each day.

Now, I know the arguments against doing this. I saw an article in the *Washington Post* recently that showed

that interest in public affairs on the part of college freshmen has sunk to its lowest level in decades. The reason interested me: college students think there's nothing an individual can do to influence national or international events.

Well, here's where Principia comes in and here's why Principia is so crucially important. Beyond what any of you might choose to do with your careers, you can do an amazing amount for the world simply by being alert, practicing Christian Scientists.

This is a whole other speech but here's the kind of thing I'm talking about:

Every time you read about conflict in the Middle East or Africa or South Asia, just take a minute to know that, in reality, man is governed only by the impulse of Love – and that will have a healing effect.

Every time you read about poverty or want or the possible imminent bankruptcy of the Social Security system, know that Soul has infinite resources with which to meet human needs – and somehow, some way, that will have a healing effect.

Now, I know what you're thinking. You're thinking that such thoughts are mere atoms of dust thrown into the gale-force winds of world affairs. If that IS what you're thinking, then consider something Mrs. Eddy told one of her classes in Boston a century ago.

It's an amazing statement. She said: "We, today, in this class-room, are enough to convert the whole world if we are of one Mind; for then the whole world will feel the influence of this Mind..." (*Miscellaneous Writings* by Mary Baker Eddy, p. 279:27).

That statement was made to a class of Christian Scientists that numbered exactly 65. I think it hints at the possibilities but also at why Principia – which

exists to teach us how to think and pray about the world – is so utterly crucial to the future of the world.

I've been out there. I've seen hopelessness etched on the faces of so many people living in the developing world, where three-fourths of humanity now lives. I've watched governments founder and extremist movements prosper because of social, political, and environmental problems that are at the very limit of solvability by human means.

That's why each one of you in this room is so extremely important. And that's why the *Monitor* is so important: to give you a basis on which to think and pray about a world that so badly needs you.

Let me mention a few other events we have scheduled this year that will help us expand our global vision:

1. On the first Friday of winter term, we'll host four senior *Christian Science Monitor* correspondents who have reported from all over the world to talk about national and international affairs.
2. On Monday, October 14th, we'll be having what I think is a first for Principia: a debate here on campus between the Republican and Democrat running for the House seat in this Congressional district.
3. We also have lines out to a couple of world-class speakers. We'll make announcements about this later in the year.
4. And don't forget our flagship event: our annual Public Affairs Conference this spring.

I hope I'll see every one of you at these events. They're important to our mission at Principia and, I think, to you individually.

### ***(3) COMMITMENT TO CHRISTIAN SCIENCE***

There's one other reason why Principia is important, and I'll have to ask you to shift gears a bit for this one.

I want to tell you about the experience of a Christian Scientist who had a significant healing nearly half a century ago. Some of you here will know the story of Peter Henniker-Heaton. He was afflicted with a paralytic condition that, after ten years, was completely healed.

I read the testimony years ago, probably when I was about your age. I re-read it for the first time just a few months ago and noticed something I hadn't seen before that makes my last point about why we're at Principia.

Henniker-Heaton was so immobilized that he literally couldn't move. During the air raids – this was in London during World War II – his wife had to carry him to a basement shelter like a sack of potatoes. When she went off to work, she would prop up a copy of *Science and Health* on a stand next to his bed, and every day he studied two new pages. It's said he memorized the whole book.

I think of Peter Henniker-Heaton and I think of the temptation, that must have been overwhelming, to be discouraged; to doubt his ability to practice Christian Science; to doubt Christian Science itself. And yet, through ten years he didn't succumb. He didn't break the First Commandment by giving power to any other god. He refused to believe the testimony of the senses. He always trusted that his prayers would be answered. In short, he was faithful.

Here was a man who was twisted and bent physically and, to human sense, not making an inch of progress towards a healing.

And yet – and this is what I noticed when I read the testimony the second time – every night before he went to sleep he recited this remarkable little poem:

“At every eve, I say, noting my life in bliss,  
That I have known no day in all my life like  
this.”

I submit to you that in this lonely room, where the clock ticked away the weeks and months and years, there was more courage, more strength, and more manhood demonstrated than on any hundred football fields.

Don't get me wrong, I like football. That's not the point. The point is that his courage and persistence were rewarded. He had a complete healing. Here's the other point. After a summer of research I'm convinced that the reason Principia is important comes down to this: that if Principia can do anything to help develop these qualities it will fulfill the highest expectations of its founder; make the most important contribution it could ever make to the Cause of Christian Science; give you the most important thing you could ever get in college – or in life; and verify my point that Principia is the most important institution of higher learning in the country.

Let me make another point. If you score a touchdown, win a science award, or give a stellar performance in a theatrical role, no one in this auditorium will be prouder than I will be. That said, bear in mind that your most important victories won't take place in public. They won't take place where people are on hand to applaud.

Your most important victories may take place in the Chapel Study Room, or maybe late at night in your dorm room, or maybe on a quiet walk along the bluffs, when, in that “quiet sanctuary of earnest

longings” that Mrs. Eddy talks about, you contend with error, affirm the Truth, and touch the hem of Christ’s garment.

Those are the moments that will be the best in your Principia experience. Those are the moments that will bring the greatest joy, the greatest sense of achievement, the most exalted moments of human existence. I can say with confidence that if, in that sweet, “secret place of the most High,” you touch the hem just once, you will never be the same.

There’s one other point we need to be clear about: the purpose of Christian Science is not to get through your next exam, to find the perfect boyfriend, the perfect wife, or the perfect car.

The purpose of our work together is to acquire those amazing qualities of devotion and fortitude that Peter Henniker-Heaton and so many thousands of other Christian Scientists down through the years have demonstrated. Finding the right mate and job and home will follow from that – but only as the consequence, not as the immediate object, of your prayers. It’s essential that we keep first things first. “...Seek ye first the kingdom of God, and his righteousness, and all these things shall be added unto you.”

I’m going to let Mrs. Eddy have the final word – or almost the final word:

She has a remarkable statement in *Miscellaneous Writings*. It’s addressed to “beloved children,” but she wasn’t taking about ten year-olds. “Beloved children,” she writes, “the world has need of you, – and more as children than as men and women: it needs your innocence, unselfishness, faithful affection, uncontaminated lives... What grander ambition is there than to maintain in yourselves what Jesus loved, and to know that your example, more than words, makes morals for mankind” (*Miscellaneous Writings*, p. 110:4).

What an extraordinary thing it is that each of us can place our lives entirely at the service of what elevates, what blesses, what makes for greatness. I hope you can remember that whether you're in the dorm, in the classroom, on the athletic field, in the Library, in the Pub, or off-campus, your life is helping to make morals for mankind – one way or the other.

Principia can't make morals for mankind. The Principian's Pledge can't make morals for mankind. OSL can't make morals for mankind. But you CAN make morals for mankind, just by what you are. It's an amazing responsibility, yes, but it's also an amazing opportunity.

My guess is that if we seize it, then maybe we will be able to say at the end of the year – noting our lives in bliss – that we have known no day, no quarter, no year in all our lives like this.

George Moffett  
College President

