

President's Fall Convocation Address

Principia College

September 11, 1997



Iwould like to share a few thoughts this afternoon about the event we will be commemorating this year — the centennial of Principia. And I would like to be clear about one thing right up front: There is nothing inherently important about a birthday. That said, reaching the century mark does provide an obvious occasion to take stock of what we are about.

By 1997 — which is to say, this year — the school that began with Mrs. Morgan's own two children has evolved into an institution that employs 650 people, that educates 1,200 students, and that manages scores of buildings scattered across nearly 3,000 acres of prime real estate in St. Louis, Missouri, and Elsah, Illinois. This is a great success story and it's one way to measure the progress of the past century. But I think there are other ways — I think Mrs. Morgan would have chosen other ways — that are far more important.

Centennial year or no centennial year, there's not a day that goes by that I don't ask myself whether there should be a Principia College. It may surprise you that I'm asking that question given that I'm the temporary occupant of the president's office. But it's a crucial question because it forces a constant evaluation of what we're about here and whether we're making — whether we're even capable of making — the particular contribution Mrs. Morgan expected us to make.

If we're not making that contribution, then I'm not sure we should be in business. If we are making that contribution, then I think we're arguably the most important institution of higher learning in the country, as you've probably heard me say before. In the end, I think we are making that contribution — to a degree, at least — and to the extent that we are, then I think we can indulge in a brief moment of centennial satisfaction.

The real issue here is exactly what contribution Mrs. Morgan expected Principia to make. Let me take a crack at the matter this way.

Mrs. Morgan's experiment in education was launched in 1897 and 1898. I've checked it out. These were incredibly interesting years.

In 1897 and 1898 William McKinley was President. The nation was just coming out of its worst depression yet. John Philip Sousa was writing "Stars and Stripes Forever." The first comic strip appeared. The Boston Marathon was first run. The first World Series was just half a decade off.

On a more serious note, the U.S. battleship *Maine* was blown up in Havana harbor — that was in 1898 — and it led to the war (the Spanish-American war) that first thrust the US onto a world stage where, within half a century, it would be playing an unexpected and totally dominant role.

Overseas, while Mrs. Morgan was founding Principia, the colonial powers were still busy carving up Africa and Asia. In Europe, they were engaged in the more dangerous game of forming alliance systems, fueling an arms race, and exploiting the volatile nationalisms of Central and Southern Europe that within 15 years would explode into global war and profoundly alter the course of world history.

All that is important enough, but there's still a deeper level of significance about the era in which Principia was founded. Let me describe three of the most crucial trends of the era that point to the most important reasons why Principia is so crucial.

Here's the first. Just as Mrs. Morgan was taking her first students, a whole series of nationalizing forces — railroads, the telegraph, the telephone, the advent of giant interstate corporations — were just beginning to overlay a society that was still, in

1897, predominantly local in orientation. When radio, movies, and mass advertising were added to the mix in the 1920s, something really fundamental changed in American society: The marketplace began to supercede the church and family as the primary source of American values. We haven't had a completely clear sense of moral direction since.

The second development took place in the realm of natural science. After the discovery of the X-ray in 1895 — that was just two years before Principia was founded — the foundation of what we call “classical” science began to crumble, and with it the confidence of centuries that there was such a thing as objective reality. With the discovery of the quantum by Max Planck in 1900 — just two years *after* Principia was founded — “modern” science was born, opening the door to vast technological wonders but leaving the once-fixed concepts of time and space and material structure almost entirely subjective and almost completely undefinable.

The third development was occurring in New England, where a controversial woman, then in her 70s, was consolidating a church based on a theology that she discovered that radically redefined reality. When Mary Baker Eddy proclaimed that matter was unreal and that all was the infinite manifestation of Mind, she virtually turned science on its head, though that fact is apparent even now — 100 years later — only to a tiny handful of people, a good many of whom, as it happens, are seated in this very auditorium.

Now here's the point: At the very time changes in society and science were totally breaking down old certainties, Christian Science was defining new certainties — the absolute Science of being that promised then, and promises now, to transform human history more fundamentally than it is ever been transformed before.

And right as all this was occurring, Mary Kimball Morgan was quietly laying the foundations of a school that could do something no other school could ever hope to do, and that was to bridge the crucial gap created by this convergence of events: on one side, the need to educate students in a clear understanding of science and society; on the other, to give them the tools to redeem science and society through their understanding of the reality demonstrated by Christ Jesus.

That's an extraordinary mandate. It hints at the extraordinary contribution — I'm choosing my words carefully here — the extraordinary contribution this tiny school on the bluffs of the Mississippi, and its companion campus in St. Louis, can make to a world that so urgently and so absolutely needs what we have to give.

That is what Principia is all about. Principia is unique because it is the only school that can respond to the intellectual confusion and uncertainty unleashed by the very developments that coincided with its founding. And it can do it with the scientific certainty of the final revelation contained in the Christian Science textbook, and based, of course, on the Bible.

One teacher of Christian Science, a contemporary of Mrs. Morgan's, remarked of Mrs. Morgan that it "it took a greater understanding of Christian Science to form a school like Principia than it did to raise the dead."

Mrs. Eddy recognized the significance of the Principia idea. One of the workers in her household wrote to Mrs. Morgan — in a letter published on the 50th anniversary of Principia — that Mrs. Eddy approved of the idea of the school: "That I not only approve [quoting Mrs. Eddy], but endorse it, and that she [Mrs. Morgan] has my blessing"

As for Mrs. Morgan herself, she was totally clear about the responsibility that came with being among the fortunate few who had the privilege of being exposed to the Christ-idea in education: “You who have caught a glimpse of the glory and power of right thinking have the responsibility of bearing a message of redemption and salvation to the world through righteous thinking — thought based on Principle” (*Education at The Principia*, p163).

Think of that the next time you pass a blind man on the street; the next time a friend comes to you in need of affection or comfort; the next time you read in *The Christian Science Monitor* about corruption in Washington or beleaguered people in poor nations struggling to survive. In the end, this is what a Principia education is about: It is about preparing you, as no other school could ever do, to meet the human need — and meeting it, to find the greatest possible sense of purpose and satisfaction and accomplishment in life, no matter what you decide to do professionally.

I hear people say sometimes that meeting the human need seems like a heavy obligation. I disagree. It is the greatest privilege. It is the lightest burden. It brings the richest reward.

“If I had the power to bring into your lives the richest possible blessing,” Mrs. Morgan told one group of students,” I would do it through helping you to lose sight of self-interest and self-centeredness, and to find your joy in love for God and man (*EAP*, p.175).

“Our [students] should make efficient citizens,” she said on another occasion. That’s an interesting phrase — “efficient citizens” — and she describes them as “men and women who will be called upon because of their nobility of character, their mental poise, their moral stamina, to fill positions of highest trust and responsibility” (*EAP*, p. 15). That is the remarkable

thing that is expected of you as Principia students. You would want it no other way.

I have a good friend, a Christian Scientist, who was a star baseball player in high school. He was the only player on the team who didn't drink. He was a young man secure enough in his own identity that he didn't need props. He mentioned to me recently that at his 25th high school reunion one of the other players on the team told him that he had never forgotten the quiet example he had set on the team. He said that all these years it had given him courage to resist alcohol and had enabled him, in turn, to help his own son deal with the issue in high school.

My friend had no idea that anyone was paying much attention to his moral stand back then — and yet, it blessed people in ways he hadn't even been aware of. I wonder how many lives each of you has touched with your own quiet example.

There's a point here. It's my final one. It's made by Mrs. Eddy in a passage I find myself referring to over and over and that defines what Principia is in business to impart. "...[T]he world has need of you...," Mrs. Eddy writes. It has need of "your innocence, unselfishness, faithful affection, uncontaminated lives." It has need, in short, of the quiet example you can set that, like my friend's, and in more than words, will literally "make morals for mankind" (*Miscellaneous Writings*, p. 110:15).

Mrs. Morgan reflected once that her school had "only just begun to touch the opportunities inherent in the work which it has set out to do. It has made a good beginning — a strong, sincere, sturdy beginning" (*EAP*, p. 218).

I'm inclined to think we're still just beginning to touch the opportunities — but what a remarkable path we're on. She once described Principia as a school "which shall glorify God as no other school ever has done" (*EAP*, p. 17). What other school

could warrant such a commendation? I confess that I stand in complete awe of it. Of what Principia has done. Of what Principia is doing. Of what Principia has yet to do. Of what the doing of it means to the human race. And of what the doing of it means to each of you — competence in the most practical of arts: the ability to touch and to heal the human heart.

And what reward the Bible promises to those who do: “...they that turn many to righteousness [shall be] as the stars, for ever and ever” (*Daniel 12:3*).

