Following Charlie Millard’s introduction and while Will was wheeled to the table where the microphone and his speech sat, the conversational hum rose in volume. When the audience saw Father Brooks, sitting to Will’s left, clearly readying himself to turn the pages for Will, the hum diminished. The speaker was seated in full view as the dais was raised a couple of feet above the floor. More than twelve hundred alumni and wives grew silent as Will launched into his talk, known by those who heard it, and later those who read it, as “The Speech.”

Let Yourself Be Loved

Thank you, Charlie (Millard), for that warm, occasionally scalding introduction. I knew Charlie was saving me for something truly treacherous when he steered me down Campion Hill and only pretended to let go. If you are asking yourself why Will Jenks was chosen to speak for the unspeakable Class of ’54, you are not alone in your indignation. I had to overcome intense moral scruples to take on this job. A wise and holy man once told me my vocation is simply to be, not to do. And since then I have religiously avoided doing anything, anywhere. But this must be doing because being doesn’t make you sweat.

The blame for this miscasting belongs chiefly to Bill Kane. It was Bill who persuaded me I have something to say. He persuaded me not with compelling logic but with the dark hint that the next ambassador from ’54 would be Mike Cooney. As it happened, it was Bill Kane who gave me the main idea for this homily. He noted that at some distant reunion the remnant of ’54 would probably all be in wheelchairs and would look to me for guidance. I do know something about the ethics and etiquette of wheelchairmanship. The subject though won’t become urgently relevant until sometime in the twenty-first century, and I have a previous engagement for that time. I’m going to be a stand-by contestant on “The Dating Game.” So, with your permission – or without it – I’ll deposit my thoughts in your memory banks now, for withdrawal later.

Let me begin by asking your forgiveness. I intend to depart from tradition and make no attempt to present my wisdom as an affirmation of the Ratio Studiorum. That has been the inviolate tradition at these banquets. Last year, Joe Kerwin, space crusader, spoke on “The Ratio Studiorum, an Anchor in Times of Weightlessness.” The year before, Joe Califano, the Savonarola of cigarettes, addressed the multitudes on “The Ratio Studiorum,
Ultimate Weapon in the Shoot-out with the Marlboro Man.” And five years ago, Fr. Brooks stood in this very spot and posed the question: “Can the Ratio Studiorum survive on a campus inundated by 1800 stereos?”

I beg leave to organize my thoughts around another axis. As you know, I wasn’t in school long enough to earn my Ratio Studiorum license. In fact, I wasn’t here long enough to earn Fr. Bean’s grudging permission to practice rhetoric in public – which brings us back to wondering why I’m speaking for ’54.

If my life is not an affirmation of that venerable academic principle, it is, I think, an affirmation of another side of the Holy Cross experience, of values imparted over more than four years to such distinctly off-campus places as Dana, Indiana, and Mundelein, Illinois. I may have had time only to chew the crust of Jesuit learning, but I’ve had better than half a lifetime to drink form the cup of Christian caring, drawn from the sacramental casks of the Holy Cross community. It would be useful to turn your eyes away from my scintillating smile and toward a source of its light. This smile is not so much an emanation of the Holy Cross spirit as it is a creation, a gift of that spirit, made present in the love of Holy Cross men and women. Celebrated graduates like Joe Kerwin and Joe Califano make the world aware – and us proud – of the College’s intellectual and moral influences in their lives. Will Jenks makes a more select audience aware – and most of us proud of Holy Cross’ kindness to the least of the brethren and its rejoicing in the small triumphs of the heart. I ask you to consider what Holy Cross has done for one of you.

How else could I begin but with the prodigious charity, the epic befriending of Fr. Pat Cummings? Reduced to stark numbers, his love was carried across the miles in more than 3,300 letters, over one million words. The Holy Cross letterhead on each of those letters could have been read as a label, describing both content and context, and it could have been read as an imprimatur, the Jesuit community’s blessing on those one million words and on our friendship. That blessing was made explicit in the rector’s approval of Fr. Pat’s four trips to Dana – approval granted despite the rector’s deep-seated dread that he was sending a fellow Jesuit to an Isaac Jogues Martyrdom at the hands of Indiana Indians. It was the spirit of Holy Cross that sustained our friendship for 18 years. Through all that time, Fr. Pat made Holy Cross a part of my present, and gave me a sense of belonging. He was mentor, friend, and grace to me. He was a man of God and of Holy Cross.
Father Pat was not my only link to the Holy Cross community. In the early years there were letters from Fr. Luke O’Connor, Doc McBrien, Commander Harmon, and Fr. Donaghy. Later, when I began writing class letters, the Alumni Office seized me in its sweaty embrace. I could drop names like Jim Healy, George Shea, Pat McCarthy, Jim Keenan, or Fr. George O’Brien, but those names mean something only to the members of their immediate families. At the very top of the organization chart – Fr. Miller, Fr. Brooks, Barbara Green – Holy Cross has been no less open-hearted, no less loving. What other college has leaders who care about the cares of an unmoneyed, unfamous, unpowaful ungraduate?

Then there is Fr. Hart. It would trigger a riot if I were to claim more than my fair share of that dear man’s inexhaustible love. So I will say only that he has clipped and mailed every word ever to reach print about Holy Cross – its everyday doings and its historic deeds. He has written letters, penned notes, scribbled comments in the margin, and amended greeting cards. And every word has been alive with humor, concern, compassion, and blessing. Here, too, the seal of Holy Cross has been affixed to Father’s good works. In support of his postal apostolate, a Harvard-sized endowment has been poured into the stamp drawer at the post office. But if the choice were confronted head-on – endowment of endearment – there is no question that Holy Cross would choose Fr. Hart and the wealth he is over a fat portfolio.

Holy Cross, of course, is more than those who serve it here on the hill. It is everyone who feels the pull of the bond, whether on the day of the miracle victory over Boston College, on the day a son or daughter begins a new generation of Holy Cross life, on the day the reunion with one Crusader over a hurried lunch or with the Silver Anniversary Class over a stately banquet, or on the day a postcard from the Alumni Office tells us we are one fewer and immeasurably less.

For most of us, Holy Cross is our classmates and friends. And from the first, these men of ’54 tugged at the bond and made it fast. There were cards, letters, mementos, and, at that first Christmas, a huge wad of money, extorted from the Sophomore corridors. Reluctant donors will be pleased to know, somewhat tardily, that the money was spent on our first TV. So instead of pouring over the ghostly metaphysical notions of Aristotle, Aquinas, and Suarez, I was peering at the shadowy electronic images of Alistair Cook, Lenny Bernstein, and Uncle Bob Hardy.

Contact with the class was never broken. In fact, the editors of the ’54 Patcher gave me a full page, right between the men who had been called to the seminary and one man who had been called to eternity. The
accompanying panegyric stated – prophetically, it now seems – that I would always be a part of the class, in spirit. Jack Leviness, editor-in-chief of the Classletter, asked me to give a first-hand account of life as a Hoosier hayseed. Jack was so edified by my work that he signed me on as a cub reporter. In time I lived out the American dream and climbed to the top of the masthead. It hardly matters that the masthead has no bottom. The bond was not maintained by mail alone. Along the way there were intrepid travelers, not at all daunted by the parochial belief that the Wabash is a mythical river. Almost before the iron lung clanged shut, Jack Weimer appeared, breathing reassurance through a gauze mask. Jack repeated the journey after his ordination and again on a junket to St. Louis for some unremembered high purpose. Jim Hessman trekked west at Easter two of the first three years. He came, of course, to bring cheer to a forlorn friend, but he also took cheer from those tours of rural America, out where the groceries begin. Jim hitch-hiked, and so did Tom Hutchinson, who made it from Worcester to Dana with a single waggle of his magic thumb. Bill Harrison and Don Kapp borrowed a car and ventured forth from Brooklyn and the Bronx, along mile after mile of streets without houses or double parking.

Another Brooklyn boy, Bill Kane, tumbled off the running board of a passing creamery truck and confessed he was no less surprised to find himself in Dana than I was, since he had set out for Far Rockaway. Fifteen years later, Bill returned in style, aboard a hijacked crop duster. Since I moved to the Chicago area the local chapter of ’54 has included me in all Alumni activities - novenas, tea dances, minor logic specimens. Members of that brave fraternity can be identified by their silver trusses, proudly inscribed, “I lifted Will Jenks.” It’s true, of course, that many people not of Holy Cross have played a large part in my life, but, except for my family and the mystical body, none of those loves caught me up in a sense of belonging. Holy Cross has been uniquely unforgetting. It’s worth noting, I think, that not one girl from Becker Junior College hitch-hiked out to see me. And that, compacted to fit time and tolerance, and minus one ecstatic happening, at the 1975 commencement, has been my Holy Cross experience, my Holy Cross education. Education, because it has taught me something.

That something is the wheelchair wisdom I promised when this interminable ramble began. What I have learned, what I continue to learn daily is that there is only one way to put Humpty-Dumpty together again: Let yourself be loved. Now, “Let yourself be loved” may not sound terribly profound. But it must be heavy, because it took me all these years to figure it out. And the truth is we were taught just the opposite. We were to do the loving and
never mind being loved, which assumes an invulnerability foreign even to the planet Krypton.

A crippling disease is just one of fate’s ways of undercutting muscular love. The able-bodied can be brought to the truth through hurts that never show. I think it’s likely I am not the most seriously wounded among us, only the most conspicuously bandaged. Sooner or later every one of us will be made to feel flawed, inadequate, powerless. And there’s no defense against it. Believe me, the humiliation is devastating. To lose control of the situation is unmanly, un-American, unforgivable. Fear of losing control may be the motive for the frantic banking of wealth and power during the middle years, so that, when erosion sets in, others may be commanded, not asked, to make up what is lacking. The alternative is to let yourself be loved. Not pitied, indulged, or pampered, but loved. It is sometimes a matter of not asking, but of waiting and trusting others to sense our wants, it is always a matter of expecting to be loved. Jesus asks us to become like little children, because little children expect to be loved. For them, life is surprise and delight. For us, life can again become surprise and delight, if we let ourselves be loved.

And the time to begin is now, because asking for help, for understanding, in small things will prepare us for the day when we must ask for help and understanding in larger things. More than that, it will put us in touch with the truth about ourselves and about every other human being: We are precarious, we are mortal, but we are loved.

I know why I was asked to speak for ’54, to give voice to the love we have for Holy Cross, the thanks we owe her. I am each of us at some near or far time, drawing life and strength and hope from this place, this bond, this faith, this love, this Holy Cross ….

The audience became silent within moments of Will’s beginning, and remained so for the following seventeen minutes. Will had done it and in an inimitable fashion – with humor, self-effacement, love, wisdom and drama. He received a deservedly prolonged, standing ovation, but most impressively he had overcome his fear of public speaking.