

COMMENCEMENT ADDRESS - COMPETENCE AND COMMITMENT
UNIVERSITY OF MICHIGAN, ANN ARBOR, MICHIGAN
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PRESIDENT CHARLES E. ODEGAARD

It is a matter of the greatest possible pleasure for me to return to Ann Arbor and to this University which I learned greatly to respect and to love during my six years' tenure here as a member of the faculty. Eleven years' absence has dimmed neither my respect for what the University of Michigan has meant to higher education in this nation and in the world nor my affection for it and for many personal friends whom I see gathered in this company today.

There may be something fitting in the return here today of a former Dean of the College of Literature Science and the Arts who is now a representative of the University of Washington. Let me explain. The University of Washington was begun at an improbable time and place. Seattle was little more than a village whose first settlers had arrived only ten years before and which had almost been lost to the Indians in a major attack only five years before. On January 21, 1861 the Territorial Assembly of Washington established a three-man Board of Commissioners to make provision for the site and financing of a Territorial University in the vicinity of Seattle. They worked with incredible speed, obtaining by private donation ten acres as a site, and selecting and even selling portions of the land grant available from Congress for university purposes, so that they could build a white Greek revival University structure, complete with four classical columns and, as of early November, 1861, less than nine months after their first meeting, some thirty students.

These fiscal officers had put themselves into the actual conduct of an educational enterprise without even having an appropriate charter. So the next Territorial Assembly had to pass as one of its earliest actions on

January 24, 1862, an act to incorporate the University of the Territory of Washington under the government of a board of nine regents. One begins to wonder further about the source of inspiration for the charter of the University of Washington when one reads the following:

"The University shall consist of at least four departments, 1st, a department of literature, science, and arts, 2nd, a department of law, 3rd, a department of medicine, and 4th, a military department."

Note the designation of the first unit of the University as a department of literature, science, and arts. This particular constellation of words, an unusual combination, describes the unit I served here as dean, which in the last century was also referred to as a department, rather than as a college or school. One wonders about the possible imprint of a Michigander or Michigan ideas on the charter of the University of Washington. At least I should like to offer thanks for this happy association between two institutions with which I have been privileged to be associated. But enough of such sentiment.

We are gathered today to do particular honor to those who have completed their studies for the various degrees to be awarded at this commencement. Those of you receiving degrees from the University of Michigan can now leave this University not only to reap henceforth the private enjoyments you may find as a result of educative experience here, but also with certain designations of competence for various careers as negotiable coin of the educational realm. And the chances are greater for you than for your fathers that you will return again to this or another university for some form of continued educational experience later in your lives. Because you have not only past but future reason to be concerned for universities, I should like to speak today to you as well as to your parents, friends, and faculty about universities

and their future and in particular about some of our worries.

We are all of us worried now about universities. To those of us who are in our forties or older it comes as something of a shock to realize how worried we have become about an institution which we had regarded until very recently as having a marvelous success story behind it. To a younger generation for whom it has become fashionable to criticize, not always gently, universities as institutions, their institutional heads, and now even faculties, it may seem strange that we can have been so complacent. Perhaps worse, our surprise at now becoming worried may be construed by our young critics as further evidence of our guilt.

But the young in comparison with the old suffer, though the realization of this may come to some only later, one disability. For chronological reasons, the shortness of their experience, they suffer from short memories unless they engage in strenuous and exacting historical study which is not today one of the more fashionable pursuits of university students. I must ask the younger persons present, therefore, if they are to understand our seemingly strange reaction of surprise to the widespread attack on universities, to engage with me in an act of the imagination, to capture a bit of the experience of the older generation, particularly of those whose lives have been long associated with universities.

The present older generation during its lifetime, in the 1930's, 40's, 50's, and 60's, has witnessed the flowering of seeds planted by earlier generations, the product of the joining of two great traditions or themes in university life which resulted in establishing for university educated men and women in many areas of human endeavor a noticeably higher level of individual competence, a capacity to learn and to do things with competence,

competence in many respects new to the world. Hence universities in the last decades came into the very center of the mainstream of human life in American society. No longer in any sense ivory towers for the elegant polishing of a social elite, they came to be regarded as the source of ideas and skills for the service of the professions, the conduct of government, the management of industry, the amelioration of social ills, the underpinning at least of the arts and culture. To assist them further in their work they became the recipients from the public and private sector of American life of gifts, contracts, grants, appropriations. Anyone who resurrects the history of American universities in the last thirty years is bound to see evidence to support a story of the triumph of the American university as an institution which transformed itself into an institution marvelously useful to society.

Further testimony to the usefulness of the university to society, and especially to its importance to individual human beings, is provided by the instinct for social justice. This has led more and more Americans to see that those who come from disadvantaged segments of our society must be aided, even by very special programs, to make their way to the university, to overcome earlier educational deficiencies, and to emerge with the advantages of university education.

But the supreme testimony to the importance of the American university, to the success of the American university, is provided by those revolutionaries in our midst who, in order to destroy our present society which they regard as evil beyond redemption choose as the prime target for disruption and destruction the university as it exists today. An institution must have some significance to be the object of such attention.

The modern American university must have done some things well by

all previous standards to have undergone all these evidences of changed status. It is surely understandable then that those of us who have witnessed directly in our lives this elevation of university status should be at once impressed with a sense of its success and yet be increasingly haunted by a mounting sense of failure somewhere, somehow in the university enterprise.

To suggest a perspective in which to view these matters let me deal quickly with two traditions in university development which help explain the obvious success of the university in the area of increasing human competence. Then let me suggest for further reflection a possible source for our failure in the hope that we oldsters, in what remains of our time, may contribute something constructive before the problem passes fully into the hands of the younger people here.

The two traditions both have their origins, to the extent that one can identify historical origins of ideas and social processes, in the nineteenth century, one in American pragmatism, or perhaps I should say, practicality, and the other in German research; and both began to exert an influence on American higher education in the second half of the nineteenth century.

For reasons I will only suggest, the underdeveloped state of the American wilderness in comparison with the European models then existing in the minds of our forefathers made any American of even a modicum of intelligence especially concerned with how to do things. The circumstances of his life in a frontier society literally shoved him into many more practical concerns than his European cousin had to develop to survive in a longer settled area where past solutions by his forebears served many of his daily needs. In America on the contrary much had to be learned fast; and built fast to bring farms, towns, and cities to a wilderness, and imaginative men developed the

idea that institutions of higher education should help. The University of Michigan responded to this call in many ways. In the 1850's before Michigan State was founded and before Senator Morrill of Vermont obtained passage of his bill for additional federal land grants to support training in agriculture and mechanical arts, President Tappan tried to start agriculture in Ann Arbor. He did start what we now call engineering.

Meanwhile in Germany the urge to know, to learn ever more deeply the nature of things in the world, had led imaginative men to develop a set of techniques for learning how to know more certainly, with more validation, and greater accuracy of description. These were techniques for finding new knowledge which could be shared by carefully trained scholars anywhere in the world as part of a continuous search which came to be called research. And so by these techniques the sum of Wissenschaft, science, knowledge, could continuously be increased.

The same President Tappan here at Michigan introduced into the faculty German scholars familiar with research who shared their experience with American colleagues. And Americans in the later nineteenth century themselves went abroad to learn research methods, to acquire the symbol of such training, the Ph.D. By 1900 a dozen American institutions were themselves sufficiently involved in offering Ph.D. training to found an association to develop and protect standards, the AAU, of which Michigan was a founding member.

Thus by the beginning of this century there was entrenched in American universities a dedication to improvement of the arts and professions, and a dedication to the advancement of knowledge in the disciplines by the methods of research. The flowering which has occurred especially in my lifetime, and to which I referred earlier, is the product of the union, in the setting of the

American university and with respect to more fields of human endeavor than anywhere else in the world, of these two traditions of how to do and how to know. The faculties of our universities of the last generation or two have effected a marriage of technology and science with results for both never before seen.

It is this marriage which explains the hopes placed in universities by so many segments of our population and by so many other institutions of our society. In direct experiences abroad in my own lifetime I have seen a remarkable change in attitude of foreigners toward American universities. Developed countries with university traditions far older than our own have turned especially within the last 15 years from attitudes of superiority to the supreme compliment of borrowing American models and asking our advice. Underdeveloped countries in Africa and Asia at the same time have bent their institutions established in European traditions toward American models.

As an officer of the International Council for Philosophy and Humanistic Studies for eleven years, six of them as its president, I have seen directly that this attitude of respect for American scholarship extends not only to American technology and science narrowly construed but also to our work in the humanities and arts.

There is then, I repeat, ground for regarding the recent history of American universities as something of a success story. I have taken the time of this audience to recapitulate this history only in part to invite from younger persons here some sympathetic understanding for older persons who, against this history, find themselves shocked at the storm of criticism of universities and worried now along with younger persons about the immediate future of these institutions.

I have taken your time for this history because it should suggest that there is still something of great value in the modern American university and hence that it would be wise not to destroy it or let it be destroyed by wreckers in our midst. There is in this furtherance of technological skill, in the advancement of science, and in the interrelationship among them, and there is in the modern American university's policies, procedures, and practices conducive to and supportive of these rational enterprises, the basis for the enormously increased competence of individuals, of yourselves now and later, and of your succeeding generations. I mean in very personal terms that your children's, and your children's children's competence will be dependent upon the survival of universities.

Is this to say that the university story is purely a success story and that the measurement of its success is in the increased competence of individuals? No one, however, insensitive to the world around him, could possibly answer that question in the affirmative. For all our successes we clearly have an area of failure, of serious failure. We may not all agree as to where it lies, as to its causes, or its cure. Let me try my suggestion for your consideration.

In its engrossment with improving competence through science and technology the University community has overlooked, undervalued, underestimated an essential ingredient in human experience. We have not paid enough attention to the problem of human commitment. The University has been preoccupied increasingly over several generations with practical improvements and with rational advancement of knowledge even to the point of avoidance of those untidier aspects of human experience especially in the area of human emotion which are nonetheless real to man but which do not lend themselves so readily

to certitudes of research. Hence the range of topics in the university's dialogue both within the faculty and between faculty and students has been limited. Occasional reformers in recent decades by different terminologies and different programs have tried to resurrect in new forms a concern for an older element in our university tradition which goes back to our collegiate past and to our English academic origins, and which has been shunted aside in the more recent overpowering zeal for teaching how to do, and how to know. I refer to another educational question, equally appropriate to the teacher but equally fraught with difficult questions as to the teacher's responsibilities; namely, "what kind of a fellow is my student?" Can I help him find his being along with helping him in his doing and knowing? Obviously the question, what kind of a fellow is he, carries us into the territory of moral or ethical concepts, into humanistic and theistic thought, into religious perspectives, into aesthetic and emotional responses to life and death. Our colonial colleges and the many denominational colleges founded in the nineteenth century may have been too preoccupied with these matters, in some cases almost exclusively with narrowly dogmatic responses. But secularization has swept the dogma out of almost all our institutions, including the private ones. So-called practical and rationalistic matters have moved center stage in virtually all our universities and colleges and scant attention is paid to the questions about morals and human goals that still remained under the surface as persistent quests of the human condition.

These questions are old, but they remain troublingly persistent in the western tradition. When the early Christian missionaries, following the course of St. Paul, brought the Christian gospel and its biblical Jewish traditions into the world of the Gentiles, they encountered in the Hellenized

Roman world the rationalistic traditions derived from the Greeks. Some missionaries began to defend their faith against disbelievers by borrowing from the tools of their opponents. Tertullian could therefore ask:

"What has Athens to do with Jerusalem, the Academy with the Church? What is there in common between the philosopher and the Christian, between the pupil of Hellas and the pupil of Heaven?"

But even he could use the heretic's tools to persuade them to come in, and with the ultimate triumphant entry of Christianity into the Roman Empire, Athens and Jerusalem have remained ever since in contention in our bodies, in our minds and hearts, as heirs of the Western tradition.

Dr. Will Herberg of Drew University stated this conflict as follows:

"To the Hebrew, knowledge and truth are personal and active, involving faith and commitment; to the Greek, they are essentially theoretical (that is spectatorial) and impersonal, the uncovering and contemplation of the rational structure of being by the rational mind congruent with it."

He sums up the difference of approach: "We can express the final antithesis between Athens and Jerusalem in this way: for Greek philosophy it is the unreflective life, for biblical faith it is the uncommitted life, that is not worth living. In the one, life is a paideia, a self-perfection through reason; in the other it is 'a summons and a sending'; a task and a responsibility, illumined through the torah of God."

It is our restive students above all who are challenging the Athenian temper of the modern academy, the American university. I am thinking not so much of the few revolutionaries as of the many dissidents. They are certainly not talking about themselves as advocates of a new or revived Jerusalem.

Most are not talking in obvious religious terminology, though some are. The historical or even anti-historical bias of many would cause most of them to be startled by the suggestion that they are modern reflectors of an ancient tension between Athens and Jerusalem. But note the search for individual identity as expressed in a task and in a responsibility, as the saying goes, "for one's brothers," the supreme value as lying in a sense of commitment which must be affirmed in action or attempted in demonstrations. The outward and visible sign of the inward faith is expressed with reference to a host of symbols. Some of these are found in positive affirmations such as the Peace Corps, Vista, tutorial assistance to underprivileged children, civil rights, a host of good causes in which it should be remarked, old as well as young often participate. Others are found in negative protests which persons who have high hopes for the salvation of our present society may share with the extreme radicals who often cite these very causes as proof of the damnation of our society and reason for efforts to destroy it. In this connection one thinks of protests against racism, the war in Vietnam, ROTC, corporations engaged in activities ranging from foreign trade to catering to women's fashions, university placement services, universities themselves as alleged handmaids to the "establishment." By protest against all these elements of the here and now expressed through mass type action some students induce in themselves a feeling of participation in a special community which enables them, as they say, to come alive and to engage in apocalyptic visions of a society to come yet invisible to those who do not share the emotion of such a trance.

We had better take these matters seriously. And when I say we, I do not mean just universities. Though I certainly include them, the issues raised in this search for values and for commitment affect any and all

institutions in our society and each and everyone of us. They need open and full discussion among and between the generations. There are dangers in the excesses of both the Athenian and the Jerusalem temper; but the tension between them can be used productively by imaginative minds and sensitive hearts. Rational analysis may deepen the understanding of, and enlarge insights into, our own individual commitments and may help us assess the probable consequences of acting upon them in this world. Increased consciousness of our moral commitments, our deeper feeling for one another and for our own sense of integrity, may guide to higher goals our will to know and to do.

The university as it is preserved, improved and bettered by the addition, through the constructive imagination of its critics, of a concern for an increased dialogue about human commitment can aid us all in the quest for the good society. The university destroyed as the means of bringing down society so that it may be replaced miraculously by the empty vision of a never-never land seems to me to be a cultural blast as disastrous and as meaningless for the prospect of a civilized society of man as the physical blast of a nuclear missile exchange. If we all mean to save ourselves, let us work together to save and improve our universities by building them into still more effective and useful sources of insight into the totality of human experience. Let us preserve them and expand them into better sources of human competence and clarifiers of human commitments. They may then be more truly an Alma Mater, a nourishing mother of ourselves, and be held in renewed confidence and respect.