

The 481st Convocation

Address: “Being Silly, Seriously”

By Harry L. Davis

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Examining empirical evidence is one hallmark of the University of Chicago style, and I’ve learned over the years that—when I am the evidence—it can even be a wonderful cover for talking about myself.

In that spirit, then, I’d like to share some data about my decision to interview here for a faculty position in the early sixties. It would be tempting, of course, to tell a story that emphasized a carefully thought-out decision on my part. But to be perfectly honest, I wanted to interview here because the comedy team of Mike Nichols and Elaine May was associated in my mind with the University of Chicago. As a doctoral student at that other business school north of here, I remember listening to recordings of their funny, intellectually playful improvisations—for example, a conversation between a patient with serious psychological problems and her therapist who continues to hiccup throughout the session. Back then, I thought that an institution that would welcome people as talented and wonderfully wacky as these two must indeed be something special. All in all, it was a silly reason for selecting Chicago as a good place for a job interview.

Now I do take some comfort in the fact that others have decided to become a part of this institution for reasons that seem equally dubious. For example, the late Katharine Graham, who was publisher of the *Washington Post* and a Trustee of this university, wrote about her decision to attend Chicago in her autobiography. Her father had vetoed her desire to study in London, but he told her that she could leave Vassar after her sophomore year and enroll at any college within the United States. One day while flipping through the pages of *Redbook* magazine she happened to see a picture of the newly appointed, twenty-nine-year-old, handsome President of the University of Chicago—Robert Maynard Hutchins. Not only was he good-looking, but the university was co-educational and located in a big city. In what has to be another silly reason for choosing this university, she decided to enroll.

I think some of our mentors must have been dismayed at how Mrs. Graham and I took such a serious step for such silly reasons, but the outcome of our decisions did stand the ultimate empirical test: It worked. So with that as a recommendation, let me devote a few moments to the subject of being silly—sometimes.

When the word “silly” is attached to someone or to an idea, it’s generally not meant as a compliment. Silly is synonymous with unsophisticated, ignorant, or lacking in common sense. Accordingly, William Frederick, Duke of Gloucester, and William IV both received the nickname of “Silly Billy” to capture their foolish, empty-headed ways. We’re supposed to grow out of silliness. (“Quit being so silly.” “Ask a silly question, get a silly answer.”)

So, why would a convocation speaker choose to anchor his remarks on a word that many adults want to expunge rather than embrace? Is it perhaps that he has nothing serious to say? Or, could it be that he’s concerned that voices within each one of us, as well as those from others, block some apertures into serious ideas—or, for this audience, an aperture into serious business?

Deliberate silliness is paradoxical because it puts us in control: When we are silly, we can view the world through different lenses of our own choosing. Silliness frees the imagination, allowing us to see possibilities not constrained by the need to please someone or get everything right to pass someone else’s standardized test. Being silly can mean testing the view on our own terms—trying a zoom lens, or a fish-eye lens, or a panoramic lens.

Now, the imaginative lens stands in sharp contrast with a technical perspective, which values objectivity, neutrality, and impersonal ways of perceiving. The American poet Wallace Stevens contrasts these two lenses with each other in his poem “Six Significant Landscapes.” In the last stanza he writes:

Rationalists, wearing square hats,
Think, in square rooms,
Looking at the floor,

Looking at the ceiling,
They confine themselves
To right-angled triangles.
If they tried rhomboids,
Cones, waving ellipses—
As, for example, the ellipse of the half moon—
Rationalists would wear sombreros.

Stevens begins his poem in a linear world defined by walls, ceiling, floor—creating a sense of being confined. And then there is a transformation into new shapes—the half moon, a sombrero—square hats like the mortarboards you’re wearing today—put aside. It’s as if he recognized that while a fish-eye lens, for instance, would ruin a passport photo, it might very well do something artful with the shadow cast by a sombrero.

Indeed, being silly can be like posing before fun house mirrors to view *ourselves* in multiple ways. In their silly ways, children delight in make believe—in playing “let’s pretend.” On any given day when I was young, I could be a magician, then a pirate, and later Superman (that is until gravity took hold).

Regrettably, you are probably past the days of “let’s pretend.” But, rather than searching for that one identity, I’d propose to you that in shaping our careers we can benefit from multiple identities—some of them as young as childhood, and only one as old as today.

The quintessential “self-made” businessman Benjamin Franklin was considerably larger than this single identity. His multiple personae, in fact, are the embodiment of a trickster—that figure in society that “rattles the cage” in order to challenge cultural conventions. Franklin entered the public stage at sixteen, writing as an elderly woman criticizing the hypocrisy of the elite in Massachusetts. He wrote in London newspapers as a Briton (a London manufacturer) and at other times as a New Englander (an American). He knew precisely what identity to bring on stage to reach his intended audience.

I tend to agree with the Chicago Symphony's Daniel Barenboim who has suggested that having multiple identities is not only possible but, indeed, is something to which to aspire.

If these small, but powerful, voices within each of us don't kill the imagination, the words of others can. Ideas are sometimes put down not because they are really foolish but, rather, because they threaten widely held beliefs.

In other cases, the put-downs have more to do with the messenger. The social psychologist Dan Wegner divides the world into two types of people: the bumlbers who enjoy going through life trying to get something done and the pointers who never do anything themselves but love to point out the bumlbers' bumbles. The word "silly" is a favorite weapon in the pointer's vocabulary.

Now I have to acknowledge that many, if not most, ideas labeled "silly" are just that—silly. But a small number of ideas judged to be foolish do mature and do impact the world—FedEx, eBay, even Silly Putty[®]. Low probability outcomes such as these pose a dilemma for organizations because a large number of tries must take place, most of which will be unsuccessful and deemed, after the fact, to have been bad investments. (It's a dilemma reminiscent of a long-standing belief in business that about half of what is spent on advertising is wasted, the only problem being that we don't know which half.)

Not unlike businesses, but in a more permissive economy, the best universities are places that tolerate, even encourage, serious dialogue about ideas that many would consider silly or foolish—perhaps even dangerous. Stuart Tave, now an emeritus professor of English at this university, once opined that more dumb things happen at a university than at any other accredited institution. In a 1989 convocation address, Tave described the best faculty and students as smart, self-confident people—even a bit arrogant—who take big risks that stretch themselves to the edge and beyond, much like great athletes. And it's because of this quality of mind that they are also capable of pulling their intellectual hamstrings, making big mistakes and fools of themselves.

The University of Chicago has a particular place in its heart for those who seriously pursue risky

ideas. Two examples on the research front immediately come to mind.

The late Professor Subrahmanyan Chandrasekhar, who won the Nobel Prize in 1983, was severely criticized by the then leading astronomer Sir Arthur Eddington for his work on the evolution of stars. Eddington tore into Chandra's work—a *reductio ad absurdum*, he called it—and then pronounced that there should be a “law of nature to prevent a star from behaving in this absurd way.” The audience laughed. Eventually what was labeled absurd would be vindicated; his insight had been correct and black holes would be accepted.

In the Graduate School of Business, George Stigler used to tell the story of Ronald Coase's first visit to the University, to discuss his proposition that when there are no transaction costs, the assignment of legal rights has no effect on the way economic resources would be used. Stigler wondered how such a fine economist could make such an obvious mistake. So, believing that the idea was silly enough to debate, twenty Chicago economists met with Coase. Stigler described the two-hour discussion as exhilarating, with the vote going from twenty to one against Coase at the beginning to twenty-one for Coase at the end. Ronald Coase received the Nobel Prize in 1991.

Standing in this location with Harper Library as my backdrop, I simply must acknowledge the audacious founder of this university, William Rainey Harper, who crafted a vision of a great research university built in a swamp on the Midway, freed faculty to do research, doubled the top salary scale, admitted women and Jews, initiated the quarter system, and created high-quality extension programs outside of Hyde Park. Some labeled the University a veritable monstrosity: “A foreign intrusion into the life of the city.” “Harper's folly.” Despite the ridicule, this institution surely benefited from entertaining what some “pointers” thought was a silly, fantastic notion.

Now, some final thoughts for *your* bottom line:

First, don't take things and yourself too seriously. Keep in mind William James's counsel:

Our errors are surely not such awfully solemn things. In a world where we are so certain to

incur them in spite of all our caution, a certain lightness of heart seems healthier than this excessive nervousness on their behalf.*

Second, engage in some actions that others may find silly. Take a train across this great country—you'll see things that you would never see from an airplane or the interstate. Accept a cut in pay to do work you love. Stroll across the monumental Brooklyn Bridge (it's the chief engineer John Roebling's birthday today).

Third, surprise yourself and others by doing something silly every day. Tackle some project with the goal of being inefficient. Argue a side of an issue that's opposed to what you believe. Plan to be spontaneous tomorrow.

Focus your zoom lens on my silly reason for interviewing here and how it turned out to be an aperture into a life's work more satisfying than I ever could have imagined. I know that Katharine Graham had the same sense of fulfillment in the College.

Finally, and most genuinely, I want to congratulate you on your accomplishments. We hope you will stay in touch with those of us still in Hyde Park. We will certainly stay in touch with you. Believe me when I say that, on that note, I'm being far more serious than silly.

Notes

* James, William. *The Will to Believe and Other Essays in Popular Philosophy*. New York: Dover, 1956. (Original work published 1897.)

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