

Jonathan Lear

452nd Convocation Address: "Crossroads,"

October 29, 1998

"Crossroads" **by Jonathan Lear**

There are great poems about standing at a crossroads in life, but has anyone ever written about standing next to someone at a crossroads? Parents, relatives, friends, lovers: has anyone captured what you want to say to the loved one beside you? For years, I have had a fantasy of standing at the most famous crossroads in world literature, waiting for the hero to arrive. There is a question I want to ask him.

I am waiting for Oedipus to arrive.

Oedipus, you remember, is abandoned as an infant by King Laius and Queen Iocaste of Thebes; he is rescued by a shepherd and brought to Corinth where he is raised as the son of King Polybus and Queen Merope. As a young man, Oedipus is attending a court dinner when a drunk lets slip the remark that he is not really Polybus's son. Instead of dismissing this as drunken nonsense, Oedipus is seized by recurrent, troubling thoughts. He slips out of Corinth and goes to Delphi. There he receives the oracle, saying that he is 'destined to lie with his mother, and to show to mortals a brood they could not bear to look on, and that he should be the murderer of his father who had begotten him.' "When I heard this," Oedipus says, "I left the land of Corinth . . . and went where I could never see accomplished the shameful predictions of my cruel oracles."

We are now just moments before I would like to meet him. And it is certainly well-known what happens in the absence of our meeting: Oedipus - leaving Delphi, fleeing from Corinth, and on his way to Thebes - comes to a crossroads where the three roads meet. An entourage coming from the other direction blocks his path, Oedipus strikes the driver, a fight ensues, and Oedipus kills them all. Clearly, trying to meet Oedipus at the crossroads is a risky business! Still, I'd like to get there just ahead of his father - and I am going to imagine that I can calm him down enough to listen to me. "Oedipus," I would begin, "I don't intend to block your path. I have a question I want to ask you. Won't you think about it for a moment? Then go in any direction you please?!"

"All right, but make it quick," Oedipus says.

"OK, here goes: given that you went to Delphi because you were troubled by a remark that Polybus wasn't really your father, why do you respond to the oracle by fleeing Corinth? If you were sure that Polybus was your father, you wouldn't have gone to Delphi in the first place. Given that you are not sure, you do not really know where your father is. Even if you believe the oracle and want somehow to try to escape it, what makes you think your Dad isn't in Thebes - or, indeed, on this very road?"

I admit, this is a flat-footed intrusion into world literature. Still, it shows that Oedipus's actions are incoherent, not just by our lights, but by what would be his lights, if only he were not too busy to notice. In fact, having heard the oracle, Oedipus has no reason to move in any direction at all. What he does have reason to do is to avoid killing any man old enough to be his father and avoid sleeping with any woman old enough to be his mother. As we have just seen, the first thing Oedipus does on leaving Delphi is to kill a man old enough to be his father, a man who looks a lot like him. He briefly stops to solve the Sphinx's riddle, then goes on to marry a woman old enough to be his mother, a woman whose previous husband has mysteriously gone missing, a woman who cannot account for all of her children. If Oedipus wants to avoid his fate, he's off to quite a start!

But Oedipus is too busy to notice. He assumes he already knows what to do, and it is precisely his single-minded pursuit of his goal which blinds him to his real situation. The fact that he stands at a crossroads is of no importance to Oedipus, for he thinks there is only one direction in which he can go.

And it is not just that Oedipus has closed himself off from practical possibilities. Oedipus is en route: he is too busy moving in a direction to take an 'existential sabbath,' and thus he cannot partake of forms of experience which lie outside the realm of the practical. For the ancient Greeks, tragic consciousness consisted in the idea that we live in the intersection of two distinct realms of meaning, one human, one divine. The divine realm of meaning is opaque, all but incomprehensible to humans - requiring oracles, prophesy, inspired interpretation - yet it is of fundamental, sometimes catastrophic importance.¹

Oedipus lives a life which denies the possibility of tragedy. When he hears the oracle, for example, he assumes he already knows what it means. He treats it as a hot tip from a good source. For Oedipus, there is no other realm of meaning than the practical. Indeed, he pours scorn on the idea of there being any other realm. In his fateful dustup with Tiresias, Oedipus brags not merely that it was he, not Tiresias, who solved the riddle of the sphinx, but that the whole project of using prophesy had failed miserably. "I hit the mark by native wit," Oedipus says, "not by what I learned from the birds."² And later, when he hears that Polybus

is dead, having died peacefully in old age, he does not conclude that he has not yet understood the oracle, but rather that prophesy itself is worthless: "Why should one look to the prophetic hearth of Pytho, according to whose message I was to kill my father? . . . Polybus lies in Hades, and with him have gone the oracles that were with us, now worth nothing."³ The idea that the oracle is itself opaque and thus requires interpretation is alien to Oedipus. And thus he cannot understand the possibility of tragedy until he is overwhelmed by it.

It is common knowledge that Oedipus solved the riddle of the sphinx, but this cannot be quite right - at least, if we require that a riddle-solver understand his own solution. The sphinx asked what walks on four legs in the morning, two legs in the afternoon and three legs in the evening. Oedipus doesn't realize that if 'human' is the answer to the riddle, then he is not human, for, perversely, he walked on three legs in the morning (his legs were pinned together) and would walk on four legs in the evening (blind, he would be led by his daughter Antigone). The cruel irony is that although Oedipus can give the correct answer, he cannot understand it.

There are many familiar reasons why Oedipus remains a haunting figure for us, but I should like to add another. Oedipus demands that we look on him in fascinated horror because he is an anticipation of modernity stalking the ancient world. More than any other figure in antiquity, Oedipus sees himself as a self-made man. After leaving Corinth, he takes himself to be relying solely on his own resources. He becomes ruler of Thebes by solving the riddle of the sphinx and thereby saving the polis: his claim to the throne runs through his mind, not through his blood. Thebes had no king or apparent heir, so Oedipus is made ruler by acclamation. Thus he comes as close as was possible in ancient Thebes to being its democratically elected leader. And he gains his position on the basis of his achievements. By the same act, he wins his wife and with her creates a family - all of this resting on the supposed bedrock of his "native wit." Indeed, he even tries to think of a way to escape his fate. One has to wait for the Enlightenment to see again such confidence in the powers of human reason.

And yet, Oedipus's 'knowing' is so thin. As we have seen, he already knows what the oracle means, he already knows where he is going, and if you read the text you will see that for almost every question Oedipus asks, he takes himself already to know the answer. The only question of which he professes ignorance is "who killed Laius?" - and it is precisely his 'knowingness' about everything else that keeps him from an answer.

I dwell on Oedipus today because there is an uncanny similarity between his 'knowingness' and a 'knowingness' prevalent in the culture today. Look in almost any direction and you will see manifestations. In the political realm, our columnists already know that politicians are corrupt and are thus motivated to look for evidence to back up their convictions. They thereby ignore genuine achievements in their search for scandal. They express frustration that the public does not get more upset, but the public for its part also already knows that politicians tend to have extramarital affairs, to make dubious investments, to take campaign money wherever they can get it - and they are thus inoculated against outrage.

In the private realm, the assumption is that the obstacles to happiness are mainly technical. So, for example, the truly remarkable advances in psychopharmacology are interpreted by the culture as meaning that psychoanalysis and other forms of psychotherapy which investigate unconscious meaning are irrelevant. Just like Oedipus, we use our practical success to blind us to the existence meanings that are not immediately transparent to us.

And, to take us into this room today, are there any graduating students who do not already know where they are going? I suppose there are a some; I doubt there are many; and I expect that they have been made to feel anxious about not knowing.

It is a tricky business to give a name to an age, but as a convocation speaker I am entitled to a shot at it, and I would call this "the age of 'knowingness' " or, perhaps, "the age of Oedipus."

Where does this knowingness come from? In Oedipus's case, I suspect his knowingness comes from abandonment: as an infant he is abandoned by his parents and exposed to die on a mountain; as a young man he abandons his home and exposes himself to the oracle. In response to being left to his own devices, Oedipus thinks his way to practical success. He thinks with abandon. If Descartes ushers in the modern world with his famous dictum, "I think, therefore I am," Oedipus offers this pre-modern anticipation: "I am abandoned, therefore I think."

In a metaphorical sense, I think we can see modernity as constituted by a sense of abandonment. Since the Enlightenment, there has been a developing sense of loss: a sense that we can no longer simply appeal to traditional values, to transcendent ideals, to God to legitimate our activities, our lives. Of course, many people still do appeal to God, transcendent ideals, traditional values, but the appeal is no longer simple: it always stands in some form of protest against or reaction to a sense of loss.

We have, almost unawares, been thrown into a Socratic situation. That is, we have lost confidence that we are able to give a coherent, satisfying account of what, if anything, grounds our most cherished practices. It is precisely this loss of confidence which Socrates would induce in others. Socrates, famously, would enter into conversations with others who claimed already to know what courage or piety, justice or human excellence is - and in those conversations those alleged knowers would be reduced to confusion and contradiction. As Socrates put it in the Apology, "they claim to know, but they know nothing." Socrates, for his part, was the anti-Oedipus of the ancient world: he too knew nothing, but he knew that, and this paradoxical 'knowledge' fulfilled the Delphic oracle's claim that he was the wisest of men. We all know how the Athenian citizens responded to the Socratic challenge: indeed, a significant vein running through western civilization can be seen as a response to that response. For Plato's invention of philosophy can, I think, be seen in its entirety as an act of mourning - and almost all philosophy since Plato has stood in some relation to him.

The question we have to face is: how are we going to respond to our Socratic challenge? I am not able to meet Oedipus at his crossroads, but I am here today meeting you at yours. Each of you has the choice of going down an Oedipal path or a Socratic one. The culture at large has clearly chosen the Oedipal route, and it is fascinating what a strange collection of hikers are trekking down the same path. For conservatives who appeal for a return to traditional values and left-wing advocates of political correctness and religious fundamentalists and relativists and cynics and the world-weary and those single-mindedly pursuing material wealth, social success, and the private pleasures - all of these people, however else they differ, have in common that they already know: what the truth is, how things should be, what human well-being consists in. All of these are different ways of avoiding the anxiety of not already knowing.

It takes courage to follow a Socratic path. Not only must one tolerate the anxiety of not already knowing, one will regularly find oneself on the outside of a group of Oedipal knowers. Only such a person will be able to open him- or herself to genuine knowing. Only such a person will be able to confront wholeheartedly and open-mindedly the loss of confidence which pervades our age - to which Oedipal 'knowingness' is a thin and defensive response. I do not want or expect to persuade anyone to be courageous. Rather, I am speaking to those of you who already are courageous: I'm inviting you to see yourselves as at this sort of a crossroads. And if I cannot find the courageous among the graduates of the University of Chicago, where can I find them? What I am convinced of is that each of you in the very near future - whether in a committee meeting, in pursuing a career, or in a family situation - each of you will be put in a situation where you are forced to

choose between Oedipal 'knowingness' and Socratic openness. It is in the details of ordinary life that such a choice will arise.

My predecessor at the Committee on Social Thought, Hannah Arendt, spoke of the banality of evil. I don't think that evil is ever banal, but I do think that the conditions from which evil arises are profoundly ordinary. The next time you feel the pressure to go along with a group which claims already to know, ask yourself: Do they? Do I? If each person were genuinely able to raise those questions each time he or she felt the pressure of a group of 'knowers,' the world would be rid of a major source of evil. Perhaps this is too much to hope for the human race, but it is not too much to hope for you. Good luck.

Notes:

1. See J.-P. Vernant, *Myth and Tragedy in Ancient Greece*
2. *Oedipus Tyrannos*, lines 390-398
3. *Ibid.*, lines 964-972

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