

The 464th Convocation

Address: "Finding Good Ground"

By Susan M. Kidwell

March 16, 2001

A convocation speech has many purposes. One is to celebrate and praise the graduates, and that is very easy. Chicago can be very daunting as well as exhilarating, with a reputation for top-flight, hard-nosed thinking. This is pretty intimidating on arrival if you have much sense of reality, and let me tell you that holds not only for students but for postdoctoral fellows and new faculty, too. And yet by sheer ability, mental toughness, and an extraordinary intellectual earnestness, students rise to both the demands and opportunities of life in this community and even push and pull us further.

As an example, let me relate a conversation I had a few months ago with a colleague at another institution who, after two terms, was rotating out of co-editorship of the preeminent journal in our field. I asked him how the process of finding a replacement team was going. He said very well and that he was about to use his ace in the hole to clinch the top choice. And what was that ace? Remarkably, it was that editors got to handle manuscripts from University of Chicago graduate students—manuscripts that were a pleasure because they were consistently so fresh, of such high scholarly quality, and so clearly by people who would go on to be leaders in the field. My first private reaction was "Oh, come on," because this seemed so over the top—editing a journal is a major job, and handling manuscripts from first-time authors is especially time-consuming. But then I realized he was utterly sincere and that our University had just received the most extraordinary compliment.

In fact, over my fifteen years of teaching here, I have never stopped being amazed at the quality of performance and the ambitious aims of students, including experiences with undergraduates in class, daily interactions with graduate students, and events of the Alumni Association. These are folks who walk up to the plate and, in seriousness but without display and often with seeming effortless, simply whack the ball out of the park. The gleeful scramble by everyone else to make equally heroic snags at the fence magnifies the pleasure and communal sense that we are

here to make home runs, earned runs. For this community, there is simply nothing so satisfying as the sound of such a hit, whoever makes it. We have some fantastic faculty here: I know these people, I work with them, and they are an inspiration. But knowing them, I still assure you that the glory of Chicago is its students.

A second purpose of a convocation speech is to summarize for graduates and their families our hopes for what they have gained from their time here and thus might take forward into their future, in all its personal and professional strands. This is therefore a kind of bookend to the speeches and discussions of Orientation Week, such as the Aims of Education address. At both matriculation and graduation, such speeches can have the flavor of institutional self-congratulation. But these are also opportunities to take stock of what we are about as scholars and most particularly the ways in which we distinguish ourselves and thus the aspects we have most need to husband, individually and as an institution. This brings me to the subject of my title, on which I will be brief, because brevity is a third aim of a convocation speech.

The phrase “finding good ground” commonly has a military connotation—the image comes to mind of Union troops rapidly occupying the high ground of Cemetery Ridge before Gettysburg and the immense tactical advantage this provided in that decisive battle. In scholarship we can sometimes find almost literal equivalents. In geological fieldwork, for example, we grub through gullies and peer from peaks to build and test hypotheses on earth processes; we even call it ground-truthing. However, finding good ground—the priority of the search for solid information and robust analysis, and the value of achieving such a purchase—is far more elastic, both literally and metaphorically. This is hardly an audience where that needs to be expanded upon. However, we can also think of good ground as a nursery for growth of scholars and responsible members of society.

How do we find good ground in any and all of these senses? More proactively, how can we create and preserve it here and elsewhere? I think this is where Chicago has unique strengths for you to hold and promulgate as you move on to your future.

First of these is a fearlessness in the scale of our thinking. It strikes me that here at Chicago we

are particularly courageous in scaling up and in fostering expansive thought. Whatever the phenomenon or problem, Chicagoans stretch the analysis one notch broader in context, time frame, aspects or ramifications considered, in order to break through to the next level of understanding. You know that feeling you get when you look out from the observation deck of the Sears Tower or Hancock Building: what you want is a view that reveals a landscape sufficiently large to be simultaneously empowering and humbling and even a little disconcerting. You will then carry with you Chicago's sense of "no small thoughts, no blinkered scope."

A second and related strength is a freedom in subject matter—in tackling purely academic questions as well as issues of immediate societal relevance, in wading into messy problems at the interfaces of fields rather than demanding circumscribed elegance at all times, and finally in engaging wholeheartedly in multidisciplinary efforts. Remaining fluid in your interests and outlook, not hesitating to change your concentration or specialty—these allow us to respond rationally to the dynamic landscapes of our personal and professional lives and also to identify new destinations and objectives for our efforts. The world rattles on: we are all now faced with new issues of natural and human-driven environmental change, of genetic profiling and engineering, and of a world economy and society that is increasingly both globalized and U.S.-dominated. As scholars and citizens, we must think critically and clearly about these issues, because they are going to impinge on our lives in ways none of us have dreamed of yet. Part of this is because each of these systems is so complex: for example, global warming does not simply mean a possibility of sunbathing on the Midway in February, but entails changes in rainfall and annual temperature variation that promote the spread of diseases like the West Nile virus to new areas and entails changes in sea level and storminess that literally sap coastal economies. Intellectual flexibility and growth are therefore not frivolous extras or luxuries but basic sustenance.

Finally, and what I believe is the most rare and valuable quality of our community, Chicago is characterized by an ecumenical attitude on styles in thinking—that is the idea, deeply held, that there are many equally legitimate ways of exploring and understanding our worlds. I remember arriving here as an assistant professor, having been hired in part because I worked with real rocks, but thinking, "Will the theoretical types have sufficient respect for my basic style of research for

me to have a fighting chance at tenure?” To my astonishment and relief, the theoretical types were the most embracing, the most curious, and I quickly saw that mixing it up was the whole point— it was the advantage and not the danger. I hope that all of us acquire some of that generosity in spirit and come to realize that the best science—that is, the most robust, stimulating, and enriching science—as well as the best art, law, policy, and spiritual life, results when multiple ways of thinking can be brought to bear. No school has a lock on the one right way, unless it’s an attitude, like the one we achieve at our best here, that you must throw everything at a given problem and throw it hard.

Consequently, any of us who have done time elsewhere—if that is not too pejorative a phrase, even at institutions with deservedly high reputations—can tell you that there is no substitute for the kind of intellectual freedom and fearlessness that thrive here at Chicago. I hope all of you have had a real taste of these qualities during your years here, and I know that many of you have been major contributors to and defenders of our good and fertile ground. On behalf of the University faculty, I congratulate you on the achievement of your degrees, in all that they represent, and give my fervent wishes that you may hold and promulgate the best of your experiences here and that you find all personal happiness and professional satisfaction on the dynamic landscapes of your future.

*Susan M. Kidwell is Professor in the Department of Geophysical Sciences, the Committee on Evolutionary Biology, and the College.*