

The 463rd Convocation

Address: “Only Connect: Scholarship, Fellowship, and Survival”

By Homi K. Bhabha

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This convocation marks a milestone in your lives and an equally important moment in the longer life cycle of your alma mater, the University of Chicago. It is my great pleasure to congratulate you both on a remarkable achievement. The partnership between enlightened individuals and liberal institutions is at the very heart of modern, democratic life, and the ritual of convocation helps us to celebrate that simple, yet essential, truth. It is a commonly held belief that great universities somehow transcend their own times and achieve a kind of universal fame. Occasions like this serve to remind us that this is only partially true. However *great* a university may be, it is only ever as *good* as the next class that its faculty successfully graduates. Every degree granted, every dissertation completed, reinterprets the mission and the tradition of the University of Chicago.

Tradition, in this sense, is the living tissue of an educational history that goes back, in our case, to 1892. Traditions are nourished by a sense of the past; traditions are often expressed or embodied in an archaic vocabulary like the academic dress that we wear to officiate on such occasions. Our vestments are only symbolic of our investiture in a much greater idea of collegiality as a community of purpose. But this sense of the past should not pull us back into an earlier time so that we may dwell there, resting on our laurels: the “pulling back” of tradition is like the drawing back of the string of a bow just a moment before the arrow is released. The reverse thrust of tradition—the past—is the energy we need to make active our inherited values in the “present” of our everyday lives and labors. It is only by connecting the institution and the individual, the tasks of scholarship with the wider work of achieving human fellowship, that we can “keep alive the *tradition* of the life of the mind.”

What is “the tradition of the life of the mind”? The phrase comes from the writings of Edward Levi, one-time President of the University of Chicago, and it captures that productive tension between the importance of tradition and the necessity for revision that I have been talking about.

He used the phrase in a convocation address at the University of Rochester in the late sixties, at a time when the American university was beset by deep anxieties and ambivalences. The Vietnam War created a profound sense within the academic community that, in attempting to protect “the life of the mind,” universities were, in fact, closing the gates of the ivory tower. The life of the mind, many believed, was being wrongly protected from its wider responsibilities to the national and international community. There is, of course, considerable debate about the inheritance of the 1960s and the era’s relevance for the millennium. However you look at it, it was an era of experimentation and evaluation, a moment when the competing claims of emergent community rights—civil rights, women’s rights, students’ rights, cultural rights—forced society to reconsider what the public “interest” may be. As an attempt to redefine the public good from the perspective of the marginal and the powerless, the 1960s certainly shared something of the “human rights culture” of our own times. Now, I do not want to attribute to President Levi opinions that he may not have held in 1969, and sympathies that he might not have felt. But in keeping with the ritual of the revision of tradition that I have suggested is true to the very spirit of convocation itself, I would like to ask what it might mean to keep alive the tradition of the life of the mind for us in 2000.

In 1969, President Levi wrote:

Universities and colleges over time have kept alive the tradition of the life of the mind. They have continued the traditions of culture and rediscovered cultures which have died. They have . . . emphasized the continuing need for free inquiry and discussion, the importance of scientific discovery, and the need to understand the non-rational. They have stood for the concept of the wholeness of knowledge, for the morality of that intellectual criticism which is so difficult because it is self-criticism, requiring the admission of error. . . . This is what a liberal education is about, and its illumination is essential if graduate and professional work are to participate in the intellectual tradition. [This] is an approach to education that emphasizes the magic of a disciplined process, self-generating, self-directing and free from external constraints. An approach which requires an independence of spirit, a voluntary commitment. It forces the asking of questions. It is not content with closed systems. (4/5)

A liberal education enhances the life of the mind when it strives for the “wholeness of knowledge.” But such “wholeness of knowledge,” Levi suggests, is grounded in a tradition of self-criticism—a confrontation with the limits of your learning and the limitations of your field. There is an engaging irony in this idea. The wholeness of knowledge is not the expression of an incarnate idea, nor is it a seed of wisdom that grows organically. The educational “whole” is built up of a series of intersecting lines and limits drawn across disciplines. The borders of your discipline are the frontiers of other disciplines and the growth of knowledge depends on border crossings and the redrawing of disciplinary maps. Intellectual criticism is not simply the contest or competition between disciplinary territories, nor is self-criticism satisfied by scholarly disputation. Self-criticism goes beyond arguments about method, the status of facts, or the fate of departments and paradigms. Self-criticism is a *moral* or ethical *attitude* that strives towards educational excellence. Intellectual “doubt” engenders self-criticism and provides us with an ethical predisposition to engage in a dialogical relationship with other scholarly values and cultural perspectives that may be distinct from ours and in disagreement with ours.

The “magic of a disciplined process,” to use Levi’s unusual and suggestive phrase, lies in breeding discontent with “closed systems”; and the importance of rationalist scientific discovery would consist in creating, at the same time, the desire to understand the non-rational. Discipline and magic, science and the non-rational: the making of the educational whole is nothing less than the process of bridging intellectual borders, the art of grafting academic values, or the act of translating the competing virtues of our disciplines. It would, I think, be true to the spirit of Levi’s thought if I were to suggest—somewhat metaphorically—that he urges us to connect the prose and the passion; to bridge the prose of information, research, regulation, calculation, description, and narration with the passion of imagination, creation, discovery, risk, commitment, courage, and originality. The magic of the disciplines arises from building such bridges that may bear the weight of our intellectual projects.

Connecting the prose and the passion has long been both the “magic” of the University of Chicago and part of its ethical educational endeavor. In turning to Levi’s convocation address I drew upon one luminous moment in that long history of liberal learning and reflection that is our

heritage. And it was to echo that call for connection, that led me to take, as my text for today, the words of that great English liberal, the novelist E. M. Forster. Let me quote one of the most celebrated passages from his novel, *Howards End*:

. . . Only connect the prose and the passion, and both will be exalted, and human love will be seen at its height. Live in fragments no longer. Only connect. . . . Without it we are meaningless fragments, half monks, half beasts, unconnected arches that have never joined into a man.

For those of you who are as embarrassed as I am by Forster's unabashed, ungendered reference to all human beings as "men," there is some questionable comfort to be found in a statement made by an earlier President of the University, Dr. Ernest Burton, at an alumni gathering in 1925: "If any of the ladies here should take offense at my use of the masculine term," he said, "I should like to say that I always include the women in the term 'men'." Forster's subject is human love; ours, of course, is the love and the life of scholarly learning. But in both cases, we must heed the liberal creed—"only connect."

In the seven years that I have been at this University, I have seen a growing connection, even a glowing collaboration, between the prose and the passion of scholarship at all levels. For instance, literary scholars—both faculty and students—have revised the canons of English and American literature in the light of postcolonial and minority writers who range from the Americas to the Pacific Rim; artists have realized their passionate visions with the new technologies of digital and virtual representation; the humanities, social sciences, and the hard sciences have come together to redefine the place of "human rights" in the curriculum; legal scholars have turned the attention of their students towards the psychology and pathology of emotional and affective life; anthropologists and medics have joined forces in debating the political culture of AIDS on a worldwide scale; research centers focus on gender, race, and ethnicity in order to produce a "wholeness of knowledge" that is based on the histories and experiences of those who have most sharply felt the glancing blow of racial or sexual discrimination—an unwarranted wounding for nothing other than their cultural "difference." Medical and business ethics are now as significant as the more traditional specialisms in these

dynamic fields. The claims of globalization theory continue to be tested and contested in departments that extend from sociology to international relations and comparative literature. Our great strengths in musicology will soon be supported by an exciting program in musical performance. In each of these instances, the tradition of the life of the mind is enriched when the prose of pedagogy is extended in the direction of those passions that bridge *universities and societies*. To achieve the “wholeness of knowledge” will always remain an aspiration, never empirically or experientially achievable. But we aim towards that sense of ethical and intellectual inclusiveness when we draw back the bow and release the arrow of tradition into a future that we can never completely know or control.

Indeed, this great intersective and interdisciplinary “dissemination” of ideas that increasingly characterizes campus life, is a contemporary version of President Harper’s vision of a three-fold framing of the founding faiths of this University. Original research ranked first in Harper’s scheme of things. Then came instruction, which transmitted a body of knowledge, but was especially concerned with producing what he called “an attitude of mind,” an intellectual temper close to the self-critical credo that Levi was to later propose. Finally, Harper insisted on “dissemination” (the phrase is his), which consisted in making public, “through the voice or through the printed page,” the results of research and instruction. What the University of Chicago has sown in the world, it now richly harvests.

There was a time when such curricular developments and intellectual innovations as I have been speaking of became the battleground of the culture wars. There was a fear that the fragile “craft” of scholarship would lose its bearings when forced into the stormy seas of public policy. There was a sense that academic standards were falling as they passed into the hands of standard bearers for whom fashion or flag-waving was all. On both sides of the divide there was a desire for separatism and sovereignty. The liberal left pursued a politics of identity that was schismatic and separatist; the right resorted to claims for cultural authenticity and traditional authority that attempted to homogenize a diverse society. In their rage for recognition and representation, both sides neglected that striving for wholeness that is built on self-criticism and proper intellectual doubt. The prose became rhetorical; much passion was unwisely spent. The positive ethical value of self-criticism, as crucial to the life of the mind, was unfortunately eclipsed.

Happily, today a wiser counsel prevails. Our “inter”-disciplinarity is grounded on a notion of human and scholarly “*inter-est*” that Hannah Arendt, who once taught at this University, has explained in the Walgreen lectures she delivered at Chicago in the late fifties:

[Action and speech] . . . constitute in the word’s most literal significance, something which *inter-est*, which lies between people and can relate and bind them together. Most action and speech is concerned with this in-between which varies with each group of people, so that most words and deeds are about some worldly objective reality in addition to being a disclosure of the acting and speaking agent. . . . But for all its intangibility, this in-between is no less real than the world of things that we visibly have in common. (182)

It is my sincerest hope that your experiences at the University of Chicago may have led you in action, speech, and writing to such a sense of human and intellectual *inter-est*. May the life of the mind bring you to a kind of self-critical fellowship that binds people together while enhancing their sense of agency and freedom. If we have made it attractive for you, over your years here, to become deeply invested in such an ideal of education, then I have little doubt that the best that this University has to offer will continue to *inter-est* you, in Hannah Arendt’s sense, to bind you together in purpose and performance. In the midst of the variety and diversity of your lives, let there always be a space for that intangible “in-between” of human and intellectual interest which is spanned by the connected gothic arches of prose and passion. Without such “wholeness of knowledge,” life and learning lose their mission and their magic.

Thank you for listening. My warmest congratulations to you, your families, your friends, and your teachers!

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