

The 462d Convocation

The Inauguration of Don Michael Randel as President of the University

Inaugural Address

By Don Michael Randel

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“The question before us is how to become one in spirit, not necessarily in opinion.” Thus did Marion Talbot record the first remarks of our first President, William Rainey Harper, at the first meeting of our faculty, on October 1, 1892.

To have the great honor to become the twelfth President of this great institution is to be but the twelfth President to take up this very question. The record of this succession is remarkably consistent. The result is a oneness of spirit as palpably present today as ever it has been or could have been imagined to become and unique in the universe of universities anywhere. That oneness of spirit derives, as many have observed in one way and another, in considerable measure from the negative term that is the second part of President Harper’s famous remark. A successor might be tempted to observe that he said “not necessarily” one in opinion rather than “not ever” one in opinion. But at the center of that spirit is that we are of one opinion about only one thing, and that is that we are under no obligation ever to be of one opinion about anything else. Does this mean that we hold nothing else in common? Certainly not.

A number of words and phrases recur through the eleven administrations and 108 years since that first faculty meeting. They speak of the primacy of research, the intimate relationship of research to teaching, and to the amelioration of the condition of humankind, a pioneering spirit, the “great conversation” among and across traditional disciplines that creates not only new knowledge but whole new fields of knowledge, the “experimental attitude” and the intellectual freedom that makes this attitude possible, the intimate and essential relationship to the city of Chicago, and, fundamental to all of this, a distinguished faculty committed to this spirit. At no other university is a such a spirit so deeply and widely shared among faculty, students, and alumni.

Now, this close to election day, everyone has already heard quite enough speeches. The customary beginning points with pride. This leads inexorably to viewing with alarm. There is surely much in the world—even just in the world of higher education—that ought to be viewed with alarm. But this is a day on which to assert not only our ferocious historical commitment to the University’s unique spirit and our continuing passionate devotion to it. It is a day on which to affirm that, because this spirit derives from all of us who have ever been privileged to be a part of the University, it is uniquely in our power to sustain it. Our enemies are only complacency and its sinister relative arrogance, and we need not view these with alarm because we need not succumb to them.

The University’s own Mark Strand writes, in *A Poet’s Alphabet*, that “*B* is for before, the acknowledged antecedent of now, the innocent shape of earlier, the vague and beautiful cousin of ‘when,’ the tragic mother of ‘will become,’ the suicide of ‘too late.’ ” Ours is the responsibility to ensure that, against our fascination with powers of ten, our before remains seamlessly the strength and inspiration of our now and holds indefinitely at bay “too late.” *We* are now the makers of our university, and *we* together will determine its purpose henceforth. Only *we* will be judged, not our before, according to whether its purpose henceforth is the equal of the purpose that it has so long served.

The making of the university is, like the making of the scholarly work for which it exists, the making of a work of art, and in this it is like the making of a life itself. A. R. Ammons’s poem “Garbage” includes the following lines:

. . . art makes shape, order, meaning,
purpose where there was none, or none discernible,

none derivable: life, too, if it is to have
meaning, must be made meaningful; if it is to

have purpose, its purpose must be divined, invented,

manifested, held to. . . .

The university's purpose, too, must be divined, invented, manifested, held to. These words capture the sense in which the university is the product of its own creative will—a will that asserts itself against all that inhibits the pursuit of ideas and ultimately against the opposite of being, namely nothing. Strand writes,

N is also for nothing, which, in its all-embracing modesty, is the manageable sister of everything. Ah, nothing! About which anything can be said, and is. An absence that knows no bounds. The climax of inaction. . . . It is the original of sleep and the end of life.

The making of the individual work of scholarship, like the making of the university, like the making of a life, is the assertion that life is worth living principally through the exercise of our most profoundly human faculties. The making of the university in our daily lives asserts a collective spirit against experience that would otherwise seem shapeless, orderless, meaningless, purposeless.

Divine, invent, manifest, hold to. These words deserve a place among those that we use to evoke our spirit as a university, for they capture much about the work of each of us as members of the University, as well as much about what it takes to carry that spirit forward as a community. Like proper scholars, we turn to the *Oxford English Dictionary* for help on this point.

divine, v. 2. To make out by sagacity, intuition, or fortunate conjecture (that is, in some other way than by actual information); to conjecture, guess.

The university does not exist to pursue what is easily predictable or what is predictably useful. It requires the intellectual freedom in which to follow sagacity, intuition, and fortunate conjecture to what was not previously predictable and to what is unpredictably useful at some current state of knowledge. In this sense, *divine* may be a better word than *discover*, which might imply that the search for truth is something like an Easter-egg hunt in which truth is a set of objects lying about perfectly formed wherever your mother hid them, and clever girls and boys will in due

course find them all. The truth, if that is what we are after, does not lie about waiting to be stumbled upon. It requires the active effort of a mind. This points to our second word.

invent, v. 2. To find out or produce by mental activity.

†b. To compose as a work of imagination or literary art; to treat in the way of literary or artistic composition.

3. To find out in the way of original contrivance; to create, produce, or construct by original thought or ingenuity; to devise first, originate (a new method of action, kind of instrument, etc.).

“Produce by mental activity,” “by original thought or ingenuity”—these are the crucial phrases. But the resonance of “in the way of literary or artistic composition” contributes much to our sense of what investigators actually do and what the university is actually about. *Invent* is perhaps again better than *discover*, and it may even add something to *pioneer*, which privileges getting there first at the expense of any contribution to the nature of what one gets to. Like the scholarship that is produced in the laboratory or in the library, the university as an institution is the product of “mental activity” and “original thought or ingenuity,” and it exists only as long as that mental activity and original thought or ingenuity continue. But what becomes of the university and its work even in such a case?

manifest, v. 1. *trans.* To make evident to the eye or to the understanding; to show plainly, disclose, reveal.

3.a. To display (a quality, condition, feeling, etc.) by one’s action or behaviour; to give evidence of possessing, reveal the presence of, evince.

The purpose of the university must be manifested, just as the work of its individual faculty members must be manifested. Here the purpose of the university runs head-on into the ivory tower, which has no obligations and from which nothing escapes. In the first instance, this implies the obligation to submit one’s ideas to the marketplace of ideas, where without constraint they will be tested, contested, refined. But it also implies the obligation for the university to declare itself to a wider community and to return to that community some of what it derives from

its presence within that larger community. This has special resonance for our university. The University of Chicago was conceived by and in the city of Chicago. Our responsibilities to it have from the beginning included responsibility to our immediate neighbors, responsibility to return to the people of the city the fruits of our research on it, and responsibility to the city's heart and soul as a city unfettered by prior example in its own invention of the nature of cities, their architecture, and their cultural institutions—a city as original as the most original of ideas at the University.

What guarantees the university? Who takes responsibility for it?

hold, v. 2.a. To keep from getting away; to keep fast, grasp.

15.a. To do the act of holding; to keep hold, to maintain one's grasp; to cling. Also with *by* (†*upon, to*).

c. *Commerce*. To retain goods, etc.; not to sell.

17. To maintain one's attachment; to remain faithful or attached; to adhere, keep, 'stick' *to*; to abide *by*.

Here is a good, hard-working monosyllable. No Latin roots here. Only a couple of columns of old, middle, low, and high English and German. Meanings well into the double digits. Perhaps it is the most important word of all in relation to our tradition, our purpose, and our spirit. If they are to be held to, we alone will do the holding. It places the responsibility for the university squarely where it belongs—on the university community itself to remain faithful or attached, to stick to one another and to our beliefs about what the University is and ought to be.

Sticking to one another turns out to be the hard part of all of this. It is all well and good if every individual in the university sticks to its spirit as we have all come to define it. But it may well be for naught absent a genuine respect on the part of each of us for the many ways in which other individuals work out sticking to this spirit. Here, too, the spirit of the university is as likely to be corrupted from within as from without. It will begin when disciplines or departments or individuals assert their moral superiority over one another. This may simply mask envy of a position of privilege enjoyed by one or another discipline in relation to resources provided

largely by the outside world. Or it may mask a belief that a position of privilege in relation to resources provided largely by the outside world constitutes a position of moral superiority. We all have different material requirements for the accomplishment of our work. If we cannot, independent of this fact, however, believe in the value of the work of others, it is hard to suppose that we fully understand the proper relationship of our own work to the spirit of which we boast.

We should perhaps think briefly about the phrase “not to sell.” Critics of both the right and left have complained that the modern university has sold out to the wrong interests—or has at least compromised its noblest interests in the pursuit of ideology or material gain. Accountability is confused with accounting in the view of Bill Readings (in a book with the title *The University in Ruins*) and others, and the modern university, having given in to the crassest market forces, advertises itself as standing for excellence, a term that in consequence has become entirely vacuous. In an article in *Critical Inquiry*, Dominick LaCapra points out that this critique closely approaches the critique of neoconservatives in its too easy acceptance of an idea of a past—a before—that never really existed.

It is naïve to suppose that universities have ever existed independent of cultural, economic, and political forces. The question is not whether universities exist in relation to such forces but why and how they do. These are the questions that we must continuously ask about the university just as we ask them about life itself. For Mark Strand,

Y is for why. Why is the question we ask ourselves again and again. Why are we here and not there? Why am I me? Why not a goldfish in a fish tank in a restaurant somewhere on the outskirts of Des Moines?

For Martha Nussbaum the question in a recent paper is “how to live with dignity, as a rational animal, in a world of events that we do not fully control.” One could equally well say of the university, the question is how it can exist with dignity, as an intellectual community, in a world of events that it does not fully control.

If this is the question that we must address in relation to the university, what might be said to be

the university's enabling condition? In a recent lecture on this campus, Jacques Derrida took the view that the enabling condition for the university is that it exist precisely without condition. To exist without condition is to require neither consensus nor dissensus (in Readings's term). It is to insist that the university's purpose must be "divined, invented, manifested, held to" from within rather than imposed from without. It is to insist on the unity of spirit and the diversity, even the rambunctious diversity, of opinion that we know so well. I pledge myself, in all humility but with all my strength, to hold to this spirit and to its lasting presence in this university. *Crescat scientia, vita excolatur.*

Don Michael Randel is President of the University of Chicago.