

Daniel Garber

454th Convocation Address: "Teaching What Cannot Be Taught,"

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"Teaching What Cannot Be Taught" by Daniel Garber

Almost everyone who stands in this spot at convocation tries to use his or her own discipline as a basis for their remarks. I am no exception, unfortunately. For my address today, I thought I would discuss something about which I don't know very much (which we on the faculty do from time to time, as you students in the audience may have noticed and you friends and family may have suspected). But, you know, it just sounded dumb. So you are stuck with some philosophical remarks - philosophy and its history is my own discipline. At least there is this consolation: unlike the other subjects taught in this University, philosophy really is central to everything. Or, at least, that's what we in the Philosophy Department want to believe.

One of my cherished memories of teaching here is an episode that happened one Monday morning in Winter Quarter, when I was teaching a class of mostly freshmen in the Humanities Common Core, maybe fifteen years ago, maybe even longer. The book we were reading was one of my favorites, Descartes's *Discourse on the Method*. Descartes begins the book with a kind of intellectual autobiography. He tells the reader about how eagerly he had anticipated going to school, and learning everything there was to know:

From my childhood I have been nourished upon letters, and because I was persuaded that by their means one could acquire a clear and certain knowledge of all that is useful in life, I was extremely eager to learn them. But as soon as I had completed the course of study at the end of which one is normally admitted to the ranks of the learned, I completely changed my opinion. For I found myself beset by so many doubts and errors that I came to think I had gained nothing from my attempts to become educated but increasing recognition of my ignorance.

This despite the fact that he had attended one of the best schools in Europe, the new Jesuit academy of La Flèche, the University of Chicago of its day, as it were. After going through a brief discussion of all the subjects he was taught in school and why he found them unsatisfying, Descartes concluded as follows:

As soon as I was old enough to emerge from the control of my teachers, I entirely abandoned the study of letters. Resolving to seek no knowledge other than that which could be found in myself or else in the great

book of the world, I spent the rest of my youth traveling, visiting courts and armies, mixing with people of diverse temperaments and ranks, gathering various experiences, testing myself in the situations which fortune offered me, and at all times reflecting upon whatever came my way so as to derive some profit from it.

I discussed these passages with the class for a while. I made sure that they understood what Descartes was saying and why. After it was clear to them what was going on in the text, I then asked for a show of hands, asking them how many agreed with Descartes's point of view. Most agreed. I then asked them the hard question: If you really agree with Descartes, then why are still here in this classroom? How come you haven't all bolted for the door? If you really think that we have nothing to teach you here, if you really think that knowledge and wisdom cannot be learned from books and teachers, why stay at this or any other school?

In retrospect, perhaps it was kind of a dumb question to ask. After all, I could have lost most of my class then and for the rest of the quarter, something not easy to explain to my chairman or my Dean. But they didn't leave. Instead, with somewhat puzzled looks on their faces and wide open eyes, they began to think about why they were there and what they could hope to get from studying this book and the others that lay ahead of them, with me and with the other teachers that they would have in this University.

What we talked about that day is a kind of paradox. At the University of Chicago, we are trying to teach you to think for yourselves; whatever department or school you are graduating from, we want you to come out of this place being able to think independently. But is independence of mind something that can be taught?

It's not as easy as you might think. University of Chicago faculty are chosen in part for their independence of mind, but they are also chosen for what they know and what they know how to do. Here at the University of Chicago we have experts in every imaginable corner of scholarship, science, and many practical disciplines, people who can tell you everything that you want to know (and more) about Rossini operas, about Eskimo verbs, about Russian serfs, how to run your economy if you are a small-to-medium-sized nation, and what to put in your constitution if you are a newly independent nation-state. And on and on and on. And we like to talk about what we know, too, which is another reason why we are here.

But the students who choose to come to the University of Chicago are also very special. The students who come here are, to be sure, attracted by the eminence of the faculty. (We on the faculty, at least, like to think so.) But they are also attracted, I think, by a certain reputation that the place has, a reputation for

producing graduates who know how to think. I have no doubt but that the students here come to see the limitations of the knowledge that we offer them in our courses, our seminars, and our office hours, just as Descartes came to see the limits of the education that he was offered. But you stayed, just as my students stayed that Monday morning. Why? Because, I think, you came to see that learning the limitations of knowledge was one of the most important things that we could teach you here.

But to return to my question, how do you teach someone to think for themselves? How is that possible? It isn't as if we could offer a course on it - Philosophy 265: Thinking for Yourself. Or offer a Common Core sequence - Ideas and Methods of Independent Thought. Nor is it something that we can do in the course of mastering another subject. Imagine the economics professor, after giving a lecture on micro-economics, telling the students that they are not to believe anything that they heard in class.

But we do teach students how to think for themselves. How do we do it? In a way, thinking independently is part of the ethos of the place, something that new faculty pick up when they first come, something that very quickly gets transmitted to the students. A few years ago I had an offer from a distinguished eastern university. While I was considering what to do, I called a colleague here who had come to Chicago from there some years ago, and asked him about the difference between the University of Chicago and the other university, call it "X University." "Well," he said, "at X, faculty figure that if you are there, then you must be the world expert in whatever it is that you teach. And so, you don't have real conversations at X. One person talks, and the others listen respectfully until he finishes. But at Chicago, they have no respect: you are only as good as your last argument."

Over the last few years we at the University, faculty and students, have been examining ourselves, and as we prepare for the future, we have been trying to figure out what is really essential to the University of Chicago, whether it is the Core curriculum, or the quarter system, or even our legendary (and much exaggerated) antipathy toward "fun" on campus. But this story more than anything else epitomizes for me what this University is all about: you are only as good as your last argument.

This doesn't make life easy, I can tell you from personal experience. I have sat at the head of classes where a well-placed objection or two from the students can topple the house of cards that was the lecture or seminar that I had carefully prepared. But, at the same time, I am proud to have students who can do that to me.

I am also proud to be a faculty member at a university where I don't have to tell you, the students, that at the end of your education you are not supposed to be cowed into submission by the brilliance of your teachers and by the depth of the wisdom that they have given you. You know that already. You are supposed to be arrogant enough, like Descartes was, to think that you can do better than us. And you are. And you can.

I will leave you with a request. Go out, and teach us what we could not teach you. Do things that we think are impossible. If you become scholars, write the book or article that we said couldn't be written. If you are scientists, prove the theory that we thought couldn't be right. If you are lawyers, win the case that we didn't think could be won. If you are in business, start a company that we couldn't even envision.

You are the leaders of the future: go out and make us, your teachers, the footnotes. But please don't forget us. We want to know what you do. Let me return for a moment to my friend René Descartes. At the very beginning of my address, I talked about the passage from his Discourse on the Method where he rehearses his years in school, explains his disappointment and why he left his teachers behind. It is interesting to note, though, that when he published his book, he carefully sent copies of it to as many of his teachers as he could find. There survives a copy of the note appended to the book that he sent his philosophy professor. (This is really true; I'm not making it up.) It begins:

I'm sure that you don't remember the names of all of the students that you had now twenty-three or twenty-four years ago, when you taught philosophy at La Flèche, and I'm sure that I am among the number of those whose names are effaced from your memory. But despite that, I don't believe that this effaces from mine the obligations which I owe you. . . .

He goes on to say, "I am very happy to offer you [this book] as a fruit which belongs to you, and of which you spread the first seeds in my mind. . . ." Descartes was very kind to his teacher, and I'm sure that he was deeply touched and deeply honored by Descartes's generous words. Despite Descartes's apparent dismissal of his education in the Discourse, his teachers must have done something right. But we don't, as a matter of fact, know exactly to whom this letter was addressed. Descartes is remembered, though his teachers are not.

Go forth, and do great things. But keep those cards and letters coming. You mean a lot to us.

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