

The 479th Convocation

Address: “The Things You Carry with You”

By Christopher A. Faraone

December 10, 2004

Chances are high that like most Americans you—soon to be the most recent graduates of the University of Chicago—will change your permanent residence at least two or three more times in your lifetime, and that in the process you will carry with you many things from your student days. In the beginning you will be most aware of the concrete forms of this baggage, especially when moving into apartment buildings without elevators or houses with difficult driveways or entranceways. But you will find that with each successive move, two things will happen: first, it will get more difficult to keep all of your student memorabilia with you; and second, you will begin to realize that you are carrying other things that you hadn’t anticipated. You might wonder, of course, how I am in a position to make these predictions. I have had the great pleasure over the last decade or so to lead a number of courses and trips sponsored by our alumni association, and I can tell you what our alumni tell me: in the end, there are only a few objects that you pack up and move each time: photographs and original art such as poems, paintings, or recordings. And then there are the books. Photographs and art are easy to explain, of course, because they are irreplaceable, and they are often linked to important and very personal moments in our lives. But why the books? Why do we carry with us so many books from our student days?

They may simply be, of course, a sign of our accomplishments, a monumental kind of diploma that telegraphs to our friends and visitors the extent of our labors or the quality of our education. A form of boast that says: “Look at all these books I’ve read” or “Look at all these really *difficult* books I’ve read.” But our alumni, who like you are graduates from the College or from one of the graduate divisions or professional schools, tell me something different: not all of the books get carried along. Science textbooks, for example, and technical manuals are gradually dropped by the wayside, when the information they contain becomes outdated as new discoveries are made and paradigms shift. But the books our alumni carry with them tend to be those that are intrinsically impractical and those that continually resist any final reading or shift in paradigm—books like *King Lear* or *Moby Dick* or Feynman’s *Lectures on Physics*. Even as a humanities

professor, I must say that I find this to be quite odd, because in the short term, at least—while you are working hard, building careers and perhaps families—these books will be of no use to you. Indeed, they will probably sit in a box at the back of a closet or out of reach on the top row of a bookshelf, while other forms of media, both paper and electronic, will press forward and command your undivided attention. But later in life many of you, like many of our alumni, will find yourselves rummaging through those books as you begin to enjoy your professional success, or even later as you begin to contemplate retirement and suddenly have the time to reflect more deeply on your life and your place in the community and the wider world.

I would suggest, moreover, that when you begin to reread that old copy of *King Lear*, and when you begin to talk about it with a friend, you will also be exercising an important series of skills and habits that you either learned or honed at this university. As a professor of literature, I have the repeated and great pleasure of reading and discussing with College freshmen and sophomores a variety of ancient Greek poems and plays, as well as narrative histories and philosophy. I think that most of my students see the value of the intensive writing program that is central to all humanities core programs. And I do believe that many of them actually enjoy reading and talking about the plays of Sophocles or the history of Thucydides. But they don't always realize that in doing so they are learning or refining an age-old practice of literate societies: the close reading and discussion of important texts—texts that encourage us to pose questions about and reflect upon the human condition more widely.

This habit of reading and community discussion is, of course, a widespread phenomenon in our culture: think of all the people, who meet—often on a regular basis—to read and discuss texts that are central to their religious tradition, or think of all the lawyers, whose careers depend on the same kind of careful analysis and discussion of documents like the American constitution or important precedent-setting cases like *Brown v. Board of Education*. But such communities of discourse also appear in smaller sizes and in less formal and less imposing venues. Indeed, every time you find yourself standing in a museum discussing with friends in hushed voices a sculpture or a photograph, or sitting around a table exchanging views about foreign policy or political candidates, you are involved in this same time-honored ritual of discussion and communal interpretation. Such discussion groups are, of course, a central part of the education that you have

received here at the University, whether it be in the courses of our College core, in the seminars of our various graduate divisions or in the formal and informal study groups or project teams that are so central to the learning experience in our professional schools.

We do this, of course, because it is fun and stimulating, but I would also suggest that we do this because in the end our deliberations and our conclusions are more successful and more thoughtful—especially if we measure success in our ability to challenge each other, in the way that Socrates and others have taught us, to think more deeply and articulate our thoughts more clearly than we would have if we were simply thinking by ourselves. So in addition to learning how to read or study in isolation, most of you have also learned how to push and encourage each other to acts of analysis, interpretation, or appreciation that you could not have come up with individually. Indeed, in many cases the entire creative process of discovery cannot even begin without this kind of community of readers and thinkers. This summer, for example, I finished writing a book on ancient Greek poetry, and I will say to you what I say in the preface of my manuscript: the argument of my book arose entirely out of a course I taught at this university and was, in fact, originally prompted by the questions that my students asked me and the discussions that ensued.

I stress the importance of community, both to education and to the discovery of new knowledge, because it sometimes goes unmentioned or unappreciated. Indeed faculty speakers at convocations at the University of Chicago are far more likely to mention another celebrated tradition and habit of mind—the cultivation of critical thinking. As you all have learned by now, this is a university where we have a healthy—one might even say rabid—skepticism about everything. One of my colleagues once said that we don't just slaughter sacred cows around here, we break every bone in their poor little bodies and then pulverize them. This confrontational attitude toward traditional paradigms is, of course, crucial to the forward motion of every academic and professional discipline, which—if it is a healthy discipline—seeks incessantly to correct the mistakes of past generations and move the field forward with more rigorous definition and more clarity of thought and expression. This habit of mind, in fact, drew me to this campus more than fifteen years ago, and it is yet another benefit that all of you will carry away with you. Indeed, my recent experience reading and discussing the *Odyssey* with our alumni suggests that

most of you will be as annoyingly independent-minded at the age of eighty as you are right now.

But in the grand old Chicago tradition of dealing with sacred cows, I want to suggest to you that this image of critical thinking is all too often romanticized incorrectly as a scenario of a single individual fighting against the world, a solitary scholar, who—like Socrates in Plato’s *Apology*—imagines herself or himself as a single gadfly harassing and goading the rest of us to be better thinkers and even better individuals. But in fact this has not been my experience at the University of Chicago, and I think that this caricature of critical thinking ignores the lived experience of many students and faculty on this campus, where there is a strong countervailing tradition of working together in groups or teams and applying this skill of critical thinking within a community of thoughtful and hardworking individuals. I am not claiming, of course, that these conversations are always fun—indeed sometimes they can be exceedingly difficult and unpleasant, especially if the group decides that on this particular day your ox is the one that needs to be gored. Nor am I suggesting that the result of this process is or ought to be a kind of “groupthink” of the sort that seems to be proliferating these days in certain branches of our federal government. No, far from it. I am thinking of the classroom or the seminar room as a laboratory where we gather to test ideas and arguments in a way that helps each of us to arrive at the clearest and most sensible answers to the questions we are pursuing individually.

In some fields, in fact, this approach to research is the only effective one available. My brother Steve, for example, is a professor of psychology and the director of a research project that is searching for genes that cause attention deficit hyperactivity disorder and other psychiatric conditions. Once, when I asked him how such a large and diverse group of medical doctors, biologists, geneticists, and psychiatrists managed to work together harmoniously on such a complicated project, he smiled and said: “We work together well because we have to if we want our project to succeed, because none of us individually has all of the skills or controls all of the data necessary to move the field forward.” I have often thought of his words in the context of the University of Chicago, because it seems to me that our habits of communal discussion—our practices of group interrogation—are closely linked to our equally long tradition of encouraging research that bridges the traditional divides between academic departments, between various graduate divisions, and especially between professional schools. Indeed, I suggest that the

continual creation and evolution of interdisciplinary workshops and centers and especially the new Center for Integrative Science are all repeated institutional expressions of our need and our desire for communal discussion and debate.

I would suggest, therefore, that this Chicago tendency to think critically and to challenge ourselves to think harder about a text or a theorem, about a corporate strategy or a difficult point of copyright law, is almost always embedded in communal dialogue rather than solitary rumination. Or to put it another way: the act of making new discoveries or slaughtering sacred cows turns out, more often than not, to be a kind of team sport rather than an individual one.

Finally let me mention one last kind of acquisition that you will carry with you, and to my mind it is perhaps the most obvious and the most important: a set of close and enduring friendships and relationships that will, I assure you, last a lifetime. I can tell you from my own experience that I met the great majority of my closest, lifelong friends in college or graduate school, as well as the most important person in my adult life, my wife and fellow traveler Susan, who is sitting in the audience today. I can also predict that no matter how busy or distracted you get in the coming years, these comrades, these fellow travelers will be a constant source of energy and support for you.

And now your journey continues. I congratulate all of you on your hard work and your achievements, and I congratulate as well your parents, your teachers, and your advisers: we are all extremely proud of you. I wish you the best of luck in the coming weeks, as you move off to different points of the compass, each of you carrying with you your books and mementos, your uniquely Chicago habits of mind and communal discourse, and that special circle of friends and confidants with whom you will share the next round of challenges and adventures.

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