

The 460th Convocation

Address: "Getting the Third Degree"

By Hanna Holborn Gray

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It is very gratifying to see that you've all made it here this morning, especially at this early hour, and to know that, having survived four years of being given the third degree, you are now ready to get your first degree. Mr. Hutchins once remarked that "A large university tends to become a bureaucracy tempered by sentimentality." In the process of arriving at this convocation, you have undoubtedly experienced the one; today you will encounter the other as well. You will find that your alma mater, the great maroon mother, can be a doting as well as a demanding parent.

So the first order of business this morning is to congratulate you most warmly on receiving your degrees. The second is to remind you that my own presence here is intended to keep this from happening too quickly. For that, in the etiquette of these occasions, would be unseemly. You are meant to be restrained from rushing out into the great world by the double defense of your natural good manners and my unnatural verbosity. And this, I can reveal, is really the point of the convocation speech. Its function is to prolong the ceremony, and to do so in order to make it appear that something has really happened here today as you move on from the College.

Once upon a time, long before you were born, the state of Vermont was a rock-ribbed Republican stronghold. In those days an old man named Caleb, lying on his deathbed, sent for the town clerk. "What can I do for you, Caleb?" asked the clerk. "I want you to change my registration from Republican to Democratic," said the old man. "Good God," cried the astonished clerk, "I've never registered one of those before; we've never seen one in the history of this town. Why would you do this terrible thing, and as your last act on this good earth?" "Better one of them should go than one of us," was the response.

Well, you are about to become one of *them*. But if you really think you can cease to be one of *us*, forget it. The fact is that degrees are very pesky things. For starters, they are indelible; there's no way to scrub them off. You can't return or exchange them. You have acquired a citizenship that

you cannot renounce, however hard you try. I actually once dealt at exhausting length at another university with a graduate who kept trying to give his degree back—he was pretty mad at the place—and even went to law, but he simply couldn't win. You have in effect achieved tenure at the U of C.

So in moving on, you will remain inescapably a graduate of the College of the University of Chicago, and its mark will remain on you wherever you may be. And indeed you'll receive evidence of that many times over, as the postal service delivers copious communications of extraordinary good will and eloquence, rather different in tone from those stern reminders that greeted you in your mailboxes here. The University, you will find, is like the church that welcomes all denominations, and especially fives and tens and twenties, preferably with zeroes attached.

Still more to the point, you will remain citizens of a commonwealth that extends beyond the campus of the University. Ideally you will be identifiable, not by some single doctrine or dogma but by your continuing willingness to take seriously the life of the mind, your commitment to critical thought, your independence in inquiry and in judgment. I hope that you will stay a little eccentric, by which I do not propose that you indulge in bizarre behavior but rather that you not simply conform to the expected, not capitulate to the merely fashionable or currently correct, not adopt unthinking, if common, opinion, but chart your own course, however difficult, on the basis of your own choices thoughtfully made. I hope that you will do the hard work of confronting complexity while supporting your intellectual imperatives without arrogance or pomposity, remaining open to other ways and ideas and to a sense of the absurd, to a delight in the human comedy. I hope you will achieve the gift of balanced perspective and care more deeply for wisdom than for expertise; I hope you will not neglect that powerful heritage of the past which speaks recurrently to our understanding in the present and draws us into a larger world of thought and experience.

Robert Frost once said, "Education doesn't change life much. It just lifts trouble to a higher plane of regard." But of course education is not meant to make us comfortable, nor is the freedom it helps create. It would often be a lot easier not to think, as it would also be easier not to try to see

things whole or take into account new or different or unsettling ways of reviewing what we may have taken conveniently for granted. So, too, it might be easier to evade the pain of making decisions and choices and to withdraw into some state of being where all thought and all options were forever open. But strangely enough, that course would diminish, not enhance, our freedom.

Hannah Arendt, who taught here for some years, once eulogized a cherished friend in the following words:

A stranger in the world, never quite at home in it, and at the same time a realist. It would have been easy for him to conform, for he knew the world very well; it would have been easier for him, a greater temptation in all probability, to escape into some utopianism. His whole spiritual existence was built on the decision never to conform and never to escape, which is only another way of saying that it was built on courage.

These words capture well, I think, an ideal of the integrity that might conjoin the moral and intellectual dimensions of our lives.

As entering students, your first experience of getting the third degree was to attend and then discuss a lecture on the aims of education. Now, at the end, you will find that your years here have forced you to internalize that question, to see your education and your intellectual life ahead as in part a continuing meditation on the proper aims and uses, the improper forms and abuses, of critical intelligence.

You will also find, unless you are very, very careful, that the University will, perhaps as early as next Monday, fall into a permanent state of decline. For it is the common experience of graduates that their college is never quite what it was in their own day and in their memories, and that not to be the same, or the place of one's memory, is inevitably to be less than before both in standards and in stature. "The curse of a university," said Mr. Hutchins in completing the description I cited earlier, "is easy standards," and you most certainly will not want to see anything of that sort creeping in here.

All commentary on education assumes that things are generally getting worse. Indeed, if you have been listening at all to contemporary critics, you would have to believe that you cannot possibly have been educated at all, or at least as well as people used to be, and you may come in turn to believe that your successors' fate is even more harrowing.

Why is this? Why do people forget the saying that “the schools ain't what they used to be and never was?” (You will, as students about to be declared certifiably educated, recognize that these are rhetorical questions. As Sam Goldwyn put it, in the best tradition of the Socratic method: “When I want your opinion, I'll give it to you.”) I think the answer has to do with the ways in which education and its institutions get transformed into emblems of other causes and anxieties. It is instructive to see how much of the vocabulary applied to the presumed decline of higher education derives from the language of a pervasive nostalgia and from romantic notions of a golden past that never quite existed, how much has to do with a distress over historical changes that cannot simply be argued away. Universities, often perceived as institutions immune to change and mocked for their conservatism, are at the same time regarded, especially by some of their own alumni, as places that should not change but ought instead to preserve their own past as they, its loyalists, want to remember it, a timeless security against the disintegrations and disappointments, the corruptions and uncertain turnings, of a threatening and unfamiliar world. To the degree that universities mirror the tensions and shifts within the larger society, they become objects of the disillusionments and fears which these evoke— they appear as once safe places made suddenly alien and dangerous, upsetting the convictions and certainties of what now seem simpler and purer times.

So to think about education, and to think about its institutions, is ultimately to think about a good deal more. The debates about universities and about the nature and uses of education go well beyond the issues of the curriculum most worth studying and the skills most worth developing through which they are so frequently argued. They represent basic debates about our views of human purpose and competence, the nature and directions of the social order, the character and priorities of civilized existence. They represent reflections on the quality of the present, its deficiencies and opportunities, reflections on the past and how one might examine and select among its legacies, reflections on the future and how it might best come to assume the shape we

seek.

To think critically about education, then, is to identify the realities and complexities, the problems and possibilities, the displacements and continuities, of change. It is to create standards by which we measure the quality of what institutions embody over time in the light of the fundamental values and traditions by which we hope to be guided. It is to be reminded that the institutions of education, and their enduring goals, live by continuing renewal, a renewal that depends on the spiritual and intellectual engagement of all their citizens. That requires a steadfast fidelity to the fundamental institutional purpose and character that will drive the process of mastering and adapting change precisely in order to give these new life in new times that call on universities to assimilate new forms and methods of knowledge and adapt to new needs.

The University of Chicago is—I will say it—a wonderful institution, one which has set its course by standards that we can call eccentric in the best sense. This is something in which you should take great pride. You should always ask your university to have the courage and foresight to be clear about its own best aims and to adhere consistently to that defined institutional personality which lends shape and weight to the education you have pursued here. Of course you will see changes over time, but if these are the changes required to sustain rather than repudiate or transform its essential ethos, that will be a sign of health and strength, not of decline. Your ability to distinguish between change for the sake of other ends and change for the sake of extending and enhancing the University's goals and special strengths with reasoned vigor will help protect you from the twin diseases of an evasive nostalgia and a derisive indifference. Of course, if you begin to see the place offering gut courses or academic credit for ballroom dancing or an easy life, then we will all have to think again. And if people are no longer asking “Just what exactly do you mean?” and “Where is your evidence?” every time anyone opens her mouth, then something is definitely and radically wrong.

And now, as you set out for the great world, it is my official duty to send you off with some final word of inspiring counsel, and here it is, from that well-known philosopher Pete Seeger. “Do you know,” he asked, “the difference between education and experience? Education is when you read the fine print. Experience is what happens when you don't.”

I hope for all of you that the fine print on your diplomas will speak to a satisfying and productive experience throughout your lives, one that will carry good memories, continuing care for what matters about your university, and an enlarged sense of your ineradicable citizenship in this commonwealth of learning. Once again, warmest congratulations to all of you, and the best of luck.

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