

STRANGENESS AS SUBSTANCE

508th Convocation Address, University of Chicago

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Greetings President Zimmer, Provost Rosenbaum, deans, members of the Board of Trustees, esteemed colleagues, and richly admired students. It is an honor to address you on the 508th Convocation of the University of Chicago and to offer today's graduates heartiest congratulations on reaching one of the great milestones in your lives. Today we also give warmest thanks to friends, mothers, fathers, siblings, children, aunts, uncles, grandparents, step-parents, spouses, partners, in-laws, cousins, teachers, mentors, counselors, and all other creatures, smooth and furry, who have supported you in this remarkable venture.

From this day forward you will be recognized by a vast world of intimates and strangers as permanent members of an elite group. For you have made your way through an extraordinarily rich and demanding institution during difficult times. You might almost think of your achievements as stigmata, evidence that you have undergone a great rite of passage from which you have emerged formally initiated, though not without certain burdens.

Like many of your teachers I underwent my own rites of passage here as a young junior professor. Twenty years ago I left a tenure-track job at a West coast university with a big school of music to come to a place that I knew had lots of brainy and scrappy exchange—more than a little intimidating! What I didn't expect to find was too much in the way of musical performance. Chicago made me rethink this, along with the trade-off I presumed I had made. Here I found composers of world renown whose concerts speak to some of the biggest questions in today's world--intellectual, ethical, political, and social. I also found a place where other members of the brainy bunch gave hundreds of amateur concerts--many quite wonderful, almost all done on a shoestring, and mostly as a sideline.

But, then, so far as I could see, almost nothing here was done much as a sideline. It didn't seem to matter whether people were racing off to workshops, lectures, or dissertation defenses, writing letters of recommendation, producing radio shows or literary journals, fighting poverty or racial inequality, or putting up Sukkot tents. Everything had a breathless intensity to it, with passion and commitment in every stroke. I dove into the fray. For every challenge of mine there was a riposte, and every riposte was a jolt to my neocortex. I proceeded to try to knock down big lists of things I wanted to learn. I wanted to know all I could about cultural anthropology so I went to the anthropology seminar every week. I wanted to become as fluent as possible in the social and intellectual history of early modern Europe, so colleagues in Philosophy, History, English, and the History of Science easily persuaded me to form year-long a seminar on Toleration and later to start the interdisciplinary Early Modern workshop. Soon thereafter, because I was interested in opera and spectatorship, I found colleagues in Art History, Psychiatry, and English who wanted to talk about the human sensorium. We ran a conference on

economies of the senses (which included a terrific paper on pheromones from a student from the Institute for Mind and Biology), and we ran a year-long workshop. And so it went.

These collaborative networks have only become richer during my two decades here, not least with the push toward integrative disciplinary formations in the sciences and humanities and the powerful arts initiative now underway. All that's needed at Chicago to make ideas grow is to be in the thrall of a bottomless curiosity. Then, almost by magic, sidelines will turn into mainlines and headlines. An astrophysicist here recently remarked that Chicago gave him the feeling of all things being possible, that the only "ceiling was your own imagination," and ended by adding "Nobody does interdisciplinary better than us; it's just in our DNA." Yes. When those curiosities go collective, they generate ideas that are even greater than the sum of their individual human parts.

Last winter I was asked by our Provost to say a few words about my Chicago experience at a reception for new recipients of endowed chairs. When I sat down to write, the word "hypercharge" kept running through my head. I had associated the word mentally with Chicago but I couldn't define it. I looked it up and read that in particle physics "hypercharge" is

A quantum characteristic of a group of subatomic particles governed by the strong force that is related to *strangeness* and is represented by a number equal to *twice the average value of the electric charge of the group*. [Century Dictionary]

Now that's for all you physicists out there. I know scarcely a thing about physics, particle or otherwise, but for me the definition has a poetics that resonates with the Chicago I know and love: the idea of a place peopled by a group of subatomic particles with the quantum of hypercharge; and the image of an assemblage of hypercharged beings "represented by a number equal to *twice the average value of the electric charge of the group*."

Allow me to pause for a moment on the thought of these hypercharged creatures being "*governed by the strong force that is related to strangeness*." In many places to be strange is not a good thing. But to be strange at Chicago is fine, because what's strange for others is pretty normal for us. Of course the attribution of strangeness in human culture is mediated by what social scientists sometimes call "relational context." Nonetheless, to most of the outside world, those with obsessive and obsessively intense behaviors are oddballs—people who start shooting a film at 3 am, say; who stay up all night to work on a start-up company or finish an experiment in a chemistry lab; who think about a materials design problem by collaborating on an art installation, pedal the lake to Wisconsin, write an opera for clowns, or design theories that support molecular engineering. These are all real examples of behaviors I've seen at Chicago, and you have surely seen plenty of others. Some obsessives may lack good eye contact, motor skills, or all-around attention spans, or even perseverate, while many present no such symptoms. But whatever their quirks, Chicagoans are inclined to view those possessed by unusual ideas as spirit familiars. All of us have been drawn to this environment because we're preoccupied by thinking outside the box. It's our way of life.

Much of this has been said before, in one form or another, by figures as different as Albert Einstein, Leonardo da Vinci, Galileo Galilei, Ludwig van Beethoven, Mahatma Gandhi, Yo Yo Ma, Steve Jobs, and

Georges Balanchine, and it's been said about them. They're all in different ways what Malcolm Gladwell calls "outliers."

I myself was born on a fairly strange side of the tracks, into generations of artists who thought academia was for people who couldn't really make it as primary creators and who rarely made children do homework. By the time I was about 22, I naively decided to become an adept at writing about music instead of spending the rest of my days practicing a solo instrument that had a pretty minor repertory. I eventually swayed my parents to my side and my brilliant mother has lived long enough that we ended up collaborating on a project that involved reconstructing eighteenth-century costumes for an opera. If I did anything smart with my strangeness as far as my own personal goals were concerned, it was probably having the insight to make the move to the field I'm in, and to discover the artist there—both the artists I study and the artistry of writing scholarly books and essays.

Now that I'm chairing my wonderful and wonderfully unwieldy Department, I see the outliers from a very particular, perpetually close-up perch. I see them when I get letters about promotions and appointments that are not treacle or platitudes but taut analyses full of mind-blowing insights. I see them when I ask student government to tell me how they view our curriculum. I see them in dissertation defenses, workshops, teaching forums, symposia, seminars, cafés, colloquia, and conferences. I see them in the classroom and in office hours, where students explode the boundaries of my own understandings. And more than ever before, I see them in the concerts of our composers--students and faculty members--and in the so-called nonprofessional concerts given by the likes of the University Symphony Orchestra, the Jazz X-tet, the Motet Choir, the Early Music Ensemble, and the Middle East Music Ensemble, to name a few. As Martin Luther King Jr. said in a famous 1964 speech about jazz and the power of freedom, "When life itself offers no order and meaning, the musician creates an order and meaning from the sounds of the earth."

To assemble a group of people who carry the capacity for this kind of productive high-energy collaboration, sustaining themselves at such great and perilous heights, strikes me as nothing short of a miracle. For that reason alone, I do believe this to be the very best of universities. Look around you, at those seated by you and the physical spaces that surround you in Rockefeller and for blocks in every direction. Along with powerful forms of difference, what you see is ingenuity, innovation, optimism, progress, can-do, know-how, and hope. You are at this moment on planet UChicago, the best that universities can produce. But what you're really looking at is the future. When you leave here, spaceship UChicago will catapult you to a world full of promise but also ravaged by the droughts, floods, and earthquakes caused by violent climate changes, with consequent food and water shortages, epidemics, and political strife. There will be widening crises of enormous proportions: financial meltdowns, dysfunction in the service sectors, not least in medical services, and growing populations of disadvantaged and disenfranchised persons, migrants and refugees with nowhere to go.

Whatever the baby boomers of my generation did to improve the world has essentially been done—not that we don't still have a trick or two up our sleeve. But we will be gone or very old by the time you are standing here. And it is you, our graduates, who will inherit this planet. That strangeness that marks

you will not simply be a special badge of your gifts. It will become your covenant with a world that will badly need you.

Today we welcome you to it and congratulate you as the finest, the brightest, the most extra-ordinary, or dare I say again, tipping my cap, the strangest. Today is a day to mark this momentous transition in your lives and to celebrate your momentous achievement. May you prevail in great health and prosperity, full of strange wonderments and miraculous achievements, for a very long time to come.