

CONVOCATION ADDRESS

given by the Provost

Provost:

“Let me offer the heartiest of congratulations to the first graduates of the University of Chicago in the year 2012. I don’t imagine that getting to this point has always been easy; you should savor the moment. At the same time, you should also appreciate that the year of your graduation is likely to be remembered as a turning point, of one kind or another.

It is dangerous to predict how any historical moment will look in retrospect but there is a very good chance that the past year will be remembered as a time of democratic renewal. *Time* magazine rightly called 2011 the year of the global protestor. In Tunisia, Yemen, Egypt and Libya, unpopular regimes were pulled down by their citizenry, at a terrible cost in bloodshed and lives lost. More recently, it is difficult not to be moved by the raw courage demonstrated by people in Syria or by the persistence of tens of thousands of Russian citizens holding hands in the bitter cold, protesting for honest elections. In the US, the Occupy movement has created, in a few months, an entire new political vocabulary. In West Africa, despite the name, the Occupy Nigeria movement seems more inspired by what has happened in Arab countries than by what it happening here.

In every place the movement has been different, protesting exploitive and disconnected leadership in one place, the absence of personal liberties in another, government by cronyism in yet another. Yet in every place the movement has been the same. People everywhere were asking for more voice in the decisions that shape their lives.

The path to democracy never did run smooth, to paraphrase Shakespeare. It is a prolonged, slippery process, and if we are sober, we should admit that some upheavals may lead to governments worse than the ones being overthrown. With that fairly admitted, we can’t be afraid to hope. At this juncture, we should still have hope that we have seen the first steps toward a longer transformation, not necessarily in the image of the established democracies, but transformations that reflect and honor the traditions and cultures of their respective societies. Democracy can and should come in many flavors.

In this country, whatever one thinks of the politics and tactics and organization of the Occupy movement, it seems hard to deny that it is raising questions of the first importance. The core question may be whether oligarchy has undermined democracy. We need not agree on the answer to acknowledge the importance of the question. I can think of only three times in the last century and a half when fundamental American notions about inequality were as much in play as they are now - the populist movement of the late 19th century, the Great Depression, and the Civil Rights movement.

It is important to note that the Occupy movement is trying to be a movement without formal leaders, in fear, as I understand it, of the tendency for leaders to start representing themselves rather than their constituents. We actually have a great deal of research to suggest that its also a very impractical way to think about organizing most things. The attempt, though, represents a healthy urge, a desire to avoid the mistakes of the past.

There are also many unhealthy tendencies in the current scene, including growing hostility toward whole categories of people. In recent polls, a quarter of Americans say they are prejudiced against members of the Islamic faith; 40% say that have unfavorable images of Islam and 70% say they know little about it.

We should be concerned as well that too few Americans have an understanding of how democracy has been defended and expanded in the past, witness here the recent vilification of Saul Alinsky, a graduate of this university in the class of 1930. He has been pictured as an enemy of democracy. I don't know what could be further from the truth. Alinsky spent his life working to expand opportunities for the poor, the working class and the middle class. *Time* magazine once wrote "American democracy is being altered by Alinsky's ideas,"

The Alinsky example also illustrates what is perhaps most concerning about the current political discourse. It is so highly polarized that it can hardly be called "discourse" at all. Too much of it is about fixed positions and closed minds.

Our Hopes

You are graduating, then, into a world of particular promise but also of particular peril. Certainly, the University of Chicago hopes that its graduates will be in the arena, not on the sidelines, will be active and influential participants in the debates of the day. I very deliberately do not say anything about "leading" those discussions. That can be a dangerous conceit. Graduates of elite institutions who take themselves too seriously, who communicate their sense of entitlement, are often unable to work effectively with anyone from a different background and thus they can become ineffective, a quarter - million dollars worth of education notwithstanding. The epistemologies of the university, the ways we understand knowledge, can be both illuminating and blinding. One must walk with Kings, as Kipling said, nor lose the common touch.

I think we should be able to take for granted that graduates of this university will be able to see nuance where others cannot, that they should be thoughtful without being paralyzed by thinking, that they will be able to add complexity to polarized discussions. We should expect more than that, though. We hope the education you've acquired will allow you to look honestly and critically at your own thinking, to understand more clearly your own motives and perspectives. The capacity to critique everyone else is

much over-rated. The capacity to look unblinkingly at your own thinking meets a much higher standard of moral and intellectual integrity. It is a rare ability and its absence contributes mightily to the futility of much contemporary debate. The more critically we can examine our own ideas, the more fully we will understand that we are more like than unlike the people with whom we most disagree, a realization which has enormous implications for the democratic ethos.

Saul Alinsky, the much maligned, understood this very clearly. He argued that "One of the most important things in life is what Judge Learned Hand described as 'that ever-gnawing inner doubt as to whether you're right.' If you don't have that," Alinsky continued. "if you think you've got an inside track to absolute truth, you become doctrinaire, humorless and intellectually constipated. The greatest crimes in history have been perpetrated by such religious and political and racial fanatics..."

We hope, then, that the university has nurtured that inner -doubt in you, that it has helped prepare you to play a role in the next stage of shaping the American experiment but we understand that we are one influence among many, probably not the most important. The greater role has been played by your family and friends, who have supported you, hoped for you, shaped your values and helped you pay tuition, in no particular order of importance. The gifts that make you special are most fundamentally the gifts they instilled and developed in you.

Graduation is never a solitary, individual act. It is always a social act; it happens because of what your families, using family in the broadest sense, have invested in you, investments began before you were born. The African American writer, James Alan McPherson, has been thinking about cross-generational interaction in several different cultures. In one of his essays, he writes:

I have learned from my Asian friends an ethic I did not understand before. What is of paramount importance in terms of what survives, in their world view, is not the personal will, which is the basic ethic of the West, but the family. In this view of what is of true authenticity, we are only the momentary possessors of the talents and traits lent to our ancestors by god. We must not allow others to defile them. Nor must we defile them with our own fears. Nor should we squander them.

We, the offspring, McPherson suggests, can ennoble our ancestors by living up to their best values. In the same way, you will ennoble the University by the lives you lead after you leave.

And now it is time to let you leave.

Go, as Gandlaf the Gray said, with words of guard and guide upon you."