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KNOWING YOUR PLACE

Let me welcome and congratulate you, first, on having decided to come, second for actually having arrived, and third, for having endured the challenges of the past few days. But then, you are at the very peak of your powers. When a college president remarked, decades ago, that universities were full of knowledge, he explained that the freshmen brought some in, the seniors took none out, so the knowledge accumulated. Your contribution is appreciated. As a mark of that status, tonight's speaker gets more time than your convocation orator will receive in June of 1996. It is a tribute to your present powers of concentration which I certainly plan to test.

Precisely one hundred years ago, minus three days, on October 1, 1892, your predecessors inaugurated classes at this institution. The ceremonies that Saturday were simple and understated to the point of invisibility. Classes were followed by a brief chapel service, and then by the inevitable faculty meeting. One of President Harper's advisers had warned him that if the opening were too elaborate or too public, speakers would "vie with each other in the exuberance of oratory to magnify the greatness of the institution, and thus involve you in the risk of disappointing public expectation."

The advice was taken, although such self-restraint, as I imagine you are discovering, proved an uncharacteristic posture for Chicago. Other features, however, had a longer life. I presume, for example, that prayers would again be offered during the succeeding century, after certain class sessions. And it also is noteworthy that the University began its official operations on a weekend morning, 8:30 AM, to be precise. The Chicago work ethic was in place from the start.

In subsequent years the rhetorical austerity of that first day has been redressed, for our origins have been extensively celebrated. During the past twelve months even more so. As humans we are infatuated with anniversaries; birthday parties are a staple of life, and a century, as Willard Scott reminds his daily viewers, is a special birthday. So you have missed—or have been spared—a year-long effort to evoke and to evaluate the origins of this university.

One way to use the present moment would be to compensate for your loss by invoking that story. In fact, I will do just that. But I will also try to demonstrate that self-absorption has its uses while urging you all to become local historians. From the repertory of themes an aims of

education address might consider, I have taken the subject of place. I'm asking you, in short, to know your place.

That phrase bears, of course, in conventional terms, a ring of authoritarian condescension. To know one's place has meant, traditionally, to recognize a rung on the social or age or economic ladder. Its referents have been hierarchies of class and status. I am asking something else. To know your place institutionally and physically, to spend part of your time here learning something about here. Unlike Gertrude Stein's proverbial Oakland, there is a here here.

Why bother? With so much else to learn, why spend time on the immediate setting in which you so suddenly find yourselves? From several standpoints it makes little sense. After all, you have just been liberated from the burdens of intimacy, from the pressures and comforts of familiar surroundings, from family, local customs, and childhood friends. Your rite of passage suggests release, revolt, and revelations from distant and exotic sources.

And from another angle, knowing your place may not quite catch the spirit of the modern situation. *No Sense Of Place* is the title of a recent book on mass communications suggesting that placelessness has become an increasingly pervasive effect of those all enveloping mass media. Indeed, to judge from recent titles, books starting with No Place—and without utopian aims—are extremely popular: *No Place to Hide*, *No Place to Rest*, *No Safe Place*, *No Resting Place*, *No Place on Earth*, *No Place of Grace*, *No Place That's Home*, and so on. Technological change, travel, the needs of bureaucratic standardization have apparently made the role of place contingent, peripheral, and ever more easily transcendable. You are, or shortly will be, hooked into electronic networks and information bases that open up the entire world. Invisible communities of computer hackers, linked by bulletin boards and a new virtual reality are radically redefining older limits on intellectual communication.

Knowing your place, moreover, has not traditionally been emphasized as an aim of education. One major source, the book entitled *The Aims of Education* which Alfred North Whitehead published seventy-three years ago, exemplifies this indifference. Whitehead's classic text is full of wisdom on many subjects: on intellectual discipline and intellectual freedom, on the relations between science and literature, and generalization and detail; on the philosophical issues raised by space and time. For many it remains the best single summary of pedagogical aims. But Whitehead says nothing about the hosting institutions of education, or the need for students to know something about them. The ingredients are presumed to be largely independent of their packaging.

And finally, one aspect of the University of Chicago's establishment may argue against my objective. For geographical transcendence was central to it. Part of the impulse behind the University's location was missionary—to carry the lamp of learning, so well fueled in the east, to western outposts. It was the challenge of refining this vast cultural wasteland—so

presented—that powered the Rockefeller gift. What made Chicago superior to ferocious competitors—New York, Washington—for his money, was its greater need. Intrinsic to this foundation was one conception of education: as a transmitting instrument to pass on accumulated wisdom and civilized values, as well as to train and identify a leadership class.

Such aims were very old. They had special relevance in a country whose first colleges were training schools for an educated ministry and promotional agents for the values of the parent civilization. These goals—shaping leaders, imparting traditions, conferring skills—many university patrons still find appealing.

The Chicago scheme, however, while acknowledging these older missionary values, added something new. For its very ambitiousness, its search for instant completeness and immediate greatness, rested upon a major achievement of the 19th century: the enthronement of knowledge as a realizable set of social ideals, the professionalization of the intellectual disciplines, the dispersion of uniform standards for scholarship in the sciences, humanities, and social sciences, and the fundamental notion that investigation and instruction were at their best when joined. The new graduate schools, and the equally new Ph.D's, had as their objective the overthrow of amateurish, arbitrary, ad hoc, casual, moralizing, and self-indulgent research in favor of specialized, rigorous, certified, standardized, scientific, publication—oriented work, national and even international in its orientation. This sense that physicists, historians, economists, chemists, mathematicians, would write for the same journals, join the same professional societies, attend the same annual meetings, share the same standards of proof or persuasion, was new and animating in the America of the 1890s. And so was the notion that it be intimately linked with undergraduate education.

In recent decades this vision of professional mastery has been deconstructed as an amalgam of questionable assumptions and unreal expectations. It has been challenged also as a set of social goals and enshrinement of privilege. You may wish, later tonight, to consider the consequences of such an imperial vision. That costs are assumed by locating, in the same place, the delicate and vulnerable first steps in the search for intellectual truth and the transfer of advanced systems of technical proficiency and recondite erudition? Indeed, President Harper's vision was broader even than this, including pre-college academies, girls' schools in Europe and Oak Park, art museums, colleges of liberal arts, science, practical arts, schools of law, medicine, engineering, pedagogy, music, fine arts, theological seminaries, and affiliations with institutions throughout the United States. One of John D. Rockefeller's financial advisors concluded, within a few years, that the University of Chicago was "not conducting a great educational institution, but rather an organized conspiracy to rob Mr. Rockefeller of his wealth." But along with other centralizing trends in American life at the time, such efforts were seen by many to be liberating and dynamic, hostile to smugness, to provincialism, to isolation, censorship, and to self-imposed limitations on thinking.

As President Harper envisioned it, the University of Chicago would not only transmit, it would originate, it would not only train, it would discover. Truth and excitement were meant to be served in a partnership between students and teachers, a partnership which functioned by testing and demonstrating. This grand vision took much of its energy from contemporary Germany, some of its collegiate aspirations from Oxford and Cambridge, and a few of its forms and ideals from Chautauqua, the great adult education program centered in western New York. If Harper's message was scientific his rhetoric and ultimate purpose were messianic: the university as a redemptive force in a democratic society a civic prophet.

But it faced some problems. I have hinted at one: the possibility of mutual corruption--of high moral aims subverted by technical objectives, of competence detoured by endless ethical debate. Of endless distractions provided by too rich a diet of possibilities and choices. This was the "Harper's Bazaar" epithet hurled at the University. But let me suggest another.

The older missionary ideal, colonizing as it was, exploited local variation. It permitted and even encouraged sentimental associations, charismatic personalities, avuncular attitudes. Instruction was a matter of personal transfer, the best education bringing together an exciting teacher and a devoted student. The new program, however, in the interests of its professionalizing rigor, risked regimenting and standardizing. From one angle of vision the University of Chicago would be a node on a giant relief map stretching from Paris, Berlin, and Vienna to Cambridge, New York, Baltimore, and Berkeley. More members of that first faculty had studied in Berlin and Leipzig than in any but three American institutions. Knowledge, as the founders saw it, was one; in scientific form, the same everywhere. Was it? Is it? If so, would Chicago come to resemble its respected elders elsewhere, a slightly revised but standard version?

Though such a vision helped shape this infant institution, it did not become simply a clone of the larger model, a faithful copy of some master blueprint. The immediate, the arbitrary, the unexpected grafted themselves on to the original program and reshaped it to a character of its own. This complex and sometimes mysterious process constitutes, for some historians at least, the magic of institutional history, the ways in which the genetic code and the environment interact on an organizational level, to produce a unique personality. If, as John Henry Newman declared more than a century ago, the university is at heart an assemblage, a place of concourse, a single spot where strangers gather to learn from one another, it must reflect something of its own location, history, and physical community.

Several on the early faculty were, indeed, quite vocal about being local, and insistent upon its value. They emphasized the need to link theory and experience. One of them, the philosopher and educational reformer, John Dewey, who wrote *The School and Society* while teaching here in the 1890s, recalled a visit to the city of Moline whose superintendent of schools informed him that many children each year were quite surprised to learn that the Mississippi river in their textbook "had anything to do with the stream of water flowing past their homes." The children

considered geography a schoolroom matter, and not a more definite statement of facts they encountered and touched each day. “All waste is due to isolation,” Dewey concluded.

Some of Dewey’s colleagues—George Herbert Mead, Graham Taylor, Marion Talbot—were also eager that the University acknowledge in its curriculum, its programs, its appointments, and its admissions—relationships to the world that lay immediately around it, a world, at the end of the century, with extensive evidence of political corruption, physical pollution, racial and ethnic conflict, extensive poverty, all of them subjects for study and candidates for reform.

But if some of the faculty were absorbed by social agendas and forged their truths in the immediacy of local experience, there were many others, even more, devoted to disciplinary driven notions of research and instruction who dismissed social causes as distractions. This University exhibited dramatic contrasts of various kinds, from its very beginning. Its aims of education were multiple and not formulaic; its blend, sometimes serene but usually tumultuous, of local and international, of undergraduate and graduate, of discovery and dispersion, guaranteed that Chicago would not simply be a bulb on a large switchboard. Indeed it could be argued that the blossoming of a series of quite distinctive programs and intellectual schools arose from the self-conscious tensions over educational methods and research objectives that engulfed this faculty.

It also built upon the nature of the student body, and the special organizational features in place. For one thing, the University was coeducational from the start, inspiring one commentator to assert proudly that Chicago had presented the world with the experiment of “an absolutely sexless university education.” You shall, like your predecessors, I assume, put this observation to the test. But equal opportunity was the opening theme. “Young men and young women,” wrote the Chicago Tribune the day after the opening, “will begin on equal par at the University of Chicago. In all classes, except perhaps some of those presided over by A. Alonzo Stagg...such as football and baseball.... The newspaper also pointed out that they would be paying the same tuition. These values would soon change and fierce debates develop over coeducation but the original position was clear.

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There was something else rather distinctive. The quarter system, a novelty in 1892, encouraged what one faculty member described as a “movable, shifting population which insures a kind of cosmopolitan air to this institution that never closes its doors.” With matriculation and graduation four times a year, and courses of only 12 weeks, Chicago was open to those who needed annual periods of gainful employment to support their living costs.

In retrospect, of course, examining our institutions of higher learning 100 years ago, their restrictions probably seem more impressive than their liberations. It may be useful to remember that when classes began here, fewer than 4% of the appropriately aged cohort in America attended any college or university at all. Fewer than 5% held a high school diploma; it was taken for granted that teenagers had to get to work to supplement family income.

Thus early Chicago students were celebrated for their intensity and seriousness. Writing for Scribner’s Magazine in 1895, one faculty member admired their ingenuity in job searching. That he termed a “condition of strenuous poverty,” produced “a very different atmosphere” from the “opulent spirit of our older institutions.” That atmosphere he labeled unprejudiced. “The student is unprejudiced in scholarship, accepting no traditions of what is really excellent to know; unprejudiced in social life, despising the tame amenities of a reticent society; unprejudiced in athletics, and therefore, thank Heaven! still willing to regard his amusements as avocations.”

Determination and, alas, considerable penury, themes detected 100 years ago by observers of Chicago student life have continuing resonance today. Along with the irreverent individualism that links Chicago alumni more firmly than mystic rites. One immediate implication of that experimental quarter system, for example, was that it lessened the significance of the class as a social unit. At Chicago “the student graduates as a person, not as a member of a class,” Robert Herrick of the English Department, the faculty member I have been quoting from, insisted in 1895. “His work and student life are individual from the first. He enters the university when he pleases; he graduates when he pleases The conventions of an old society, the ambitions of a select set, do not trouble him.” Such a student, Herrick predicted, will have contempt for “mere culture” or “anything that derives its respect from the past alone. He will despise forms and ceremonies, but he will be powerful in life.”

Herrick overstated. Many students did feel links with their entering class; over the years their numbers increased. But Chicago loyalties are, in fact, different than many others, often late in developing and more hard-headed, critical, and pointed than some find comfortable. Read the alumni magazine to find out.

If you have been following the tone of the early descriptions and quotations you may, however, be puzzled. For in this celebration of innovation, experiment, newness, something might seem

missing, something rather important to our study of place. Where, in all this, is the theme song that has been so much a part of recent Chicago history? The power of tradition. The centrality of liberal education. The canonical texts. When did they arrive on the scene? And for what reasons?

I won't tell you. But there are several possible explanations for my omission. One could argue that Chicago's emphasis on textual traditions became so significant a part of its culture precisely because it relied so little upon sentiment. There was less to clear away. The continuities linking generations over time and peoples over space could more easily be seen built around texts, commentaries, and expositions, precisely because this institution itself relied so little upon the mystic chords of memory and the forces of inheritance.

But perhaps not. I have probably understated the ceremonial and conventional aspects of the institution's early years. Or, for that matter, of its later years. This was a place, after all, where Big Ten Football games were played. And even won by the host team. Where fraternities, sororities, mandolin clubs, and varsity sings flourished almost at once. Whose first president enjoyed constructing rituals almost to the point of distraction. The day before classes began with such serious purpose 300 students, if the newspapers are right, a majority of those on campus, met with Coach Stagg to evaluate more than 50 Varsity Yells and choose five winners. These were described by the Chicago Tribune at some length. Neither Aristotle nor Plato was mentioned.

Perhaps the history of place and the history of teaching and research are not so interactive as one might imagine. Perhaps personal and social character, and professional and intellectual practices are not mutually dependent. Homer and Virgil can be read on a desert island; texts are texts wherever one goes. Does it matter where you learn what you learn?

Certainly content has been privileged over form for many experiences, inside school and outside. The history of organizing and displaying information is relatively recent as a subject of interest, despite its generally acknowledged influence upon learning capacities. One example: it took more than four and a half centuries after Gutenberg for the first sustained examinations of how printing, as a medium of expression, helped reshape and redefine the nature of physical experience as well as the pattern of intellectual priorities.

And still more recent is the acknowledgement that presentation itself can be a revelation of value, an exposure of argument, assumption, and intention. This is nowhere more apparent than in one institution whose social role has dramatically expanded during the recent past: the art museum. It is not only obvious that a museum's size, lighting, and installation principles will affect a visitor's experience. It is also now apparent that the juxtaposition of objects, the size of their labels, the sequence of progression say something about what the museum curators think about art, science, and history; they are messages which accompany the actual displays. Recent

analyses of exhibition spaces demonstrate the need to pay close attention to their formal organization, and suggest the importance of visitors learning more about museum history and identity.

I am gambling that you will discover connections between form and content, between history and curriculum, between institutional organization and intellectual values. And I am arguing that the need to know something about Chicago goes beyond the provision of anecdotal background or cocktail chatter. For the history of this institution has been a string of debates and arguments about the very nature of education and learning, dominating almost all other issues and causes. Penetrating it becomes an indispensable exercise in intellectual contextualization and self-consciousness.

Indispensable, but not necessarily sufficient. For you must also contend with things that context alone cannot handle. How much or how little is currently under debate. During the past few years scholarship in the humanities and social sciences has been challenged by new formulations of textuality which dispute not simply the status or priority of canonical works—that is a very old competition—but the very value of assigning value. The role of authority in constructing legitimacy, defining hierarchies of value, and shaping agendas of investigation and interpretation dominates many of our angriest debates. And this authority appears to stand on categories of privileged gender and race, charged with exploiting the seeming objectivity of academic research and disciplinary canonization.

Will the history of this institution, then, tell you just why you are reading certain texts, examining certain images, listening to certain music, indeed, studying certain sciences? Only in part, and only after you have positioned yourself on those points of textual disagreement I have just mentioned. But I think it can be said that university curricula are not mandates from Heaven. They reflect on-going negotiations between longer historical tendencies and common cultural biases on the one hand, and the play of human personality, intelligence, temperament, and need on the other. The special character of this place was formed by encounters between an unusual faculty and a non-traditional student body. For different reasons each group valued new approaches to old problems. And were willing, at the start, to risk the insecurities and discomforts that novelty entails. Knowing your place, and its history, should enable you to sustain this posture, to question boundaries, formulas, and the organization of knowledge, even while trying to demonstrate your mastery of received wisdom. Just as the dual functions of dispersion and discovery were assumed by the university itself, so the dual functions of absorption and rebellion are part of your responsibility.

There is a second dimension to knowing your place, that I want to talk about before I close. And that is its physical nature. You will be spending much of your time, during these next several years, in a set of buildings and spaces whose relationship to one another, as well as to you, bears strong marks of purpose. Unlike most large spaces in our society, college campuses

are planned, and planned around certain notions of style, scale, and movement. They are represented on postcards, in yearbooks, in thousands of snapshots, on plates and pennants and T-shirts and guide books. Elaborate iconographies meet you at every turn. Buildings are covered with references to history, religion, mythology, art, science, and literature. Their materials as well as their symbolic language, have been protected, and the landscape in which they are set is also a highly self-conscious artifact, with very specific notions about trees, grass, shrubbery, and flowers.

The campus, as an idea, has some highly sentimental aspects; in many places it is an instrument to pluck heart strings and reap nostalgic memories for its host college in years to come. Its elaborate expression at Chicago is, in fact, another of the many features of this institution that is worth considering. I urge you, in moving about, to pay it some attention, to try to read it, and its neighborhood, as you read other texts, and to think about how you might describe it. Place is not only threatened by time. It is threatened by our very ease of evocation, by the cameras and photographs and postcards that we rely upon to carry the visual message. Part of knowing your place is being able to describe it as well as to photograph it, to appropriate through language, not only narrative movement over time, which many of you have already mastered, but the shapes, the sizes, the colors of objects. Knowing your place means not only being able to say something about its history and its evolution, but something about its appearance. This, as it were, is as much a test run for your future relationship to the environment as your courses and readings are for your larger intellectual outlook.

Protecting landscapes or saving buildings, even simply responding to change is troublesome without the language that transmits what we most admire or dislike. The building we currently sit within is probably more difficult for most of you to describe than the plot of a novel you have recently read, or the character of a musical performance. Its dimensions, references, materials, generic origins, structural logic, fenestration and body parts may seem alien for reasons other than its religious origins. A library, laboratory, or courthouse would probably present similar problems. They are remote because their linguistic translation has atrophied, in favor of the easier route of visual reproduction.

You have an opportunity, entering a setting that was designed to be enveloping, inspiring, and influential, to sharpen your descriptive powers. And, beyond this campus, to encounter what has become a holy city for admirers of American architecture. Try to penetrate the choices, strategies, and logic of your setting. In some ways the campus echoes the University's own challenge. Is it properly a shelter or refuge? Should students and scholars have some place apart? Or does this add to isolation and distance? What makes a landscape integrated and effective? Consider how your landscape functions, and what has been brought together to make it work. That will make this place a part of, as well as a site for, your education.

It can be argued that places offer moral lessons as easily as narratives. One of them, the one I will end with, concerns the relationship between change and continuity. Distinctive institutions, I have implied, carry with them marks of their origins which are never lost in the process of adaptation. That is one reason they are absorbed, sometimes obsessed by their histories. The test of strength is the simultaneous capacity to accept and even welcome change, and remain faithful to original purposes. If institutions resist all change, they are threatened by the hazards of rigidity, irrelevance, and insignificance. If they change to the point of unrecognizability, they can endanger not only their corporate charters but the trust generations have placed in them.

Human beings have more freedom than institutions to make themselves over. And you are at a point in your own lives where you will be doing precisely that. This is, in many ways, the reason you are here: to shape your values, ambitions, and skills with an informed intentionality, to examine and challenge what you may have taken for granted, to turn answers into questions and, some questions, at least, into answers. But in the course of so doing, you should not forget who you have been and where you have come from. Your own life histories deserve at least the same respect and understanding that your place does. And indeed, the two are now inextricably intertwined. Knowing yourself, and knowing your place, are each worthy aims of education. I wish you success in your quest for both.