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LIBERATION AND THE LIBERAL ARTS

It is a great privilege to be invited to give this annual talk to the incoming class. The “Aims of Education” speech has become a ritual at the University of Chicago for the last thirty-eight years, and I am honored to be able to deliver the address to the first class of the new millennium, and in the presence of our new president, Don Randel, whom I welcome most enthusiastically and gratefully to this truly ungovernable place. However much a great honor, though, it is also very intimidating. It is intimidating not only because, with a topic so sweeping and complicated, avoiding clichés is hard, but for another, obvious reason. This choice of yours about where to go to college is one of the three or four “big ones” in your life, right up there with the choice of a career and a spouse. You all no doubt took advice from parents and relatives and friends, and probably, for some of you, your decision was affected as much by where you weren’t accepted as by where you were. But all of you decided to apply here, and the decision to come here was, for many of you, the first major life decision that you yourselves, as adults determining your own fate, have made. It will shape so much in your future that many of you are no doubt starting to think: well, why did I come here? This place seems so intense and serious; what in the world have I gotten myself into? And you might be expecting me to tell you, and that is what is so intimidating.

After all, yours is a unique and extremely privileged situation, and that always calls for reflection of some sort. Only an infinitesimally small percentage of people in the world your age get four years like this, and only a minority of those privileged few, I am sorry to have to say, really take advantage of such an opportunity. Unless we can start a conversation about what this unique structure and rare opportunity is all for, and can settle together on some common aspirations, we might as well drop the pretense of great seriousness that events like this are supposed to imply, import the fraternities and sororities from Florida State and USC, build the engineering schools, drop the Common Core, and “vocalize” away. As already noted, this is the period of your lives when you start to take over the active management of your own affairs, when you begin to “lead” those lives, as we say, and in North America (almost alone in the world, apart from the Oxbridge system in England), we have settled on the residential liberal arts college as an ideal way to help you do so, to make part of this transition. Why is that?

T W O

Let me start with the truisms often uttered in contexts like this. Truisms are, after all, occasionally true, and they can thus be a good beginning guide. The chief aim of education at the University of Chicago is a successful “liberal arts” education. (To avoid the confusing suggestion that you might be here to learn only painting and music and dance, the “arts” bit is now often dropped and this phrase is shortened to a “liberal education.” But that can be confusing too, since it suggests that you are here to learn to be more like Ted Kennedy or Mario Cuomo. So I might as well stick with the old fashioned term, according to which biology and economics, just as much as literature and philosophy can be studied as a liberal art if studied in a certain way.) Perhaps no other university in the country takes such an ideal so seriously or asks itself so interminably what exactly a liberal arts education is, and whether it is so all-fired important. The topic usually arises here in discussions about general education and the Core. (This is the place after all that once had a four year, common core requirement!) But it also describes an ideal to which we all aspire throughout the student’s time here and that general ideal already evinces the root meaning in the ideal of a “liberality of mind”; that is, the realization of a certain sort of freedom. The Latin root, liber, means “free” (it is also the Latin noun for “book,” an odd coincidence that supports the point I am trying to make), and the very first use of the word “liberal” in English in 1375 was as an adjective in “the liberal arts” and designated “the objects of study worthy of a free person.” And that is what we are supposed to teach you: to enable you to become a freer person and this by showing you (so goes that truism) how to “think for yourself,” to be able to reflect critically on what you have heretofore just taken for granted; and to learn to do this by an acquaintance with the best that has been thought and written by human beings. Similarly, as you all have also probably heard, here you should not just learn the facts and methodologies of modern mathematics and science; you should learn how a mathematician and a scientist thinks, so that you too can go forth and design your own experiments and proofs (or appreciate that form of discovery and reasoning when you encounter it “in the real world”), just as you can learn to think your own thoughts and write your own elegant, persuasive English prose.

In a university setting such a liberality of mind means attention to “knowledge for its own sake” and so a certain kind of freedom from the compulsion of the requirements of biological life, from the satisfaction of unavoidable needs, the press of the passions, the everyday and the practically necessary. (This understanding of freedom, which is obviously connected with a kind of leisure and privilege, was first formulated and defended over 2,000 years ago by Aristotle and has influenced the notion of an “ideal” education ever since.) You all know the caricature of such an “impractical” attitude: the absent minded professor, who is so indifferent to the practical that he forgets to change clothes and to eat and so forth. That is a figure of ridicule of course, but it is also, oddly, an expression of envy and in its latent hostility a kind of suspicion that such a type really can exist with such indifference to the practical world; that he or she really is so liberated from such cares and can lead a life dedicated to something believed

to be of intrinsic value. The opposite of the liberal arts stance or sensibility is then not just dogmatism and prejudice, but also any kind of over-specialized technical instruction, or vocationalism, a slavish devotion to the means necessary for mere surviving or existing comfortably, rather than a devotion to inquiry about the good or the best life, and to the value of knowledge itself, for its own sake. Or at least that was the older controversy when our most famous former president, Robert Maynard Hutchins, strode through these hallowed halls; and it is a debate that is still very relevant.

More recently the suspicion about such a claim to freedom has come from the charge that the traditional humanistic liberal arts ideal that comes down to us from the Renaissance, the general ideal that I have just summarized, is itself not liberating but in the service of some political goal, and rather than foster liberation, actually “serves power” in some way (a class, a gender, an imperial power), reproduces an enslavement to an elite or to a restrictive, exclusionary self-understanding. But this last charge is of course not really an objection to the liberal arts ideal, but an attempt to formulate and pursue it more rigorously, even more “purely.”

T H R E E

As this simple summary already indicates, any formulation of such a liberal arts ideal (the view that a certain sort of learning and knowledge might enable one to lead a freer life, even if a learning and knowledge not directly connected with practical results or technical power) is an ideal often formulated in response to and as a defense against a perceived threat or attack (such as that pursuit of such an ideal is a waste of time). The very beginning of this series of lectures at the University of Chicago was understood as a “response” to such a “threat” when the then Dean of the College, Alan Simpson, wrote to the Ford Foundation in 1961 requesting funds for a lecture series on the aims of education because, he claimed, the ideal of a liberal education was “under pressure everywhere.” Many of the talks presented in this series have that same tone, responding to various intellectual, economic, professional and practical “attacks” on the attempt to achieve this liberality of mind through reading books and learning science.

There are lots and lots of reasons for this frequent siege mentality and “man the barricades” rhetoric. For one things, suspicion of the humanistic university ideal might go very deep in the modern world we live in. The university after all, is like the Roman Catholic Church or the military. Together with these, it was one of the very, very few pre-modern or feudal institutions to make it through the wrenching process of European modernization and to survive in some recognizable form into the modern world. (For all such institutions, even the funny, medieval way that we sometimes dress, with robes and gowns and medals and sashes, somehow survived; not to mention all this gothic architecture.) But even though universities survived, the tone of suspicion and anxiety about such old institutions in a much altered modern world can be felt everywhere when the very words “scholastic” or “academic” or “ivory tower” and so forth are

mentioned as obvious disparagements. And so here we will all sit one day soon, with biotechnology professors on the “cutting,” even Frankensteinian edge of modern research, dressed at graduation in the same thirteenth century robes as the Latin Professor and theologian. It’s an odd place indeed.

That problem of a “fit” in modernity is even worse in the humanities and interpretive social sciences, where an internal crisis of legitimacy has been going on for a couple of hundred years now. Such disciplines of course, like philosophy and literature and history, purport to know something about human beings and the human world that is worth knowing. Because of this we even insist here that you can’t get a degree without grappling for a while with what they claim. But everybody also knows that the seats of power and influence in the modern university are the natural and life sciences. (The exception is economics, but its prestige is largely a result of its mathematical complexity—it certainly doesn’t stem from its predictive power—and its ever growing “market share” of undergraduate audiences.) The sciences have an accepted method for resolving debate and moving on; what they know works, and they have given human beings a kind of power not even imagined in ancient mythologies. Prior to World War II, the tone and aura of medieval universities could still be felt at the elite institutions. University presidents were often classicists (perhaps musicologists); English and history were often the most popular majors; studying science was a bit plebeian, common, even, I was once told, “smelly.” After the war, and especially after the cold war and sputnik and the cost of Big Science and the war on cancer and the breakthroughs of molecular biology and now neurology, everything has changed. And it would be odd indeed if the “liberal arts ideal” did not look and feel different to new generations of students and educators. So besides these general considerations about the status of the liberal arts ideal in modern history, perhaps the first thing we need to talk about is the relation between this ideal and the various specific pressures that have come to challenge, even threaten it, and especially those historical pressures that have emerged in the last fifty years or so. We often understand this ideal best, in other words, in terms of what opposes it, offers itself as an alternative, and there is a lot more to say about this history. What I’d like to do then, after a brief survey of the recent history of American universities, is to talk then a little bit about the ideal itself in that context, and so to return to this question of the free, or at least the freer life that we have promised you.

F O U R

We need first to understand what a different sort of place this is, in the context of contemporary “post-secondary” or “higher” education. There are now 12.3 million undergraduate students in such post-secondary schools. (I heard a fine talk a year and a half ago about this subject by a literature professor at the City University of New York, Louis Menand, and I refer here to some of the statistics that he compiled. The figures are now a bit out of date, but the corresponding percentages have stayed the same.) Almost half of these attend two year community colleges, some 5.5 million. So there are 6.8 million of you in

bachelor degree programs. The vast majority of these, some 4.6 million, are enrolled in public colleges and universities. So that leaves about 2 million of you (out of this 12.3 million) enrolled in private, non-profit, four-year colleges. But there are all sorts of such colleges, ranging from Bob Jones University to Bennington, and if we look at the truly exclusive, very hard to get into, very expensive liberal arts colleges (that is, those that charge over \$20,000 tuition), there are only about 100,000 students, or less than 1 percent of students now in college or university.

Now Chicago is hard to characterize in this group. Like a very few other top universities, we have taken the liberal arts college idea from medieval British universities like Oxford and Cambridge, and combined it with the idea of the research university, pioneered in Germany in the early nineteenth century. And again, we are not talking about very many such universities; the Ivy League, Chicago, Stanford, Duke, Johns Hopkins, Rochester, Washington University and a couple more. But even if we look at all the major research universities, including the majority which do not have a liberal arts college, only about half of the students who go there major in a liberal art and get a bachelor's degree in such a humanities or in a pure, research oriented social or natural science. Twenty percent of all B.A.s in the U.S. are now awarded in business; 10 percent in education; 7 percent in the health professions. When I taught at the University of California, by far the biggest undergraduate major, and growing every year, was "communications," whatever that is. It has been reported that there are almost twice as many undergraduate degrees conferred every year in a field that calls itself "protective services" as in all foreign languages and literatures combined.

So the category of "higher education" is a huge tent, with all kinds of various beasts in it, so much so that there may be no such thing as "the American higher education system." Moreover, if we also look historically just at the study of the liberal arts, apart from the institutional question, then we can note another motive for the siege mentality. The proportion of undergraduate degrees awarded annually in the liberal arts has been declining for a hundred years now (apart from a brief increase between 1955 and 1970). And this slide is all greatly complicated by one development: the fact that we are now living, or have been living since around 1975 or so, in a period of a massive, unstable, nervous reaction to the greatest expansionary period in the history of education anywhere. Between 1945 and 1975 the number of American undergraduates increased by almost 500 percent and the number of graduate students (and this is truly an amazing figure) increased by nearly 900 percent. More professors were hired in the 1960s alone than had been hired in the 325-year history of American higher education to that point.

What happened then, after and in reaction to this great expansion, is complicated, but it is at least obvious that in this super-heated period, colleges and universities had over-expanded and a period of retrenchment and cut-back was in order. The draft and the Vietnam war ended; so did the baby-boomer surge in the demographics, and a very serious recession, mysteriously

accompanied by runaway inflation, set in. Universities and colleges, facing rapidly declining applications and declining admissions had to compete ferociously for students, and students themselves faced post-college prospects far more uncertain and competitive than at any time in the history of the Republic. Said in a simple formula, the liberal arts—study, reflection and learning for its own liberating sake—require a certain sort of leisure, security, and peace. In a situation of anxiety, uncertainty and competition, such a climate can be ever rarer. Obviously all these pressures since 1975 have changed the atmosphere of higher education, bringing with it some healthy forms of skepticism and doubt about some of the old liberal art verities, but also a great uncertainty and anxiety among, and a great pressure on, the liberal arts faculty. This sometimes led to a furious and near suicidal self-criticism, or an attempt at a kind of populism, a populist attack on the high culture/low culture distinction, or an odd, dizzying, nervous susceptibility to academic fads (or market trends), new ones year in and year out. (And actually the effects of such anxiety and uncertainty about exactly what “college is for” can be charted even before 1975. In the period between 1962 and 1983, the percentage of students who majored in foreign languages and literatures declined by 58 percent; in philosophy they declined by 60 percent; in English by 72 percent, and in mathematics by 67 percent. Where did they all go? Well, in that same period, the number of business majors increased 87 percent.) So while intuitively, one might think that a place like the University of Chicago has the resources and the reputation and clout and faculty to think of itself as simply doing better what all universities aspire to do; that we represent a kind of peak, the Platonic Ideal or perfection of what universities should be and what other places cannot afford to be, in a situation like this, where we look so different from what goes on in the rest of the 99 percent of post-secondary education, it is not hard to imagine why this system might feel under threat, and why they and we might feel that we have become an anachronism; hardly a perfection.

In other words, over-expansion, market uncertainties, economic anxiety, the need to justify the expense of a college education in terms of a good rate of return in future employment have all made that 99 percent to 1 percent ratio even more significant, has increased the pressure on places like Chicago to move to the norm, and can make the ideal of a certain sort of freedom from practical concerns seem so unrealistic, when the jockeying for position in the practical world is so intense. The idea, in this climate, of concentrating on Elizabethan literature or linguistics or astrophysics or Greek philosophy can look a little like playing solitaire on the deck of a sinking Titanic. (And, by the way, we are about to look even more different in the years ahead. The experts say that the next waves in higher education will be for-profit universities and on-line or distance learning—very likely some combination of both of these—and if those catch on and start to dominate the market then residential liberal arts colleges with merit-based, need-blind admissions and some sort of education in a core curriculum, might begin to look to the general public like fox hunting clubs or monasteries.)

FIVE

So that was (by and large anyway) the original hope for the liberal arts, and those are the pressures that seem to be squeezing it. In the face of that pressure, what can be said for the liberal arts ideal? In terms of the practical survival of that ideal and such colleges, the right response is probably, “Who knows?” My guess is that there is no great danger that Chicago will be turning out sanitation engineers, disc jockeys and industrial arts majors anytime soon. There will always be people who find a home in books and research, and always be those who are smart enough to know that there is much of intrinsic value for the rest of their lives in wrestling for a while with difficult ideas and in appreciating the beauty of mathematics or science. Remember that we probably need, all of us in this small boat, only a couple of hundred thousand recruits a year or so, and it’s a big country. The ultimate fate of the ideal, the strength of belief in it, commitment to it, its perseverance over the next century or two centuries, is another matter. That depends on what we believe about it and how we believe it. I would like to spend the second half of this talk discussing that.

SIX

Imagine that the question is whether you are here at the University of Chicago freely, of your own free will; whether your coming here reflects or expresses you, whether you can see yourself in this kind of role. Obviously the first condition that has to be satisfied for you to be able to answer “yes” is that no one coerced or forced or tricked you into coming here. If your parents told you that you had gotten into Brown, drove you here and dropped you off, you would have a clear case that you did not come here freely; this was not your doing. Likewise with being coerced or threatened to come here, and I certainly hope none of you has any such stories to tell.

These are all fairly obvious, external conditions. No one or nothing from “the outside” should be constraining or coercing or unduly pushing or pulling. But there are also clearly “internal” conditions that have to be satisfied. You have to be able to stand in the right relation to your own life for your being here to be the result of a free choice. No one may have coerced or forced or tricked you to be here, but, for example, if you have felt absolutely obsessed since you were six years old with the idea of going to the University of Chicago, and have no idea why, then you also did not come here freely, even though nobody else, just you, is responsible for your coming here. Compulsions like this are rare and the example is fanciful of course, but the possibility already illuminates one of the oldest ideas about freedom in the Western tradition. This is that the only real form of genuine unfreedom or true slavery is ignorance; the only true form of freedom is wisdom, ultimately knowledge of what is best. In this fanciful case, unless you have some idea of why it is better for you to be here rather than anywhere else or at any other university or whatever, then you did not come here freely. There is an element of alienation or strangeness to you in your presence here. Some crucial part of your life, while it

was in fact produced by you, does not truly reflect the “you” that you understand yourself to be and identify with, and so this decision cannot in the deepest sense be yours.

And this sort of intuition represents something essential to the notion of liberation, liberality of mind, or freedom, promised by a liberal arts education. Now this idea, some of you may have begun to wonder, already may sound a bit suspect. (“Is this guy telling us that the main reason to come here is to be able to find out later why we really came here and whether it was really a good idea?”) Well, yes, that is what I am trying to say, and I hope it does not sound as strange as that formulation makes it. There are a very great many elements, terms, values, aspirations, that have gone into the decisions you have made and will make that are so opaque and mysterious to you, to all of us, that we cannot really be said to be masters of decisions that rely on them.

SEVEN

Think of it this way. In one of his many hilarious novels about modern campus life, the British novelist David Lodge depicts a game played by particularly brave (and quite drunk) professors. The point of this game is to admit something even more embarrassing than the professor who went before you, to try to trump your predecessor and ultimately to trump everyone else by revealing the most truly embarrassing, humiliating fact about yourself. What each of them is trying to do is to name a book that, given his or her academic specialty, it would be taken for granted that he or she had read several times, but which they had in fact never read. So if a professor of Elizabethan literature admits that he has never read Hamlet, the next person, say a philosophy professor must try to top that, by admitting say, that she had never read anything by Plato. And then the German professor would have to admit that he couldn’t read anything by Thomas Mann because the German was too difficult, and then the history professor would have to admit that even though he was a leading expert in modern German history, he couldn’t read German books at all. And so on.

It is not too difficult to imagine all of us playing a version of the game where we try to name an idea crucial to our understanding of ourselves and of the modern world, and which has played a critical role in some of our decisions, some of the policies we have formulated, and many of the judgments and even condemnations we have formulated about others, but which we have no clue how to define and, no matter how much we have relied on it, no clue at all how to defend the idea from objections. Examples come easily to mind to all of us. What, after all, is a “right”? What does the notion of a natural or human right mean to delineate? What other kinds are there? Why are we said to have them? How many do we have? Do we have a right to interesting jobs? To a cool pair of shoes? To own and eat animals? Why or why not? What do we mean when we say something is beautiful? If we claim that that term “means something different to each person” what is it that means something different to each person? How important is the beautiful? More important than the creation of more jobs? How much more or

less important? Why do groups of strangers like to gather together in the dark and watch a small group of other people pretend to be people who they are not, doing absolutely horrible things to each other, while also pretending that they are not observed? Why do you do this, or what is the point of theater? When did we start to do this in our civilization, and what might explain this origin? Why did people just like us, perhaps in some sense, better than us, like George Washington and Thomas Jefferson, own slaves? Could you explain what a nuclear reaction really is? What it really means to be genetically disposed to something? And so on. The point of the game would be to admit something even more obviously important to you and some decision or judgment of yours than your predecessor's example, and which you would in principle have to defend in order to explain some action or opinion of yours, but which you could not claim to understand.

Being better able to do all that explaining and defending is clearly a kind of liberation because the more of such understanding you possess the more you are able to stand behind what you do, acknowledge it as your own, especially when challenged by others, because you can stand behind it, explain it and defend it to some degree, to yourself and others. Of course, there are writers and thinkers who believe that this is all a mistaken way to look at it. They believe that what you do more genuinely expresses you and is freely done only if we get rid of all this reflection and self-consciousness and opinions and theories which are very likely just views of others to which we have become subject, and that we should strive to achieve a state of ever more intense emotional immediacy, or spontaneity and direct expression, not filtered through theories and thoughts.

Well, pursuing these issues could take us pretty far afield. My version of the David Lodge game was only meant to illuminate in a very broad way why a better form of self-understanding might make it possible to say that you led a life more "your own." Around the sixteenth and seventeenth century or so, when it began to seem to many people that a life belonged essentially to the finite individual him- (and eventually her-) self, not to God, or to one's master or lord or fatherland or husband or father, the question of how we could come to acknowledge our deeds as truly our own, and the roles of self-consciousness and expanded knowledge in that possibility, loomed as large items on the agenda, and we are here, in the kind of university we have, partly because of all that.

E I G H T

But I want to close with a final consideration about the role of books, research science, history, art, music—the academic enterprise—in this liberationist ideal. One way of understanding the possibility of a free life—"your own life"—is to consider which of your past decisions you could truly be said to be able to "stand behind," where that means being able to defend or justify them when challenged, or even which you could claim to understand. "Having reasons" in this sense for what you did, having something to say about "why," is a general condition for

some event being considered an action of yours at all, and not having any reasons means it is very hard to understand any link between you and what conduct you engage in. If the question is why you came to the University of Chicago, or are concentrating in chemistry, or why you stopped speaking to a friend, and you replied, “I don’t know, I just felt like it,” it is very hard to see concentrating in chemistry or not speaking to a friend as any sort of deed performed by you. It really does look like something that happened to you rather than like something you did.

But if this is true, what is it to have such reasons, and when are they satisfying enough for the deeds to count as “claimed” by you, as yours? The issues that I have just been talking about assume that a deeper awareness of the possible options, a broader sense of the sorts of relevant justifications, a better familiarity with the most crucial possible positions and objections, and so forth, can be understood as “liberating,” making such evaluations freer by in essence increasing the quality of the reasons you can give. The same can be said for understanding historical change and coming to understand why options are framed for us now as they are, why things used to seem so different, and for understanding other great civilizations and their histories. Such reasons become forms of thought that you do not just inherit, but can take up knowingly as your own. If this transition happens at all, it has to happen some time, and this is the time set aside for it to happen for a small group of young people; i.e., you and your colleagues in liberal arts colleges. If all this works well, where once one might have seen before one only a small, narrow path of decision with very few options, might look broader and more various, surrounded by less darkness and uncertainty; much that seemed necessary and fated, we could now understand, could have been otherwise, and might be otherwise in the future, and that is all certainly “liberating.”

But it might also seem a bit unrealistic, even utopian. And so it would, if we think of all this as occurring simply because certain books are assigned in general education courses and certain courses are required. If a university prides itself simply on having assigned such books, and prides itself on insisting that students have a look at them, then most of what I have been saying would indeed be very hard to connect with such a self-satisfied and superficial notion of a “liberal arts education.” It matters of course which books or themes make up a university’s idea of itself, how much and what sort of math and science the university requires of its students. But what matters much more is the way in which faculty and students engage those books, or other books, or various ideas. And that essentially means the way they engage each other. Let me close with a remark about that.

NINE

Since almost everything of importance and controversy in human life involves some sort of normative question, a choice that demands evaluation and a decision about what ought to be or ought to be done, the issue of what sorts of reasons are appropriate, what it would be to be confidently in charge of one’s existence is a vast, unmanageable topic here. But there is

something peculiar about the nature of these reasons worth mentioning in a discussion about the liberal arts.

These evaluative questions, and the arguments about them, have special characteristics. On the one hand, the issues that are raised are unavoidable and as serious and important as one can imagine. On the other hand, there has hardly been the kind of convergence in our civilization about such evaluative issues that there has been about matters of fact. Most of you are intelligent enough to begin finding things to disagree with already in what I've said today. There is no decision procedure for any of this. In any such attempt to improve the quality of the reasons we give each other or are willing to accept, there is no equivalent to the test tube changing color if we get the right answer or the bacteria dying if we find the right drug. Our odds on being better warned against false leads, dead ends and so forth go up if we can find a way of learning from what the best minds ever had to say about all of this. But of course, the question of what Aristotle or Dante or Karl Marx really meant is just as disputed as any possible "answer" to such questions.

What then can we rely on for guidance in the pursuit of such issues; how could we hope for any sort of even small progress in such endeavors? Well, the answer embodied in these liberal arts colleges is very simple. We depend on each other. After all, what it is to have a reason for what you believe, to be able to acknowledge it as yours, is to have something to offer to someone whom your action affects or injures or provokes to question you. And part of what it is for the reason to be adequate is for that offering to be accepted, at least ideally, in conditions where it is the proposed reason itself that is doing the persuading. Of course in deciding whether to accept what someone proposes, we are always looking to what, independent of us, might make the reason a good one, but that too is often in dispute, and the conversation then goes another round.

Put another way: I expect you'll discover shortly that a great deal of what goes on here is arguing; sometimes friendly, sometimes heated, and it can sometimes look like egotism, grandstanding, envy, or just plain bullying. But at bottom, this endless conversation we have invited you to join is a kind of "liberal arts research." We are always trying to find out what sort of reason will pass muster, among colleagues in the profession and here on campus, among professors and graduate students and among graduate students, and certainly and most frequently between professors and you, and among yourselves. By means of these conversations, we are both trying to hold each other in check, and to help each other see what sort of account or justification or interpretation might be adequate, might be enough. For this to work at all, we have to be able to hear you out; hence the emphasis on discussion seminars; you have to get to know each other relatively well; hence the idea of residential campuses; and we all have to approach this with the right attitude and openness; hence talks like this one. Someone out to convert people, to enlighten the ignorant, or even someone a little too quick and eager to think of himself as a radical critic, as "speaking truth to power" distort and

impede this conversation. With the kinds of questions, of the magnitude and seriousness, that we all will discuss here, we have to depend pretty heavily on each other for any clarity and even partial satisfaction in addressing them, and none of that will work if you play the part of the timid, or the too-cool, or the angry, alienated student, and I play the part of the know it all, or the bored, aloof, arrogant professor, or the stand-up comic or ironic cynic. You will find, I think, that most of us will do our part, and it remains true every year that the University's traditions and the wise judgments of our admissions office ensure that it is very likely that most of you will too. Better conversations about great things make for better reasons, and better reasons make for freer lives. And as one of my favorite writers, Henry James, put it simply: "Without your life, what have you got?"

You only get one college experience in your life, and my colleagues and I are not so modest that we can't say: we think that you have all chosen wisely in coming here. I urge you to enter this conversation rather than just listen to it, and, I hope I've made clear, I urge that not just for your sake, but for mine. Thank you for your attention on this warm afternoon, and, once again this week, welcome to the University of Chicago.