

THE UNIVERSITY OF CHICAGO | The College
AIMS OF EDUCATION ADDRESS 2001
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PRESENTED BY: Danielle S. Allen

She delivered this address on September 20, 2001, just after the terrorist attacks on the World Trade Center in New York City and the Pentagon in Washington D.C. At the time she was Associate Professor in the Departments of Classical Languages & Literatures and Political Science, the Committee on Social Thought, and the College. She is now UPS Foundation Professor in the School of Social Science at the Institute for Advanced Study. This address is dedicated to Josh Ober.

WHAT I WOULD HAVE SAID

By early last week I had drafted my Aims of Education address. It was light-hearted, jocular. Its central subject was humor, and the good of it. But I'm unable to give that speech now.

Forgive me, then, for straying from my original plan, for you still deserve such a laughing speech. After all, you are the joys in your parents' lives and your successful entrance into a fine university, one validation of their great accomplishment. You yourselves look upon new vistas and will soon see your worlds' horizons expand at dizzying rates. Indeed, you deserve to laugh, to cheer, and to be gay at heart with the prospect of the coming years.

And so, I had intended to talk to you about the importance of laughter in the classroom. I wasn't going to put it that way, so ploddingly and prosaically and in such very unfunny terms—I wanted to dance my way lightly toward a serious point—but I was, for all the play of it, going to argue that laughter is education's catalyst. Why is it so? Because laughter is a mark or source of friendship, and friendship is crucial to encountering what is novel, alien, and unsettling, and such is the business of learning.

Let me explain. As students we invest ourselves in attending to the artifacts that the human spirit has throughout time left behind in the ongoing effort to encounter and account for the world. Our encounters with those artifacts—whether they are textual, musical, visual, or scientific—pull us beyond ourselves and the comfortable scenery of the world we take for granted. Through everything we read and study, we see how the world might be otherwise than we expect. This can be very scary. And we undertake this journey through foreign parts amid a crowd of strangers. As every course begins, we find ourselves in a room of people—teachers, fellow students—whom we do not know. We encounter one another, and our strangeness to each other, as much as we encounter alien times and places. Yet, if we are to come to understand those other times and places, to make sense of them, and to understand their relevance to our lives, we need to engage in the frankest conversation. To make progress,

thinkers risk voicing half-formed ideas. They express doubts and disclose why they care passionately about particular questions. A thinker extends herself, when conjecturing an account of the world. We must, in short, speak honestly and unguardedly with strangers. This we can do only if we are confident that the others, the strangers in the room, will respond in kind— not with irony or mockery but with their own accounts and honest assessments of the ideas put forward. To have this sort of richly collaborative conversation, strangers must trust each other. At the beginning of every class, I ask my students to befriend each other, for we learn together best as friends. Laughter, shared, leads us into the necessary unguardedness.

Here let me read a strange set of instructions I happened upon this summer, which also give apt advice for the business of getting an education. They are called “Tips for Stage Coach Travelers” and were published in the Omaha Herald in 1877. Here they are:

Don’t keep the stage waiting. Don’t smoke a strong pipe inside the coach—spit on the leeward side. If you have anything to drink in a bottle, pass it around. Procure your stimulants before starting as “ranch” (stage depot) whiskey is not “nectar.”

Don’t swear or lop over neighbors when sleeping. Take small change to pay expenses. Never shoot on the road as the noise might frighten the horses. Don’t discuss politics or religion. Don’t point out where murders have been committed, especially if there are [gentle] passengers. Don’t lag at the wash basin. Don’t grease your hair, because travel is dusty. Don’t imagine for a moment that you are going on a picnic. Expect annoyances, discomfort, and some hardship.

Here you have a set of instructions for getting along well enough with strangers to get somewhere together. The point is to generate peace enough for collaboration even in the middle of discomfort. And indeed these tips sort of apply to the classroom—especially the rule “don’t lop over neighbors when sleeping”—with one crucial exception. Here in the university we do expect you to discuss politics and religion. On such topics, ideas are unsettling, propositions world-changing, past and present events disorienting. What’s more, on a university campus, one gets the deeply unnerving sense that how one talks about the world will affect one’s future actions and those of one’s fellows. In the classroom, we have an early opportunity to explore how our commitments, once converted into action, will affect the people around us. This makes the collaboration involved in getting an education even bumpier and jerkier than a stagecoach ride. It requires even more effort on the point of friendship. Indeed, the effort to be friends in the classroom should become a central test of our ideas. Are they compatible with friendship? If so, then we are on the right track.

The aim of education, I was going to tell you in that original speech— the one I’m still not giving—is to develop an openness to the world, a way of befriending it, so that one can marshal all six of one’s senses—the sixth being our mind’s reason—and stretch the body taut

and assimilate the world, rendering back one's own account of it in words or music or pictures or eloquent actions, an account that responds to those that others have offered, that is also true to one's own searched-out understanding of the world, and that is friendly to the world. Befriend the world, I wanted to say, everywhere. Not only in your classroom and in the imagination, but also in Hyde Park and on the South Side of Chicago. After all, this will be your world for four years. Befriend it and ask the questions about race, opportunity, and citizenship relevant to understanding it. And befriend the wide world as you travel it, asking whys, wherefores, and what nexts. Look broadly and with an open spirit.

But most of all, I was going to say, laugh. Abandon the competitiveness that so often keeps students on their guard with one another when they enter the classroom. Now that you have come to university, don't expect a picnic, but do talk to strangers; speak frankly and make them into friends. So much I would have said to you, though in a less serious tone, had we met ten days ago.

Instead we meet today ten days after so many lives were cut off. I've had to give up plotting out careful understatements and timing deft jokes. Rather than talking about jocularity, lightheartedness, and laughter, I am drawn toward a more politically pointed topic. Education has a big job to do in democracy, and I want to talk about that.

The Power of Education

Last week for the first time in my life I discovered the full power of education. This sounds ridiculous coming from somebody who has herself never once in her life left school, but it's true. The aims of education therefore interest me less today than just this, the power of education. I present this discovery to you not modestly as a small side-effect of last week's events, nor as my own personal story of difficult times, but as a most vital discovery, equally significant for each of us individually and also for our larger democratic community. Education can ward off the paralysis of mind that is the worst danger for democratic citizens. Let me tell you what happened.

On Monday, September 10, I had given a guest lecture about ancient Athenian democracy at the University of Wisconsin in Madison and I was scheduled to speak midday on Tuesday to my host's class on Thucydides, the ancient Greek historian who wrote *The History of the Peloponnesian War*—a book many of you will read before you leave Chicago. My fellow guest lecturer, who as it happens was also my own former undergraduate advisor, was to join me in this discussion. Tuesday was a beautiful early fall day in Madison—crisp, cool, commanding blue skies. This class was going to be a special pleasure because I would again enter conversations with my old teacher and now friend.

But by 10:12 A.M. I know pretty much what has happened in New York and Washington to the people, the towers, and the Pentagon (or to the country's money and its gun). From where I stand on the street, listening to a frustratingly insufficient, tinny radio, I turn back to my original path toward the Wisconsin classics department. I go a few steps, then pause and return to the radio. A few moments more and I walk away again, only to go back to the radio. A few moments more and I repeat my departure and return. Turn and turn and turn about. I go nowhere. There is a Greek word for such behavior, this indecision, and for inaction arising from inefficiency of motion. It is stasis. Do you know it? Lately it has settled into my head like a swarm of bees.

The Oxford English Dictionary defines "stasis" as "a stagnation or stoppage of the circulation of any of the fluids of the body, esp. of the blood in some part of the blood-vessels." The word means paralysis and lack of motion. But the original Greek contains a secret that this OED entry does not tell. In Greek, "stasis" also carried the more common meaning of "civil war." Stasis meant not only paralysis but also total conflict, chaos, and confusion. How can the same word have such seemingly disjunctive definitions, meaning motionlessness on the one hand and an excess of motion on the other? Well, the Greeks knew that in a city-state when civil war was at its height, with two parties evenly matched, standing off against one another, the result is not that everything happens but that nothing happens; the very possibility of action is undone by extensive conflict.

Stasis comes to mean stagnation, inaction, and paralysis because it refers to the confusion and battling that undo the human ability to analyze, judge, and act. Plato was the philosopher who first applied this idea to the human psyche. In the Republic he argues that when our desires, our anger, and our reason are in conflict, we fall into such a state of confusion that action is impossible. He called this confusion "civil war" in the soul. Turning and returning and turning back again, my mind not working, I had fallen into stasis.

At least, I wasn't alone. You will remember, as I do, that in the first two days of the television, radio, and newspaper coverage of that Tuesday's events, countless people kept using the same limited vocabulary to describe their feelings: events were "unbelievable," "incredible," and "mind-numbing." One woman described herself as in a state of utter incomprehension. Everywhere people were saying that they found themselves unable to think. Minds were paralyzed, action brought to a standstill. Our inability to articulate anything beyond that was staggering. Over and over, the testimony was of stasis, or paralysis.

As I walked away from the radio that morning to meet my Madison host and my former teacher, I believed I could not talk to the Thucydides class. A bright still pool had settled in my head; I had nothing to say. Sensibly, though, the University had decided to stay open to keep people from panicking, and my mentor, though visibly shaken, rose to the occasion. "If we really believe," he said, "that studying these old books is of any use, then now is surely the time

to test that proposition. And if there is a book with which to test the proposition, it is surely Thucydides' History of the Peloponnesian War. After all, it's mostly about what happens to democracies in times of crisis." Thucydides' history is a dense, tangled, and difficult account of the war between ancient and democratic Athens and its highly militarized enemy Sparta. "And yes," I thought, "it is about what happens to democracy in times of crisis." I sat up.

The story of the Peloponnesian War may already be familiar to you. It begins with the early history of Athens itself. The transformation to democracy got underway in roughly 590 B.C.E. when the legislator Solon decreed that Athenians could no longer be sold into slavery to pay off their debts; that assured a free citizenry. Roughly eighty years, or three generations later, in 508 and 507 B.C.E., a quick and populist revolution finally democratized the city for good. Afterward the city was run almost entirely by citizens assigned to key offices through a lottery system; most citizens would have held office sometime or other.

Then democracy grew into empire. When the vast Persian Empire to the east attacked Greece, Athens together with Sparta fended off the threat and preserved Greek independence. Athens' pre-eminent role in this conflict set it at the forefront of Greek politics, giving it the opportunity to develop into an imperialist power. The Athenians seized the moment hungrily, developing the largest navy, greatest wealth, and farthest-reaching influence in the Greek world. As the navy grew, the city became more secure, then wealthier; as wealth increased, the navy grew stronger.

Round and round that cycle went: from security to wealth to strength to security. And as the city flourished, it also grew flashier, erecting great monuments and inviting the world to visit. One of the city's leading politicians, Pericles, would eventually describe Athens as the school of Hellas (or all Greece) and argue that "we throw our city open to all the world and we never by exclusion-acts debar anyone from learning or seeing anything which an enemy might profit by observing...; for we place our dependence not so much upon prearranged devices to deceive as upon the courage which springs from our own souls when we are called to action" (Book 2, ch. 39). Athens' very openness, he argued, had produced far greater human achievements than other regimes had seen. Its success grew from its willingness to trust that the strength of collective action could overcome any vulnerability deriving from the openness of its political debate and the latitude of its laws. The allegiance inspired by this openness would be the city's greatest strength. Indeed, all around the Greek world people had generally begun to think that there was something special about democracy that made it stronger and more successful than other political systems. After all, it did seem just to keep on growing.

But the fact of Athens' remarkable growth also made the rest of Greece nervous. Finally, in an atmosphere of general jitteriness, small conflicts among the allies of both Athens and Sparta pulled the two much larger cities into war with each other. That war lasted twenty-seven years, from 431 to 404 B.C.E., attended by disease, famine, and massive casualties.

Worse, though, than all the physical disasters was what became of human relations during the war. In city after city, people took advantage of the confusions of wartime to prosecute old grudges and abuse one another; they abandoned traditional loyalties and became deceitful; they ignored the requirements and aspirations of legality; trust dissolved. In city after city factional strife arose, and in two of the worst cases, Epidamnus and Corcyra, the cities eventually imploded in civil war. Thucydides' central theme is stasis of the worst kind: civil war, chaos, and confusion. As his account of the war progresses, and one sees one city after another caving beneath its pressures, one begins to wonder: what will happen to Athens, to the democracy, in the midst of all this mess? What will happen to the Athenians, who depend on collective and collaborative decision-making, and open public debate, when they are faced with such crises? When the world has become so uncertain, what will happen to the people who believe that a citizenry confident in its rights is always more loyal, and so stronger, than one subject to police scrutiny? Will Athenian resilience, tremendous in peace and prosperity, find ways to reckon with the stress of war? This resilience had always derived from citizens' willingness to trust their futures to one another's hands. What would happen to that trust now?

Thucydides was a critic of democracy and it is tempting to believe that his whole narrative is leading to the argument that democracy, too, would crack, descending into stasis and not finding a way out. Indeed, the Peloponnesian War as a whole does end with civil war in Athens. In 404–3 an oligarchic faction, with Spartan help, takes over the city. But Thucydides does not write about this civil war in Athens. Although he saw the war end, and early in his history (2.65) mentions its end and the stasis of 404, his text is incomplete, stopping short a few years before war's end. Why didn't he finish the story? Is it because the democrats did in fact recover from stasis despite Thucydides' hints that they wouldn't? Although the city broke down in 404, a year later the democrats were able to overthrow the oligarchs and re-establish democracy, democratic legality, and the system of citizenly rights on which they had previously depended. How did the democrats manage to maintain their expertise at being democratic citizens even when stressful events led too many people to abandon their democratic commitments?

For an hour, in that Wisconsin classroom, we wandered off to Greece, to the Peloponnese, where the dry heat of the summer fills the air with the scent of all the spices growing in the landscape, where temples, exposed to the elements on every promontory, provide the nervous traveler with reference points, where the life is tied to the land and the olives, not the sea and the fish. Today I am gone wandering again, this time with you. Are you with me? Can you imagine wooden ships hugging the shore or cutting out, daringly, straight across the sea, to the craggy volcanic masses of the island city-states? Are you beginning to wonder what happened to Athens when it was at war with Sparta? In Madison we wondered and we also began asking more general questions like these: What are the strains on collaborative, collective, democratic decision-making that are likely to arise in democracies in times of crisis? Why will democratic citizens, in crisis, come to see their freedoms as luxuries rather than as basic necessities and the

true source of their strength? Of what does democratic resilience consist? Are you also entertaining these questions? For an hour in Madison we wandered away from ourselves, and yet we also, with our questions about Athens and Sparta, talked for the whole hour about what had just happened to us in the United States.

I had entered that classroom bereft of thought. But in the midst of my paralysis, I began to question again. In the midst of my confusion, I began to think. Despite my grief, my mind was not numb. For an hour, by discussing Thucydides, a small group of about sixteen of us, escaped paralysis; in fact, I think, we put it behind us. We began to figure out what questions were relevant to understanding our present situation. Mind you, we did not once mention New York, Washington, hijackers, or incomprehensibility, for talking about Athens and Sparta, we found the problems of crisis in fact quite comprehensible. The distance to which the text took us was our salvation. If you now, this afternoon, have also followed me to Greece and into these questions about Athens, then the power of education is working on you. You are (I hope) being led out of yourself and into contemplation. This is something you should feel in your being as it happens, a sense of release, of slipping a trap, of anticipation; you should feel the glancing breezes of the future.

What good were ancient books on a day like Tuesday, September 11? Thucydides, in years probably worse than our own, managed to ask questions. Holding events at arm's length, he thought and wrote. He thus made art, and it does us, its readers, good in giving us room to reflect. These days we often praise immediacy, the lived experience as the richest source of knowledge and authenticity, but by turning to a text from a distant time and place, those of us in that classroom were able to step outside ourselves, outside the immediacy of pain and confusion, outside the stagnation of our own minds. Applying our minds to problems that were not our own, we gently roused our minds to life. We spent an hour talking about the very subject that was most important to all of us but without disabling our minds by attending to the immediacy of grief.

Here was the power of education: it catapulted our minds outside of this particular place and moment, and its horrors, and thank god for that, because the flight gave us back our minds. No longer did we have to use the words "mind-numbing" or "incomprehensible" to describe the effect of events on us, for we could comprehend. Friendly conversation delivered us from stasis. Education restored our sense of agency.

I want to turn now to the political point of this account of education. I have throughout been suggesting that what we do in the classroom is like what we do in democracy. Citizenship is the struggle, carried out through conversation, to achieve accounts of the world that accord with norms of friendship and provide grounds for action. We have this conversation in the classroom; we have it in the world. I have also been suggesting that democracy, more than any

other type of regime, needs its citizens to have strong, resilient habits of reflection. Let me explain why.

Plato, as I'm sure you know, argued in his book the Republic that the best government would be one in which philosopher-kings ruled everything and there were no democratic institutions. He, too, grew up in trying times. He was sixteen when civil war first shook Athens, twenty-three when the oligarchs took over, and twenty-eight when his favorite teacher Socrates was executed. Although he wrote the Republic in times far more settled and secure than those of his adolescence, he nonetheless believed that democracy could not in fact solve some of the basic problems of political life. The crucial argument of the Republic is that politics is the business of experts. Ordinary people, he maintained, should not pretend to have the intellectual resources necessary to weigh in on matters of state. By opposing the fundamental tenets of democracy, Plato also makes them clear: democracy is based on the idea that politics is the business of everybody, not of experts or, at any rate, not of experts alone. Against Plato, democratic citizens must argue that an expertise in collective decisionmaking can indeed be spread throughout the citizenry, that ordinary people can, by talking together, reason and judge well. Democratic life therefore fundamentally depends on citizens' ability to maintain their trust and confidence in their own status and that of their fellow citizens as reflective beings. Political crises are dangerous for democracy, as Thucydides suggests, precisely because they undermine that confidence.

In times of crisis, ordinary citizens, confused and disoriented, settling into paralysis, can come to believe that, as Plato had argued, they are not up to the job of making difficult decisions. In hard times, democratic citizens may become more willing to hand over the business of politics to experts and to abandon the institutional frameworks, the rights and liberties, that secure their position as participants in the political process. The danger of intellectual paralysis in face of chaos is finally that it undermines the first premise of democracy: namely, that ordinary citizens will always be ready to think. To ward off the ill effects of confusion, then, democratic citizens must know in moments of crisis how to preserve their status as reflective beings. They must also know how to preserve their expertise in democratic conversation and decision-making. Finally, they must also be able to preserve their fellow citizens' commitment to democratic processes of judgment and action.

As we talked about Thucydides, we had restored to us our confidence in the status of democratic citizens, ordinary people, as reflective beings, and in the power of friendly collaborative conversation to enable intellectual progress. As we began to think again, we enacted the project of democracy, affirming that citizens, ordinary citizens, can maintain confidence in their own ability to judge even in the worst of times. Stasis, we realized—not plague, famine, and disaster, but chaos, confusion, and paralysis of thought—is the greatest threat to democracy. Democratic resilience consists of an ability to resist such intellectual stasis, just as we were doing with our conversation. Above all else, therefore, a democratic

education must give citizens enduring habits of reflection and practices of collective conversation hardy enough to generate subtle thought even when individuals, trying to think on their own, feel overcome. That day, speaking together, questioning collaboratively, we could comprehend.

Let me conclude by reporting what we in that classroom comprehended. Although many around us were using the word “incomprehensible” to describe what happened, we realized that once we began to ask questions again, we could sort out what was and what wasn’t comprehensible in the day’s events. We could, actually, quite easily comprehend the physical processes by which the towers were destroyed, and also the loss of life—it was emotionally staggering, it deserves respectful silence—but we could grasp it. We also understood that what had been attacked was not random individuals or buildings but the well-springs of principle of our political system. These things we understood without difficulty. What we comprehended less well, however, was our vulnerability. That was the first point of incomprehension: how had we, given our strength, failed to secure ourselves? Second, we could not comprehend how that failure could be remedied. These two questions we plucked delicately, once we began to think again, out of the mass the media was calling incomprehension. And when the state of incomprehension is reduced to those two questions—how did we fail and how might we remedy the failure—it is less daunting.

But our conversation about Thucydides also rescued a third most vital question. Under pressure, democratic citizens are quick to believe that their own democratic procedures—their openness, their civil liberties, their commitment to educating anybody and everybody, in short, democratic magnanimity—are part of what have made them vulnerable. The third and fundamental question is how we can secure ourselves without undoing that which, though it does to some degree make us vulnerable, is also our greatest source of strength.

Why do these principles of freedom and equality, of trusting rather than policing fellow citizens, of educating anybody and everybody, make us strong? Let me answer with a fable. Imagine you are about to go on a journey through desert and jungle and over mountains and across grassy plains; there will be typhoons and droughts and earthquakes and plagues. And as you prepare to go you are presented with a choice: you may go with one of two parties preparing to make the journey. One party is known to be free and democratic, to let individuals speak about what the group should do, to be straightforward and frank about its intentions, and to develop norms of trust and openness. The other party is known to rely on deceit to carry out its plans. With which would you prefer to travel? In the final analysis, the party that commits itself to frank openness will always have vastly more friends than the other, and vastly more consent and freely given allegiance to support it. The deceitful party will eventually find itself alone, and so too weak to accomplish its aspirations. A democracy is not weak for opening itself to the world, nor for allowing its citizens great liberties. To the contrary. It is not merely that openness and rights make us who we are as democrats; they also make us strong,

for they alone inspire the consent, allegiance, and commitment on which democratic power rests. Democratic authority rests on the state's securing a way of life that we are glad to share, and on nothing else.

As, in the coming days, we consider these issues of openness and frankness and their value, we should remember the first sentence of the Declaration of Independence: "When in the Course of human events, it becomes necessary for one people to dissolve political bands, which have connected them with another, and to assume among the powers of the earth, the separate and equal station to which the Laws of Nature and of Nature's God entitle them, a decent respect to the opinions of mankind requires that they should declare the causes which impel them to the separation." Those revolutionaries assigned themselves the task of proving their arguments by, in their words, letting "Facts be submitted to a candid world." Their straightforward frankness was itself radical. The author of this document understood that a commitment to open argument, frank declarations of intent, and free discussion inspires powerful allegiance, loyalty, trust, and friendship. To destroy trust and friendship, and one's status as a worthy friend, by turning to deceit, guardedness, or the restriction of freedoms, is to undo the very sources of strength that are the most remarkable democratic invention.

In the university, too, we declare reasons. Accordingly, I now welcome you to a place where habits of reflection and argument are cultivated, where frankness in accord with friendship is the guiding norm. And I ask you to see your years here as not only an educational but also a democratic experience. As you speak with your fellow students, developing each of you a strong confidence in your own ability to think, talk, and judge as well as a confidence in the ability of others to do so with you, you practice citizenship. Understand that the intellectual progress you will make here is the product of freedom and a culture of openness. Come to feel the strength that exists in the friendships you will develop in this arena of openness. Understand that their rare strength, too, grows out of frankness and fairness.

Finally, I charge you as you now undertake your own education, commit yourselves to warding off stasis. Commit yourselves to warding off the dangers that follow from intellectual paralysis among your fellow citizens. Develop methods of reasoning so that in moments of confusion you can, like my own teacher, lead yourself and others back into thinking. Do not let the current moment undermine your confidence in and commitment to democratic practices. No more allow confusion and disorientation to lead you to believe that democratic practices can be sacrificed without also sacrificing democracy. Restore your confidence in democratic forms of interaction—in openness and trust—by practicing them in the classroom. There restore your confidence in friendliness as a source of intelligence and strength.

Be well, my friends. My talk has been too serious, but my welcome of you to this campus is no less warm and delighted for all of that. I hope that you can educate yourselves here so that you are never, not even in the most difficult moments, found unthinking. We who are on the other

side of the podium cannot “give” you such an education but only help you toward it. It’s an education that you, the class of 2005, by talking amongst yourselves as friends, must yourselves win. Welcome, my friends, and be well.