

THE UNIVERSITY OF CHICAGO | The College
AIMS OF EDUCATION ADDRESS 2010
SEPTEMBER 23

PRESENTED BY: Christine Stansell

Stein-Freiler Distinguished Service Professor in United States History and the College

Students of the University of Chicago! Welcome! You are now officially OUR students, to be cherished and taught. You think you are humble 1st years, next to invisible once you blend into the crowd of your elders who arrives soon. But our eyes are on you. We, your professors, will want to know you and find out what makes you tick. This is not out of altruism. We count on you. To cross the bridge from your old life to this one, to step into a great stream of students and teachers that stretches back centuries to the great centers of learning of Eastern and Western Europe, the Middle East, Asia, and Africa.

The education you're embarking on is very different from anything you've experienced. It can be trained to achieving a goal, like getting a job, finding a career, and building skills, in the same way that your education from grade school on was largely trained to getting you into a good college. Preparation for practical purposes is an important effect of college education, one which the founders of the U of Chicago have especially valued since founding this institution in 1890.

It was an audacious experiment, this place at the edge of the plains, remote from the centers of erudition on the east coast and a world away, it seemed, from the great universities of Europe. The place was "desolate and disorganized," reported an observer in 1894, and he was a booster. The 1890s were hard on the country, but they were especially hard on Chicago: massive immigration from Europe, a terrible depression, mass poverty, the bitter Pullman strike of 1894, and ethnic strife. In contradistinction to the Ivy League universities, which put a premium on the acquisition of traditional forms of learning, this university intended from the beginning to employ the social and physical sciences to help solve problems—not the least the pressing problems of its own raw, painfully divided, money-mad city. But your own historic moment is very different. There's no novelty in making problem solving and practical goals the aim of education. Everyone urges this on you, so much so that you may not even be aware of the mandate, so deep does it run in your generation. The culture brims with skepticism about the value of a liberal education, and professional and goal-oriented training are treated as the ONLY aims worth striving for in college.

In this historic moment, I believe, it's good to lean the other way. There is another education available to you here, one that offers the intrinsic pleasures of learning. It is a force field which some of you will enter it only momentarily, while others will be enthralled, and stay for the duration of the four years. It is not disengaged from the world; rather, it is implicated in life in every way. Nor is it necessarily separate from technical and vocational training. I speak about

education not in service to an end, but as an end in itself. Education as an inherently valuable state of our being in this world.

You're momentarily uprooted, and for most of you, it's the first time you've had to make a home of your own. In a university, you make your home in an odd way—by burrowing into a hive of mental absorption. Everyone is here to do one thing—to study and learn. In the first days, you can calm yourself in the vortex of new experiences by locating people like yourself—other students from West Africa or the Czech Republic or California, other cyclists, the other feminists, the other Republicans, the other tennis players, the other econ majors. What's amazing though is how the university allows you to shift locations. New neighbors, fellow spirits and interlocutors materialize, from study groups, laboratories, classrooms, and arguments outside a lecture hall about an off-the-wall provocation from a visiting speaker. These relationships last for the duration of a class, or they can turn out to last a lifetime.

Education works in two directions. It stretches you wide, to enmesh you in intense, enthralling relationships with strangers. And it drives you deep into yourself—in the small hours of the night, immersed in a vexing physics problem, swimming in an enchanting book. Education can be delightful and sociable, and it can be difficult and lonely. Education ranges between these two poles, the sociable and the solitary.

I

Like many consequential encounters, it can be awkward, this meeting of the teacher and her students. It's 9:30 am. It's late October, not the starry-eyed beginning of the quarter but the middle. The days are getting short and the assignments are piling on. The students are heavily-scheduled and sleep-deprived. As they file into class, some are shifty-eyed, too, which means they've barely finished the reading. The professor, too, is heavily scheduled and sleep-deprived, and here's a secret, yes, she too may barely have finished the reading. The students are thinking about things like: the bank, will the check bounce before the deposit clears? A bagel, can I get to the coffee shop before my next class? The teacher is thinking about things like: the paper assignment, should it be 7 pages not 10, and, is the department meeting at noon or 3:30? Life is not conducive to thought, reflection, or concentration, first thing in the morning at the University of Chicago or any place else.

The topic on the table is John Locke's theory of government. Does anyone really care? Not likely from the look of things at 9:33. This state of not-caring—not caring about the big matter at hand, caring about the trivial matters not at hand—is the default mode of humanity, inside the classroom no less than outside. When it comes to John Locke, the prevailing mood is, Whatever.

That's the prelude. Blank faces, averted eyes, laptops open but what's on the screens? I have seen this hundreds of times in hundreds of rooms with thousands of students. Class begins: the teacher's questions. Meant to be probing, they sound—to her—clumsy and obvious. Desultory

answers from a few helpful souls. The answers, too, are clumsy and obvious. Things lumber along. Who wants to talk? No one? Are they shy or or anxious? . Or unprepared?

Then something changes. Sometimes it takes minutes, sometimes it takes half the class. But when it does , ten or twenty minds are looking at the same thing simultaneously. Around the table, spirits lift, visibly. People are nodding in agreement. They are dying to talk. They look irritated, they look exasperated, they look appreciative---- they look alive. They are dedicated to a common task- understanding John Locke. It' s not just that we see that John Locke is interesting—in itself something of a miracle that morning; it's that we care to understand his ideas. We have created a “we” , a confraternity in search of knowledge, and right now, it feels like understanding John Locke is more important than anything else. We are released from not-caring. We are freed from the great Whatever.

And all this while people are sitting still. Sipping their takeout coffee. It doesn't always happen, but it happens enough. It's an experience of learning that is like no other—not like high school, certainly, and not like graduate school, either, where the instrumental task of preparing for the vocation takes over. The goodness, happiness, and occasional exaltation of liberal education—the connections spun with others in conversation, mutual inquiry, argument, and even acrimonious debate.

II

To abolish the state of not-caring. It's one aim of liberal education. To remove us for a moment from the default state, and to feel those moments blend together into a sustained experience of caring about something else, or something new, or something old taken in a new way. It would not be so powerfully liberatory, perhaps, if we were only caring by nature. But we are not; there is something in all of us that wants *not to know*, that *cannot know*. We are only partially thoughtful by nature. An entropic force pulls us away from wanting to understand. Attention to the entirety of existence is not within human capability; it's the prerequisite of the gods. None of us, including your professors, are immune to the lures of whatever.

For myself, there are few things I care nothing about, but one is computer science, including the inner workings of my own computer-- despite my children's urgings to learn something more than word processing, Internet browsing and e mail. I say this with apologies to students and professors of computer science. But because I have the good fortune to be an educated person, I do see how I might want to know about computers, if someone else explained the work to me, or if I overheard a conversation or a lecture. If I freed myself from the dull gray zone of 'who cares, as long as it works?' I might be interested. I could say much the same about the novels of Don DeLillo.

To be interested is to be curious, and to be curious is to create a question. To question is to want to learn, and wanting to learn is to care. A cognitive process slides into a moral state. Education is a precursor to empathy and understanding, which are essential ingredients of goodness. That's why the preachers of prejudice traffic in willed ignorance.

There is good news. A liberal education, if taken seriously, means that the state of not caring recedes. Wanting to know about one thing breeds wanting to know about another: another aim of education is fecundity. You begin with one or two things—the Second Treatise of John Locke, or the films of Kurosawa, or credit default swaps—and you end up with a chunk of the world

There is bad news, too. Educated people have done terrible things inspired by values and ideals they have acquired in the course of their learning. Consider what a historian of the Second World War writes of the elite young men of the Nazi SS. These bright young men were not thugs but products of German universities, among the best in the world, educated in the humanities and social sciences. Education does not guarantee either private virtue or the public good. But without it we are lost.

III

What happens when a class takes off? Something changes inside students, and something changes outside. Education is erotic, a form of desire—the observation goes back to Plato's Symposium. Tired people are transformed. The pale washed out young man takes on color. Postures change, everyone sits up straighter. The young woman in the corner lifts her eyes from the table and stares at the guy who is talking. Does she like him or despise him? It's too early to tell, but for now, what's good is that she's alive to what he's saying. Students are momentarily riveted by the teacher. As for the teacher, she finds the students enchanting. For a time, everyone is focused on the object of desire—the elusive reasoning of John Locke. Not unlike focusing on the one we love, the one we desire. The scene fades in this class room, and reappears in another across campus, and another. Glances, smiles, scowls; excited collaboration in one room, passionate disagreement in another. In my history class, the talk can take off about Locke, or a little later, Thomas Jefferson's views on race. In a poetry class, it's about the meaning of an image in "Campo de Fiori," by the great Polish poet Czeslaw Milosz. The concentration of attention is the concentration of eros. As I suggested, it doesn't happen always, and it doesn't happen everywhere, but it happens enough.

Universities have always been places where friendships, sex, romance and passion flared up across a continuum of intense relationships. For centuries, universities were all male; even in this country, the great private universities were barred to women until Stanford and the University of Chicago opened their doors to coeducation in the late nineteenth century. For centuries, then, the eros of knowledge thrived in exclusively masculine milieux, in friendships, alliances, and occasionally real love affairs. Once women entered the mix, universities were places where mental absorption widened possibilities between the sexes, created a space beyond the marriage plot that dominated young people's lives. I do not mean to ignore the ways in which sex in universities could be used against the young and vulnerable, and against women in particular. Nor do I wish to mistake an ideal type for reality—students were distracted, and prone to inattention then as well as now. But in the case of women, the tilt of the historical record is undeniable. Despite the pitfalls, and despite the considerable attraction

of all women's colleges, women yearned to take a place beside men in institutions constructed at least formally on principles of equality (whatever the hollowness of those principles was for years). They flourished alongside male students in new spaces like the University of Chicago. In twentieth-century universities, women and women, men and men, and men and women have been able to conduct friendships, passing romances, and intense love affairs— all woven from a common commitment to learning something. The glance across a classroom, the shared vexation with a problem set, the mutual help with a paper—all these were departures from the normal decorum of gender relations. And still are.

Philosophers and scholars have long pondered the connection between knowledge and carnal desire, because they knew it first hand. For the ancient Greeks, sexual relationships between older men and younger men were a paradigm for thinking about the relations between teacher and student. Plato's *Symposium* is a sustained reflection on these themes, worked out through an imagined late night conversation among a group of male friends, including Socrates. The theme the men choose for the evening's talk is Love, and Socrates makes it clear that you can't talk about love without talking about knowledge. In quoting the prophetess Diotima who was his tutor in this matter, Socrates gets to this point quickly. "Knowledge is one of the most attractive things there is, and attractive things are Love's province (or *Eros*). *Eros*/ Love is bound, therefore, to love knowledge."

Diotima/Socrates recognizes that this love of knowledge is not straightforward, but exists in tension with the pull toward not wanting to know, an undertow of the psyche. Diotima, too, is aware of the dead weight of what I see as the great 'whatever'. In her telling, it's the dual character of *Eros* himself, the follower of Aphrodite, that explains this division. *Eros* is not chubby Cupid, as the image comes to us from painting. He is a charming, feckless fellow. Neither wholly divine nor wholly human, he is the child of Plenty and Poverty—conceived in a drunken swoon after a festivity. He takes after both his parents. Here's Socrates' characterization:

His situation is as follows. In the first place, he never has any money, and the usual notion that he's sensitive and attractive is quite wrong: he's a vagrant, with tough, dry skin and no shoes on his feet. He never has a bed to sleep on, but stretches out on the ground and sleeps in the open in doorways and by the roadside. He takes after his mother in having need as a constant companion.

It's a strange conception, this poverty of *Eros*. For what could be impoverished about love and desire?

As for his father Plenty, however:

From his father.... he gets his ingenuity in going after things of beauty and value, his courage, impetuosity and energy, his skill at hunting (he's constantly thinking up captivating stratagems), his desire for knowledge, his

resourcefulness, his lifelong pursuit of education, and his skills with magic, herbs, and words.

This entire passage is enchanting but mysterious. Plenty, yes—but why this odd mixture of things: hunting, education, magic, herbs and words? It seems intuitively right that Eros seeks abundance—because our desire for sexual love and our reaching after others; our “skill at hunting” and our captivating stratagems to get that which we want—these seem to us the essence of the good things of life, of abundance and satisfaction. As for Eros’s love of knowledge, Diotima goes on to explain this connection. Sexual desire is the desire for mortality through procreation; and this desire can also be satisfied through other forms of creation, through making art, music, and ideas. Smart and wily, Eros is interested in unpacking the truth of the universe with magic, herbs and words. “Knowledge is one of the most attractive things there is, and attractive things are love’s province.”

Yet why the stress on his homelessness and poverty? It seems to me that Eros is meant to shuttle back and forth between two sides of humanity. On the one hand there is our finiteness, our vulnerability to the vicissitudes of fortune and our aloneness, our heedlessness to what life requires of us; on the other, our activated perceptions—that state which is awakened and yearning to know, to quarry its prey, to unlock the secrets of the cosmos with magic and to explain them with words. Like us, he lives in-between: between the ‘whatever’ of his heedless, barebones life and the affirmation, the yes! of his pursuit of beautiful things, the exercise of his mind, skills, and moral capabilities.

Diotima describes this alternation of states in the cycle of Eros’s day: “Sometimes within a single day he starts by being full of life in abundance, when things are going his way, but then he dies away, only to take after his father and come back to life again.” In the making and unmaking of Eros, he is like all of us, reverting to the state of need which is our constant companion (what about the checking account, when is the department meeting?), coming alive to the questions and possibilities around him.

I think of the eroticism of curiosity, the wanting to know more more more which is the blessed state of the first year student. Of what it is like to read the course catalogue and think there will never be enough time to take all the courses you want to take. It is something like this state which Plato was describing, I think, connecting it to our most elemental passions. Passions for others, passion for that which is beyond ourselves, passion for a deeper apprehension of ourselves. It does not rule out a focus on vocational goals, but it is very different state of mind.

IV

We speak too seldom of the pure pleasure of learning—the comedy, the delight, the joy. Study is delirious. “There is joy in thought,” remarks the early twentieth century East European Jewish jurist and moralist Israel Meir Ha-Kohen. He is reformulating the observation of the German rabbi Jacob Molin, from five hundred years earlier. “Thought is the very principle of happiness. If a man reads a text all day and does not comprehend it, what joy does he possess?.

It is the strenuous exertion of the mind that is associated in its essence with the principle of joy.” It is easiest to envision this joy in connection with the religious texts these scholars studied, or, today, with the literature, art, and philosophy, and science that you will encounter in this university . Joy in beauty, joy in truth.

But there is also the joy of the mental act, whatever its object. There is the almost-physical sense of stretching your mind, wrestling it past its limitations to accommodate a new shape to things. The generation of the 1960s had slang for this —“mind-blowing”, “mind-boggling.” The mental endorphins kick in. In a class on the history of feminism, a student shakes his head in wonder at a passage from Simone de Beauvoir’s *The Second Sex*. “I find this so amazing,” he says. “ Where Beauvoir writes , “A woman is made not born.” Beauvoir wrenches his patterns of thought into a different shape. This has ramifications, because once he grasps the idea, he can never again look at relations between men and women the same way. Evidence will come his way, unbidden, to illustrate what de Beauvoir meant, leading him to perceive, to know, and to care about how the arbitrariness of what is defined as ‘womanly’ affects and drives relations between the sexes outside of our conscious comprehension. The idea more or less blocks off the exit into “whatever.”

V

It is harder to consider the joyfulness of learning when it comes to my field of historical studies. I teach about many subjects that are not beautiful or admirable: like slavery, war, genocide—and the makers thereof . Yet a liberal education grants integrity to all objects of study, the ugly and loathsome along with the beautiful. Those subjects, too, must be accorded respect and suspension of judgment. All is higher in higher education, and this can be uncomfortable. You, the students, are for the moment the authorities before all the thinkers and heroes and victims, and bystanders and culprits, and lovers and thieves, liars and murderers who parade before you, but for the moment you must restrain judgment until you understand what it is that you’re judging.

I think of the most vexing of subjects in American history, the study of chattel slavery. To understand the system, it’s necessary to understand the slaveholders. This is an uneasy matter. Why not just call them terrible and be done with it? Terrible because they were innately evil, or because they had no choice but to participate in an evil system. You don’t have to be educated to issue that verdict. But the verdict—guilty—avoids any semblance of curiosity, and confers an easy smugness and superiority. It abdicates the task of wrestling with the tough questions. Why did some human beings enslave others? Why did they believe those others could be treated as chattel, things, to be bought and sold? The questions go on and on, because it is a massive endeavor we study. Every generation asks new questions about the system of chattel slavery in the New World; every generation debates these matters anew.

The debates never end. We can only be curious, and ask again, and find more evidence to build up our body of provisional truth, and so it goes. But the effort has to proceed from the

assumption that slaveholders were no better or worse than anyone else, and that their activity has to be interpreted within the range of human rationales and acts. So students argue and seize on questions and evidence—how much did the ancient Greek and Roman examples of slavery mean to American slaveholders? Was the system entirely driven by the search for profits? How did the Founding Fathers understand the three-fifths clause, which enshrined slavery in the Constitution? Excitement sweeps the room in these discussions, no less than if we were analyzing a beautiful poem. The debate is not about the rightness or wrongness of slavery, it is about how slavery was made, and how it was unmade.

Although—it is true—should a student say she believes, as did the slaveholders, that slavery was a more humane method of employing the poor than factory labor, she could not be dismissed from class, or expelled or thrown in jail. As students have been—and are—all over the world when they have expressed views that go against the party line or religious doctrine that is enshrined in their university. And that is an uncomfortable and awkward matter of a liberal education—you can end up with more than you bargained for.

VI

What about solitude, the other pole of education? I've spoken of eros, sociability, mental reaches in company with others. But what about all the time you spend alone? In your room, into the night, off to the side reading in the coffee shop while a group cheerfully whiles away the time at the next table. Reading books that no one around you is reading, staring at a problem no one else is working on.

Last year, Bard College in New York state conferred sixteen degrees in an unusual graduation ceremony. Unusual because the graduation was at the Eastern New York Correctional Facility, a maximum security prison across the Hudson River from the campus. The sixteen graduates were prisoners serving long sentences, all but two black and Hispanic, and all from the mean streets of New York City, Panama, and Puerto Rico. For most, probation was a distant hope. Many in the audience wept, including the President, Leon Botstein, who is not coincidentally, I think, a graduate of the University of Chicago. It's his moving account of the event I draw on here. This was not a degree program aimed at vocational rehabilitation, or preparing the students to adjust to the real world. Nor was it focused on the issues of immediate relevance to the students, like criminal law or the history of prison reform. Rather, the graduates had studied literature, philosophy, history, and mathematics. Of the two senior theses, one was on political history—the origins of black conservatism—and the other was a philosophical and literary study of the ethics of language use. Leon Botstein concludes, “we have become accustomed to believe that it is in circumstances of complete unfreedom and deprivation, particularly in incarceration, that the character of human nature is revealed.” “If that is indeed the case,” he continues, then the graduation of these men shows that “the capacity for good is never erased. An incredible potential for good resides in all of us, for it is the consequence of the human ability to learn and speak.”

There is no clear social utility in the Bard program. Usefulness to society is not its *raison d'être*. It wasn't meant to jumpstart a wholesale rethinking of prisoner education—although it would not be a bad thing if it did. We could not say that it was meant to prepare the men to be citizens of the nation or the world, because the world is a long way away from them. Rather, it was an education in the intrinsic worth of learning, a testimony to education as a fundamental exercise of human virtue and freedom. It reminds us, paradoxically, that the root of “liberal” is the Latin *liber*, freedom; and that the “liberal arts” was in classical usage the education given to free men.

You might wonder, why did the prisoners do it, except to pass the time? Earning a degree would have been a release from boredom. But to be freed from boredom, you must find something to replace boredom, or else you go back to being bored.. At the ceremony, teachers and family heard student speakers reflect on what they had gained. The graduates spoke about “the liberation of the mind that comes from confronting the rigorous demands of difficult study. They described their joy in the close, intense reading of texts, the working out of problem sets in mathematics, and the struggle they encountered in learning how to write closely reasoned arguments that forced them to reconsider deeply held prejudices and facile notions based in ignorance.”

You could say that they found a release from not caring, from the ‘whatever’ that breeds ennui and despair. They found curiosity, and curiosity engendered questions. They found—and this was their word—joy, the “joy” in scholarship of which Rabbi Molin wrote, five centuries earlier. “It is the strenuous exertion of the mind that is associated in its essence with the principle of joy.”

Solitude, fortified by knowledge; solitude, necessary to knowledge. Solitude as one aim and effect of education. With education, we can hope to tolerate our aloneness: for the prisoner, at one end of the spectrum, no less than for the student, at the other. It is not easy. Knowledge can increase solitude. In last year's speech, my colleague and friend Professor Jonathan Lear of the Philosophy Department observed that “*every* time you try to think something through for yourself—no matter how trivial seeming or obvious—you risk alienating your own community. There is at least a chance that you will come up with a different answer from the settled opinions of your neighbors, and there is also a chance that, instead of honoring you for expanding the scope of our shared understanding, the community will be irritated with you for rocking the boat.”

Another face of the default mode of ‘who cares?’ is more subtle than overt boredom, because you can adopt it and still appear to be a good student. It's acceding to the easy agreeability of class, the pleasant concord with the professor and classmates. Universities are no more immune to received opinion than the rest of life, or to self-satisfied pieties which suffice for thought. People get tired, and lazy, and they repeat truisms and banalities. Not every class is joyful, not every group is charged and absorbed, not every teacher open-minded. You will have chances to challenge bad reasoning and slipshod argument with your own considered judgments and

evidence. Take them. More often than not, you'll find that reasoned disagreement—not “in my opinion,” not slamming someone with “you're biased”—but logical doubt and contrary evidence can bring back everyone's attention to the reason you're there in the first place. You might change your mind, or the rest of them might, or the teacher might see a way to reopen the discussion. And, here, you can't go to jail.

This is my moment to give a piece of practical advice. Be the one to ask the dumb question. As in, “I know this is really dumb, but, I just don't understand why

A friend who teaches Shakespeare yearns for the moment when the student—who's almost inevitably a first year student, because it's the first year students who care enough to wonder—asks him, “I know this is really dumb, but I just don't get why Hamlet thinks he has to kill his uncle.” My colleague replies with delight that this is *the* question that lies at the heart of the play. Is Hamlet's dream real? Why should we believe him? and even if he knows the truth, does it justify the havoc and slaughter this moody adolescent brings on himself and those around him? In a nineteenth century history class, the dumb question might be: “I know the reading talked about this, but I still don't understand why women couldn't go to college.” Or, again, “can you explain again, what is the three-fifth clause in the Constitution?”

I cherish these questions because the student is peering at the surface of things and asking why in the world it should be that way. She is freeing herself from the default mode. The aim is to care enough to ask the question, and to feel the pleasure that comes from finding a good, or a good-enough answer.

VII

What I learned in college; what I have seen my students learn; what I hope you learn. We do not have to take the world as it is handed to us. It may not be receptive to our desires to change it; its terrors may overwhelm us; its obstacles may be insuperable. But a liberal education shows us that the world as it is is not the world as it must be. Its surfaces lie. It's a world which hides the questions that can be asked about it, and tells us that what you see is what you get. It's a world that lures us into not-caring, blinds us to all that is worth caring about.

What I learned in college. There are so many hidden things to ferret out. That I didn't have to remain on one side of Eros's divide, mentally hungry and shoeless and sleeping in doorways; that magic and herbs, words and stratagems were mine for the taking, handed on by books, conversations, friends, teachers and my own activated intelligence. I acquired a new home, as will you, I promise.

What I learned in college, what I still learn every month I am in college. That education is an assertion of freedom and a deliverance from the domination of what IS. Which is why a prisoner doing hard time finds joy writing a senior thesis, why Eros arises from the doorway where he slept and goes hunting and dabbling in words, even though he has no shoes.