

THE UNIVERSITY OF CHICAGO | The College
AIMS OF EDUCATION ADDRESS 1993
SEPTEMBER 27

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FUNDAMENTALISM FOR HIGH BROWS

“No one ever died of homesickness” were the most comforting words told to me during my first days at college. I remember the moment vividly, because I actually thought I was going to die. Back in those days I was an athlete as much as an intellectual. My metaphor for basic survival was “just take one hurdle at a time. Don’t think all at once and at the same time about everything that is to be done in life, or in the next four years, or tomorrow morning. Just take one hurdle at a time.”

These days I have a son who attends an intellectually intense liberal arts college—sort of a miniature University of Chicago—where the school slogan is “Guilt without Sex”. I have a daughter who is entering her senior year at the University High School and has had college on her mind and in her back yard since she was in the womb. And I have just discovered that if you go through life just taking one hurdle at a time suddenly you find yourself on a pulpit in Rockefeller Chapel looking at yourself thirty years earlier. You find yourself wondering if there is anything you can offer another generation, the adored generation of one’s own children, by way of some sage advice. So I am going to start by telling you that “no one ever died of homesickness”. I am going to tell you that at the University of Chicago many believe that the brain is an erogenous zone (an intensely pleasurable section of the body) and that provocation is a fundamental virtue. That means there is plenty of sex and very little guilt here, and you are going to have an astonishing time. And I am going to provoke you.

There is actually a bit more to be said about the sex thing. We meet here today in Rockefeller Chapel. There is a story about this place that goes back to the years of Robert Maynard Hutchins, who became President of the University in 1929 at the startling age of 30 and remained President until 1951. Rockefeller Chapel used to be open 24 hours a day. Hutchins ordered the building closed at night. When asked why, he remarked: “unfortunately more souls have been conceived at Rockefeller Chapel than have been saved there.” My theme this evening is going to be a kind of postmodern reflection on the “saving of souls” in the hope that if enough souls get saved in this building perhaps we can get the place open again at night.

The soul I want to save is the soul of liberalism, as in the “L Word”, as in *Liberal Arts Education*, and I think there is good reason to think it needs to be saved, or at least

resuscitated. Perhaps at a place like the University of Chicago it merely needs to be constantly defended.

Liberalism is sometimes identified with the spirit of “open-mindedness” yet the idea of an “open-mind” is notoriously difficult to define and it is easy to get the specifications wrong. Consider for example Kurt Vonnegut’s description of his education in open mindedness four decades ago at the greatest of all American Universities. This is what he recounts in his novel *Slaughterhouse Five*: “I went to the University of Chicago for a while after the Second World War. I was a student in the department of anthropology. They taught me that nobody was ridiculous or bad or disgusting.” Vonnegut goes on to say he never wrote a book with a villain in it because that is what they taught him at college. They taught him there are no villains. They taught him that whatever is, is okay. It is precisely open-mindedness of that sort that led our former colleague Allan Bloom to strongly recommend closing the American mind.

Although provocation is a virtue at the University of Chicago, Allan Bloom’s book *The Closing of the American Mind* drove most of his reviewers, and even some of his colleagues, wild. The incitement in the book was not so much his ridicule of “Woodstock” (which he likened to Nazi rallies at Nuremberg) or of “rock music” (which he viewed as obscene). The real instigation was the claim that the basic distinction between good and evil, between culture and barbarism had gone out of style on American campuses. College students, Bloom complained, have become so open minded they don’t make moral judgments and feel embarrassed when others do. They have become so tolerant they have lost their sense of taste. They are so enamored of the idea that beauty, goodness and truth are in the eyes of the beholder that they have become blind to things of genuine worth. They ascribe no greater value to the dialogues of Socrates than to those of Beavis and Butt Head.

Cole Porter, the famous social critic, composed lyrics to go with Bloom’s thesis. “Good authors too who once knew better words, now only use four letter words, writing prose, anything goes.” That “anything goes” attitude is sometimes called “nihilism” or “subjectivism.” Bloom called it “relativism.” One of the wittiest reviews of *The Closing of the American Mind* appeared in *Rolling Stone Magazine* where the book was described as “fundamentalism for high brows”.

(Incidentally, I am told that soon after the publication of Bloom’s book the admissions office received at least one phone call from a concerned parent of a prospective student asking whether it was true that rock music was prohibited on the University of Chicago campus! In fact one of my favorite images of the spirit of the University is the undergraduate woman I saw last spring, wearing a Sony walk man, eating a croissant from the Medici, listening to “Widespread panic” and reading Aristotle while walking across 57th Street in traffic. I much prefer that image to those earnest patriarchal portraits hanging in Hutchinson commons, which seem so perfectly designed to terrify any young visitor to our community. Those austere

glances from off the wall are meant to guard the secret that inside its Gothic exterior the University of Chicago is really an informal place where people have fun.)

Now I am not particularly a fan of Bloom's thesis. I am far more concerned about the Puritanism on American campuses than the relativism. But I do like that idea of "fundamentalism for high brows". Every other community has its sacred principles that give life to its profane activities so why shouldn't we? Why not think of "fundamentalism for high brows" as something like a ten commandments for saving the soul of liberal education? To get the project started I propose to list a few fundamental qualities of the liberal academic spirit at the University of Chicago, as I have experienced them. For rhetorical reasons I will call them "commandments."

(Actually I find it a little hard to believe that God could only come up with ten commandments. I suspect she had hundreds in mind but only ten could fit on those tablets. The soul of liberalism rests on far more than six principles. Fortunately the "Aims of Education" speaker is given less than an hour to discern what they might be. Here are the first six that come to mind. None of them are written in stone.)

The First Commandment: Don't stand up when your professor enters the room. I do research in a Hindu temple town in India. A few years ago I invited a friend and scholar from that temple community to visit my temple community, the University of Chicago. It was his first trip abroad. So he came to the United States quite fresh. I invited him to attend my section of the Social Science Core. He noticed things we take for granted. He noticed that as I walked into the classroom the students did not stand up and show their respect for my status. He noticed that males and females were sitting together. He noticed that I encouraged the expression of opinions from my students. All those things went against his notion of what the practice of teaching is about.

Such observations by an "outsider" helped me recognize a fundamental message of the organization of the classroom in our intellectual community. The message has something to do with the autonomy of voice. We participate in the community as individuals not as social categories. We try to detach our evaluation of the ideas that are voiced from the social identity of the person who voiced them.

There are many ways to lose one's voice or to have it taken from you. Laryngitis is just one of them. I have lost my voice twice in recent years, both at academic conferences. On the first occasion one of the main speakers at the conference declined to participate in round-table discussion with the males in the room on the grounds that her only interest in men was as sexual objects. It was her way of telling a story about the loss of voice. On the second occasion a speaker denounced the musical "West Side Story" on the grounds that it had been produced by "successful white males" who, she argued, had no authority to represent the Puerto Rican American experience. When it was pointed out by a wounded female fan of the show that

“West Side Story” was, of course, a variation on “Romeo and Juliet”, a play created by a successful white male who was neither Italian nor a citizen of Verona the speaker denounced William Shakespeare as a racist.

Confrontations of that type raise fascinating questions about the authority of a voice to speak about particular topics. Earlier I said this was going to be a kind of “postmodern” reflection on the saving of souls but I did not tell you what that term “postmodern” really means. You are going to hear that term a lot around this university (just as you are going to hear the term “positivism” a lot). You have four years to figure “postmodernism” out for yourself. I am not going to spoil the fun. But I will give you a hint. Postmodernism is not modernism, and it is not premodernism either. In case you think that is not much of a hint here is one of the ways you can tell the three modernisms (pre, post and pure) apart.

In a premodern frame of mind there are “insiders” and “outsiders” and it is easy to tell which is which. All knowledge is parochial and owned by those who are insiders, Only insiders have the authority to speak about themselves. The Old Testament is the private property of the tribes of Israel. Only Afro-Americans are entitled to “rap” or sing the “blues.”

So much for premodernism. Let us move on to modernism, the mentality of the French Enlightenment. Modernism has been the dominant mentality of our academic culture, at least until recent times. The modern mind believes that the only knowledge worth having is universal knowledge. What is true for one is true for all. It is assumed that if two people disagree (for example, about whether it is blasphemous for Salmon Rushdie to write *Ilia Satanic Verses*) then, according to the modernists, at least one of them must be wrong. The message of modernism is that if we stick to pure reason and hard facts (logic and science) all disagreements and conflicts between peoples can be resolved. If you believe the world would be a better place if there was just one language to speak (for example, Esperanto or Arabic) then you are probably a modernist. Perhaps you think it should be English.

The postmodern mentality is a bit different. Let me define it by illustration. I have in my files an item about a prominent member of an East Africa tribe, who was professionally trained in Western philosophy. He had an interest in reviving the traditional practices of his ethnic group. As it turned out, the old ways had been forgotten even by the elders of his community. The main repository of knowledge about his tribal past was located in books published in Europe and the United States. The East African philosopher realized he needed a “Western” anthropologist as a consultant. He had no difficulty finding several “Westerners” eager to take the job.

The East African philosopher and the “Western” anthropologist collaborating to keep each other’s valued differences alive is an example of open-mindedness in the postmodern world. In a postmodern world your ancestry is less important than your travel plans. Ebony and Ivory do not rise above their differences to realize their essential nature; instead they trade places. Let’s call this postmodern liberalism. Here are some scenes from the postmodern liberal world.

German linguists teaching Sanskrit to Indian Brahmins. Bengali writers feeling disappointed when they journey to England and discover that the prose of Byron, the prose they are accustomed to, is not spoken on the streets of London. The indigenous elite in Kenya and Jamaica teaching the English how to be properly English. American baseball financed by the Japanese. Japanese rice production financed by General Mills. An Afro-Caribbean scholar translating ancient Greek texts. Janice Joplin singing the “blues”.

I think there is a message to be drawn from these examples and it is this: The authority of a voice has a lot to do with what is said and very little to do with who says it. In other words, you do not have to be a Westerner or a male to articulate a Western or masculine perspective and most Westerners and most males are not very good at it anyhow. Authoritative voices speak for the zen of things not because of who they are, least of all their social designation, but because what they say binds you to a reality. Indeed, “insiders” in the old premodern sense are not necessarily the best ones to speak about themselves. That is why some of the best books about social life in the United States have been written by “outsiders” from Asia, Africa and Europe. It was an observation by a friend from India that got me to pay attention to the first commandment of the liberal soul: never sacrifice the autonomy of your voice.

The Second Commandment: Seeing is not believing. When I entered college I believed that seeing is believing. I was pretty hard-nosed about it. “I’ll believe that when I see it”, I used to say, especially in arguments about the existence of God or miracles or elves. Then someone showed me a photograph of a leprechaun, looking just like the little Irish elf of my imagination. The photograph, which was astonishing and very natural looking indeed, came accompanied by a notarized letter from someone at the Kodak Company swearing that the photo was authentic. I have now learned through much schooling that seeing is believing only if I am already prepared to believe.

This insight has been confirmed for me by an experiment I have conducted over the years with students in the Social Science Core. I have asked my students whether levitation (causing your body to rise off the ground through mental influence) has ever occurred. The students divide into three groups. Those who are convinced that levitation has occurred but have never seen it. Those who think levitation is theoretically impossible and would not believe it no matter what they saw. They have already seen levitation in magic shows and on the movie screen and they think deception, hallucination or mirage is more likely than genuine levitation. And then there are those who are so open-minded they think anything is possible. In all three cases actually seeing it has little to do with believing it.

That insight was confined for me in a second way. A few years ago a very famous theoretical physicist was confronted with some very puzzling evidence from a very carefully conducted scientific experiment. He announced: “I’ll believe that data only when I have a theory that makes it plausible.”

It is precisely because our views of reality are not literal that so much time is spent at the University of Chicago provoking conversations in which your assumptions get challenged. You will find that one of the maxims if not commandments of the place is “no statement shall go unanalyzed”. Some people think this maxim is simply a variation on “the unexamined life is not worth living.” I happen to think there is a lot to be said for the unexamined life, but I can assure you that one of the most popular University of Chicago camp fire songs is “anything you can do I can do meta.”

The Third Commandment: Students shall not sleep; they need time to worry about right and wrong. Hannah Arendt, a former member of our faculty, is well—known for an idea called “the banality of evil.” The “banality of evil” refers to the idea that the motives that move human beings in administrative bureaucracies to commit atrocities are themselves average or commonplace, like the desire for a promotion or the fear that government funding might be lost. In 1961 Hanna Arendt (being a University of Chicago type) wrote a provocative essay about the trial of Adolph Eichmann in Jerusalem. She argued that the Nazi who was in charge of the “Final Solution” was an ordinary and rather uninteresting bureaucrat who had no particular hatred of Jews and was in possession of a normal conscience. His motives in life were entirely banal.

Now one of my friends and colleagues at the University of Chicago is Frank Richter. He is Chair of the Geophysics department. (You will discover that at the University of Chicago conversations cut across bureaucratic academic divisions). One evening, as we found ourselves arguing about Arendt’s thesis, Richter said: “What about the evil in banality.” He wanted to stand Hanna on her head. I think he had a point. This point: Courage (and other high motives) are in short supply these days. Perhaps they always were, still there remains a “demonic profundity” to the absence of heroism in the contemporary world. It is a devilish world when mundane (and hence popular motives) can lead human beings so astray. Just reflect for a moment on the shameful events last year in Waco, Texas when several bureaucracies and prominent national leaders managed in a routine way to produce an atrocity, while everyone else, from the American Civil Liberties Union (where they don’t like guns) to the National Conference of Christians and Jews (where they don’t like “cults”), stood by silently and watched.

Perhaps it is because courage is in such short supply that we have students at the University of Chicago. Do not forget to remind those of us with too great a stake in mundane things that there is “evil in banality” and in bureaucratic motivations. Keep us alert. Engage the issues of the day. Examine their moral foundations. How do you feel about the “Genome Project”? Do you know what it is? If there is to be a “new world order” how are the forces of internationalization to be reconciled with the forces of separatism and local cultural and religious revival? You are now “college students”. That means you are members of an ancient order of fellows who never sleep, just so you can have more time to worry about right and wrong.

Fortunately for everyone's sleep there can also be irony and humor in the "evil of banality." In the late 1960'S I knew a South Asian woman married to an American man who applied for United States citizenship so that her father, who had lived his entire life in the "Third World", could join the American Peace Corps. (By the way the preferred term these days for the former "Third World" is the "Southern World" now that the former "Second World", the Soviet Union, has disappeared. Only a few troglodytes persist in calling it the "underdeveloped" world). In any case at the final stage of being "naturalized" in New York, the immigration officer said to my Indian friend, "Do you swear you will bear arms in defense of the constitution of the United States?" Compounding the irony of her situation (her aim was to get her father into the "*Peace Corps*") she replied, "No I won't do that!". The immigration officer asked, "What do you mean?". She said, "I am a pacifist. I don't believe in killing." He said, "Who taught you that?". She said. "Mahatma Gandhi." He said. "Who is he?" She said, "A great Indian religious leader." He said, "Well you'll have to get a note from him." She said, "I can't. He is dead." He said, "Well, get a note from whoever took his place." The "evil of banality" flourishes because in the thick of a horde of utterly compelling everyday concerns (promotion, profit, good grades, the flow of government funds) no one dares to step forward to take "his" place.

The Fourth Commandment. Don't believe what they tell you about the "core". I threw this one in just in case you are still musing about getting Rockefeller Chapel open at night. Well maybe there is more to it than that. A curriculum in which there is a set of readings of old or seminal or at least "original" texts common to all incoming students taught entirely in a discussion section format by regular full time members of the faculty has probably never existed at the University of Chicago. It certainly does not exist now.

Here is one way you can do the University a service. When you are asked why you came to the University of Chicago don't humor the administration by telling them back what they told you about the University, because they may believe you. Don't tell them you came here for the core. There are better reasons for coming. Tell them you "came for the waters" or for "Da Bulls". Tell them you came because you heard that in Hyde Park the brain is an erogenous zone and provocation is a virtue. Those are good reasons for coming because if you came for those reasons you are going to be very happy. It is good to be happy.

That is not to say you won't be happy in the core. You may be. You may even learn some useful things there. Learning is a curious thing. It is very hard to do entirely on your own. Even the simplest things are hard to induce by trial and error or by observation without coaching. For example, I played squash regularly for several years without understanding the game. One day another friend of mine, Bill Meadow, who is a member of our Medical faculty and a former college squash player, took me aside on a court in the field house and said, "Let me tell you what this game is about. The point is not to hit the ball as hard as you can down the center of the court. The idea is to gain position in the T and you do this by keeping the ball deep along the wall." That took about thirty seconds. My game improved 600 percent in thirty seconds.

I had a similar experience with bagels, which I assure you should be sliced before not after you place them in your freezer. That one took even more years to learn and the insight was achieved only because slicing bagels before freezing them was the standing practice in someone else's house and they didn't guard their secret. They shared their knowledge as a free good.

Of course I may be a slow learner but I think there is another conclusion you might draw from these examples. Just as it is good to be happy and to have friends, it is good to have traditions. They protect you from the down side of trial and error learning. You do not have to figure everything out on your own. A deep tradition, for example the tradition of free inquiry and provocation at the independent minded private colleges of our land, may even be an antidote to tyranny. You are going to learn some practical things at college. No Chicago police officer is ever going to pull you over on Lake Shore Drive and ask you for your definition of "postmodernism", but you are going to learn some practical things nevertheless.

Here are a few practical things I hope you will be lucky enough to learn from the tradition of teaching associated with the core: that the world is incomplete if seen from any one point of view and incoherent if seen from all points of view at once; that if you have no starting point in life you will never get started; that it is our pre-judgments (sometimes disparaged as prejudices) that make it possible for us to see; that just because there is honor among thieves does not mean that theft is honorable; that the authority of a voice has a lot to do with what was said and very little to do with who said it; that seeing is not believing; that banality can be evil; that you shouldn't believe everything they tell you about the core. If you are not taught those things switch sections. Better yet, ask your instructor for a definition of "postmodernism."

The Fifth Commandment. Never take a Puritan to the Monty Python Show. A Puritan is someone who exaggerates a virtue until it becomes a vice. Puritans come clad in straight laces rather than in the untied sneakers that are the footwear of the liberal soul on our college campus. There are Puritans of the "left" and of the "right". There are as many kinds of Puritans as there are kinds of virtues, because any virtue can be overdrawn. Try this thought-experiment. Imagine a world governed by some perfectly enforced virtue. Whenever I engage in the exercise I reason myself into a horror show.

Justice, for example, is an important virtue. It is deeply offensive to the human spirit when like cases are not treated alike or when effort and accomplishment go unrewarded. Many people spend their lives feeling indignant about injustice. A few even succeed at bettering the world. This is admirable. Perhaps if you are lucky your generation will develop a permanent sense of itself as the 90's generation because of the role you play during your college years in standing up for what is just. My generation has that sense of itself. Many of us who were students in the 1960's continue to feel proud of the role we played opposing the war in Vietnam and marching on Washington for the extension of civil rights. One of us kept marching right into the White House.

A world of perfect justice however would be a nightmare. In such a world every error, indiscretion or dark desire would show up on your “permanent record card.” Actions and outcomes would be exactly correlated. You would reap what you sowed and only what you sowed. Forgiveness and redemption would be impossible. There would be no such thing as luck. You could not start over in another town. The past would always catch up. To enforce perfect justice someone would have to be watching all the time. It would be a world run by accountants and prosecutors. Too great an emphasis on “accountability” can be stifling of the human spirit and dangerous to the life of the free university. Let us hope the lesson of the Lani Guinier case is not to keep your scholarly mouth shut so that one day you can make it in Washington. What is the lesson?

As you know, the biblical text *The Book of Job* addresses the question of justice. It is one of those exuberant texts that resists any single interpretation of its deepest meanings. Nevertheless I would hazard this reading. In *The Book of Job* an all powerful God refuses to enforce a principle of perfect justice. God then refuses Job’s demand for an explanation why. Could it be that God is not an accountant or a prosecutor after all? Could it be that she knows just how important it is for us to achieve that understanding of her nature on our own?

Protecting people from harm is also a virtue. It is deeply offensive to the human spirit when the vulnerable are exploited by those who should be caring for them. Yet even here Puritan alchemy is capable of turning a virtue into a vice. A world comprehended only in terms of harm would be a disaster. If you exaggerate too much the idea that you should be protected from harm you have a recipe for creating a society of thin skinned complainers. For every parody, lampoon or personal slight (you “snake”, you “pig”, you “animal”) there would be an accusation of “harassment” or “abuse”. For every act of criticism someone would rise up to claim they were being “victimized”. Hate groups and anti-defamation leagues would quickly organize and keep each other in business. Eventually the members of such a society would learn to keep their mouths closed, their ears covered and their doors shut, for fear of the consequences. Then someone would surely complain that the people they detest will have nothing to do with them.

Even provocation can become a vice if it is the only virtue in a Puritanical town. There is no dignity in provocation if its only aim is to celebrate your freedom to humiliate others or convict them of inferiority. Provocation is an act of love not of hate. It serves the pursuit of truth and of justice and it protects from harm those who use it wisely. But like anything else of value it must be handled with care.

As you undoubtedly know there is no such thing as “political correctness” at the University of Chicago. If there was it would be a unique form of “P.C.”, because everything we do at the University is “unique.” “Postmodernism”, “positivism” and “unique” are three words you are going to hear a lot at the University of Chicago.

Of course these days it has become very hard to know what it means to be “politically correct.” Is it “politically correct” to be in favor of government regulation or against it? Is it “politically correct” to celebrate the differences between men and women or to deny that there are any differences?

In the contemporary postmodern political world even the old distinction between left-wing versus right-wing attitudes seems outdated. Libertarians and anarchists are bed fellows. Moral Majoritarians and Old New Dealers want the government to be more involved in our lives. There is an old joke about the “three great American lies.” The first lie is “The check is in the mail.” The lie second is “Hi, I am here from the government. I am here to help you.” These days it is hard to predict who is going to laugh at the joke. I remember the political scene a few years ago when the “left-wing” government of Angola employed Cuban troops to defend oil fields owned by American corporations against a Maoist revolutionary supported by the Reagan administration. It is hard to be “politically correct” when the world starts to look like the Monty Python Show.

Yet let me not be evasive. Curiosity about variety, diversity and difference is a mark of a liberal open mind. So is the celebration of difference. So is the criticism of difference. If “political correctness” refers to the tenet that “nobody is ridiculous, bad or disgusting” then it is an exaggeration of the virtue of “tolerance”, which makes it a form of Puritanism, which is not a good thing. If it refers to the idea that the only reason some people are not as accomplished as others is because they have been victimized, then P.C. diminishes some of the pleasures of the brain. But of course you won’t find any of that at the University of Chicago. Or if you do it will be “unique”, which may make it okay.

It is not the exaggeration of some single virtue that makes for an open mind. Open mindedness is a balancing act involving several virtues. This annual address is entitled “The *Aims of Education*.” The speaker is invited to address the question “what are the ends that an excellent college education ought to promote?” The ability to make intelligent choices? The recognition of ones true interests, talents and goals? A sense of community and the public good? A desire to feel justified in the eyes of other open-minded women and men? The good taste and judgment to go beyond simply being well-informed? The title of the address presupposes that there are certain ends, which if achieved would lead you to say that the process which helped produce them was an excellent process? One of those ends, I believe, is to cultivate an understanding of the balance of intellectual functions and virtues that makes the life of an open mind possible. That balance of intellectual virtues is what my *Aims of Education* address is about.

The idea of balancing several virtues may remind you of the idea of “seeking the golden mean.” The two ideas may be related but I don’t think they are identical. Things in balance protect each other from the distortions of exaggeration but they do not blandly average each other out.

Many classical societies subscribed to the idea of natural aims in life. They believed there was a divine plan behind the organization of roles and functions in their community. It was the

expectation of those ancients that there would be a division of labor within society but that all roles and functions would be valued and esteemed as part of the plan.

I am uncertain whether that very premodern idea is entirely correct. Nevertheless in a postmodern world eager for any ironic turn we should be willing to revalue certain aspects of premodern thought. Here is an image of a divine plan for the liberal arts college. I leave it to you to decide whether it is truly divine. I leave it to you to ponder what term other than “divine” you would rather use to speak about things that are elevated and have worth. Even if seeing is not believing I do hope you still believe in fairies.

In the great, fabulous intellectual court of my imagination there are four functions or roles in balance with one another. There is a king or queen. There is a loyal opposition. There is a jester. And there is a secret society.

The king or queen stakes out some starting point and tries to make his or her perspective the reigning view of things. It is important to the life of an intellectual community that someone play this part. The king or queen tries to establish some reigning view of things (rational choice theory, Marxism, reader response criticism, feminist criticism, structural analysis.). He or she tries to push it as far as it can credibly go (and perhaps even beyond that). Reigning views become objects of debate or criticism. Occasionally they even become targets for rebellion and revolution, although one of the things you don’t learn in school is that even the most appealing of revolutionaries usually turns out to be a frustrated king (or queen).

Debate and criticism is in the hands of the loyal opposition. Members of the loyal opposition look for kinks and inconsistencies in what the king or queen has to say. They become disturbed if things are not functioning in an orderly way (the king or queen is usually amazed that there is any order at all, and grateful for it).

The jester on the other hand plays the part of deconstructionist, questioning deep assumptions, letting the court know how ridiculous it is to think there can ever be a reigning vision, sawing off with a blade of irony the branch upon which the king sits. (That last sentence, in which with some effort I avoided ending the sentence with a prepositional phrase — “sawing off with a blade of irony the branch the king sits upon” — reminds me of Winston Churchill’s quip about that rule of grammar. When told he should not end his sentences with a prepositional phrase Churchill replied: “That is something up with which I shall not put.” parenthetical digressions are one of the jester’s many tricks. Have you kept count of them in my talk? Which role am I playing tonight?)

Then there is the secret society. The secret society is a safe haven for the human imagination. The secret society protects the mind from premature cross-examination. It protects the mind from difficult and stifling questions which it is not yet prepared to answer. It protects it from embarrassing public scrutiny, for the sake of human creativity. There is a private secret part to the human mind which it is imperative to protect. Nothing should be forced to come out of the closet until it is ready.

You can think of the secret society as a function that includes all the more private aspects of the liberal open minded intellectual community. It includes private clubs and spheres of personal association where birds of a feather flock together and where various versions of thick ethnicity are practiced. In its secret societies the university community is a microcosm of the world. In dining halls, dormitories and private clubs on and off campus and at various recreational activities it is likely that some form of voluntary separation will be witnessed. If you decide to spend all your private time with other star bellied sneetches or if you decide to form a private club where men and women are segregated during social occasions or where only women meet to worship the Mother Goddess of the universe you are probably going to succeed. Personally I think it would be highly edifying, even ennobling, to be randomly assigned to meals throughout the year with a cross-section of members of the community, male and female, who come from different racial, ethnic, national and religious groups. Nevertheless the soul of liberalism is not saved by mandating against the spontaneous separations and free associations of everyday social life. Quite the contrary, without the secret society the soul of the liberal community is bleached of some of its creativity.

In the non-Puritanical world of an open mind there is dignity associated with each of those four intellectual roles. On my list of the great achievements of human kind is an item concerning the song “The Battle Hymn of the Republic.” When you hear the song sung well your blood boils and you feel like you want to go to war. The person who took that strident melody and transformed it into “Glory, Glory Hallelujah, Teach Hit Me With a Ruler” did a wonderful jester like thing. It is an accomplishment to take something heroic and passionate and “high” produced by the king and render it absurd, ridiculous and “low”. It is one reason we need jesters around. It is one reason we do not want them to lose their heads.

The divine plan requires that all four roles are played. It imagines that the roles are in balance. If there is no place in the intellectual court for one of the roles, or if there is a confusion of roles (for example, the jester becomes king), or if one role becomes too exaggerated it can be a disaster for the intellectual life.

Kings can become megalomaniacs. Their reigning visions can become oppressive of alternative truths. The loyal opposition can lose its nerve and become more concerned with loyalty than opposition. Yea saying may be encouraged or even cultivated by the king. A court full of jesters can be so discombobulating that everyone recoils in the backward direction of some old-fashioned literal truths. The secret society can become so fond of not having to answer tough questions that it stops having anything to do with the broader intellectual community. Worse yet it may begin to think that its parochial principles are the principles of the broader intellectual community. Each of these exaggerations is a move in the direction of “Puritanism”, which is not good for the health of any community in which the brain is an erogenous zone and provocation is a virtue.

The Sixth Commandment: There are only two things you need to know to do dermatology! This is the last commandment and I will be brief. I hope you won't judge importance by a word count.

I have a brother-in-law who once did a medical residency in dermatology. He told me there are only two things you need to know to do dermatology. "If it is dry make it wet. If it is wet make it dry." Similarly there are only two things you need to know to be successful in the liberal arts college of the University of Chicago. "If someone asserts it, deny it. If someone denies it, assert it."

So let's get to work and start having some fun. We expect nothing less of you than an eagerness to argue about the fundamentals of a liberal community. I have in an unguarded way made some bold assertions this evening, not the least of which is my suggestion that we are fundamentalists too. I invite you to say "That is something up with which I shall not put." I invite you to debate any or all of the legendary simplifications which I have dubbed "commandments" for saving the liberal soul. Replace them with other principles. Add to the list. Argue against lists. Argue against principles. Argue that the very idea of an "Aims of Education" address is nothing more than an arbitrary imposition of values by some power elite bent on preserving its privileges. I invite you to do this later tonight at your houses and dorms. I hope you will do this over the next four years and for the rest of your life. On behalf of the faculty of the University of Chicago I welcome you to this temple of liberalism. Honor it. Flourish in it. Defend it. May it live for a thousand and one years.

I have one last remark to make before we close. As you know we have a new President at the University of Chicago, Hugo Sonnenschein. He comes to us from a great intellectual community, Princeton University. Allow me to end this address by expressing one of our many local conceits. Hanna Arendt (who I alluded to earlier) once said during a lecture tour on the genteel campus of Princeton, "The idea of speaking here, of all places, about the concept of revolution has something ineffably comical about it." She preferred Hyde Park. The members of this faculty think they know why. Hanna Gray, our recent leader, concluded her Presidency last June by describing the University of Chicago as "the only true American university." That is why you are here. That is why Hugo Sonnenschein is here. That is why we are all here. Welcome Hugo Sonnenschein, welcome class of '97, welcome all new members of our community to the only true American university. May it live up to your expectations. May you help it live up to its reputation. May it live for a thousand and one years.