

## Convocation Address

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**"What Kind of Freedom?"**

It is truly my privilege to welcome all of you to Duke. I extend a warm welcome to the parents and families who are with us electronically in Page Auditorium and Reynolds Theater. I am also glad to greet transfer students and those who are here on exchange from other universities. Welcome back to returning students, staff and faculty members, and, most of all, a heartfelt welcome to members of the Class of 2001.

You've come from homes around the world to a place that is new to many of you. My welcoming talk today will be mostly about Duke. But I want to encourage you also to get to know this city of Durham, your new hometown, this region called the Research Triangle, and the state of North Carolina, while you are here.

North Carolina is a state with a lot of beauty, in both directions -- the mountains and the sea -- and an interesting history, politically and economically. You may well associate North Carolina with tobacco, and indeed, as you drive around this state you'll still see a lot of tobacco growing by the roadside. But North Carolina also has a growing technology and research base, and the eastern part of the state has become one of the biggest pork producing regions in the world.

In fact, the newest joke about our state goes like this:

How do you keep the economy of eastern North Carolina recession-proof? Teach hogs to smoke.

One of the best things about Duke is that you can discover a lot about a fascinating region of the country, at the same time that you participate in a university community with a truly global reach.

Among the books I read this summer was a collection of speeches from another great university, the University of Chicago, where the annual opening convocation features a faculty speaker chosen from among the very best teachers at the university. The assigned topic for the speeches is "The Aims of Education." The collection provides an interesting overview of the changing climate on campuses -- in terms of what the faculty speakers in different decades thought students would be like, what their prejudices and tastes would be.

As I read this book I thought of you, and I asked myself what your own attitudes and expectations are, as you begin your university experience at this particular place, and this particular time in history. But as I pursued this line of thought, it became clear to me that the whole idea of typecasting you is suspect in itself. You are a large cluster of highly individual persons, each with your own history and characteristics.

In the late sixties, when some of your parents were students, in the midst of the Vietnam War protests, people at least thought that they could get a handle on what students in general were like. The same was true in the mid-1980s, when faculty members thought students were too complacent and self-satisfied and needed shaking up. Today, our world is more diverse, confused, and multifaceted, and generalizations are particularly problematical. That, in fact, may be the most useful generalization I can make about your situation: be careful about moving too quickly to generalizations, about yourselves, or anything else, for that matter.

In any case, I want to speak to each of you, not address some conglomerated stereotype. So my goal will be to share some ideas that will be relevant for people who come to this campus with lots of different experiences and expectations.

Hanna Gray, an historian who was President of the University of Chicago in 1987, focused her speech to new students on the relevance of education to your future, and to the future of the world. She told students that education, most of all, is not about "the heritage of the past and the clamorous problems of the present," but "the uncertainties and possibilities of the future. To think about the aims of education is to ask what kind of person, what kind of human competence, what kinds of goals might be most desirable for the social order and the quality of civilized existence."

This point is particularly good, I think, because it reminds us that the whole point of your education is forward-looking, not backward-looking, and not even focused on the present moment.

You come for an education for a purpose: to prepare you to be a better citizen, leader, family member, professional, but fundamentally, a better -- more thoughtful, wiser, more humane, more flexible and more interesting -- person. By providing you with the finest education we possibly can devise, we help ensure that both your personal future, the future of the people who know and love you, and indeed the future of the world you will help shape and lead far into the next century, will be better.

Paradoxically, however, the way to get this fine education for the future is not to think too much about what you expect the future to be like -- not to try to shape yourself as a specific kind of person, a doctor or lawyer or whatever, too quickly. The future orientation of your education is broader than that, having to do with the kind of person you become. And this education is provided in daily interactions, in apparently small encounters and choices, by savoring and exploring what is actually in front of you, not by always focusing on what's going to happen next.

*The relevance of myths*

Professor Wendy Doniger, who studies literature and religion at Chicago, began her speech in 1985 like this:

I believe that one of the most valuable and also one of the most delightful aims of a liberal education is to nourish in each of us, whether we be scientists or social scientists or humanists, the innate curiosity and courage to take seriously what is said by the great stories told in cultures other than our own.

Stories? Is this what you've come to Duke to learn? Didn't you leave that behind in elementary school?

Fortunately, the answer is no: because what Doniger means by "stories" is the great myths, classics of world literature and history, stories that give us a profound insight into some aspect of the human condition and the features of our extraordinarily diverse world. This includes not only the Odyssey but Star Wars, not just the great Hindu epic the Ramayana but the best of American Westerns. She points out that, in the first place, we should not be too complacent about thinking that we know even the classics of "our own" culture, whatever that culture may be. For students from the United States, your education may well have given you only the most glancing acquaintance with Shakespeare, the Bible, Greek plays, William Faulkner, James Baldwin or Virginia Woolf. You will find that college is a good place to discover the classics that have shaped Western culture. But you should not stop with Western culture, as rich and variegated as that tradition is; you should seize this incomparable opportunity to learn something about the equally fascinating and illuminating myths of other great civilizations, Indian, Asian, African.

In order to show the rich versatility of myths, Doniger describes the retelling by a great student of Indian culture, Heinrich Zimmer, of an Hassidic tale told by Martin Buber, about a Rabbi who lived in Cracow in central Europe. The Rabbi dreamed that he should go to Prague, where he would find a treasure hidden beneath the Charles Bridge. So he went to Prague and waited many days for further enlightenment. One night he was questioned by the Christian captain of the guard on the bridge, and when he heard about the dream, the captain laughed and said that dreams were obviously false, because he had himself been commanded in a dream to go to Cracow and search for a great treasure buried behind the stove in the house of a Rabbi named Isaac son of Jekel -- which, he said, was clearly ludicrous since half the men in the ghetto at Cracow were called Isaac and the other half Jekel.

But our Rabbi, who was Isaac son of Jekel, hurried home to Cracow, and found in his own house, buried behind the stove, the great treasure he had sought in Prague. Doniger quotes Zimmer's commentary on this myth:

Now the real treasure ... is never far away; it is not to be sought in any distant region; it lies buried in the

innermost recess of our home, that is to say, our own being. ... But there is the odd and persistent fact that the one who reveals to us the meaning of our cryptic inner message must be a stranger, of another creed and foreign race.

### *Varieties of Freedom*

Next, I want to ask you to think with me about a theme that pervades many of the Chicago speeches, and indeed almost inevitably comes up in a discussion of the aims of education anywhere: the theme of freedom.

One of the first things you will notice about being at Duke -- and indeed one of the main reasons I suspect that you have been looking forward to it -- is that you will now have a lot more freedom than most of you have experienced in your past. Despite the fact that there are a number of requirements you must fulfill in order to graduate, you will have a lot of freedom to decide what courses you want to take, from a wonderfully huge and bewildering array of possible choices. You will also have a lot of freedom to decide how you want to spend your time, when you will study, when you'll go to bed and get up in the morning, what kinds of parties you'll attend, who your friends will be, what kinds of clubs you will join, whether or not you'll go to religious services. You've had some of this freedom in high school, but few of you have had as much as you'll now have at Duke.

Fortunately, you have come to a place that offers you countless wonderful ways to use that freedom, and lots of good people to help you use it well. Duke is a beautiful, high-spirited university, with a great sense of tradition but also a magnificent and quite distinctive sense of fun, of openness to new things, of adventure -- in the classroom, but also in other parts of your lives: sports, travel, community service, social clubs, just hanging out with friends. In choosing Duke, I can assure you that you have chosen wisely. It is a great place to be a student, and to have the kind of freedom that will help every one of you make Duke your own.

This concept of "freedom" is in fact embedded in some definitions of a "liberal education" as one of the implications of "liberal," which is from the same root as liberty. The actual semantic connection is an odd one, however, since it historically had more to do with class or caste distinctions than with liberty as we usually consider it. A "liberal" education was traditionally offered members of the free or upper classes, those with the leisure to use and enjoy life, rather than those who have to work for a living, the "servile" or poorer classes.

This should make you stop and think. It is partly for this reason that students sometimes spurn a traditional "liberal" education because they see it as class-based, perpetuating a particular dead/white/male vision of the world which is now going to be imposed on them. But a liberal education worthy of the name is anything but narrow or class-based -- it is invigorating, challenging, scary, and open to everyone who has the courage and curiosity to take advantage of it.

Unlike classical Greece or Victorian England, today we offer a liberal education to students of all kinds of backgrounds, in our democratic republic. One of the great dreams of many families who could not themselves attend college is to provide an opportunity for their children to have a chance to do so, so that they can rise in the world and have a better life. Some of you in this assembly today are in this position, and it is a crucial feature of this country and this university that we do not confine the highest form of education to people from only a particular kind of background. A liberal education is now an experience open to merit, and to excel here at Duke will depend on what you yourself do -- each one of you -- with your time and energy, not on what your parents or your schoolmates or families have done. This can be both frightening and truly liberating.

There's that concept cropping up again: "liberating." That's also a version of liberal, or liberty, or freedom. And in this context, liberating means freeing you from mental habits and expectations, stereotypes about the world that you have taken for granted all your life. The most powerfully effective way to grow and experience this liberation is to get to know people who look at the world differently, to learn about some of those powerful stories by taking courses, exploring activities, and making friends who are quite different from the things or people you've always known.

This advice is easy to give, but you will find it's not easy to take in practice. However, it is really important. So I want to stop on this point and drive it home, even to those of you who are so full of advice right at this minute, because of all the things your parents and your Aunt Sarah and those of us at Duke have been telling you, that you can't absorb another ounce of it. In other words: Yo, listen up.

### *The relevance of race*

Last spring at Duke, there was a set of events that focused everybody's attention on a topic that many people at this university and on other campuses don't spend a lot of their time thinking about, although some people think about it almost all the time. That sounds like a riddle, and it is. What is this mysterious thing that is almost invisible to some folks, and painfully obvious to others, in the same community?

The answer is race. Let me give you some context here. First, the particulars about the events of last spring. Two student publications published stories about workers and students that many members of our community, but particularly African-Americans, found offensive or egregiously insensitive. But the central event was the improper arrest by two Duke police officers of a male African American student who was mistakenly identified as a burglar. Our police chief promptly investigated the incident, sanctioned the officers, and apologized to the student -- as did I -- on behalf of the entire community. Compelled by an understandable and deep sense of injury, African-American students held a silent vigil outside Duke Chapel, and concerned Black faculty members wrote a thoughtful letter to me about the implications of this incident for Duke.

I, and many other people, have spent a lot of time this summer discussing ways in which we can all work to make this a more inclusive community, for everybody here. We'll continue those conversations this fall, and I hope that you will join that discussion and the actions that result from it, with your fresh perspectives on this

thorny question, and your eager optimism as students who want and expect great things from your university.

In terms of the larger context, you have chosen a university in the American South, with an historic legacy of slavery followed by decades of rigid segregation. The scars of that legacy don't go away easily, even as the practices themselves are changed. So race is relevant here in ways that it may not have seemed relevant in the societies from which some of you have come -- although race anywhere in this country, and in most other societies today, is far more relevant than you may have thought in growing up. And one of the ways it is relevant is in daily interactions and experiences in the lives of every one of you.

In a national survey of 56,000 students published this month by the Princeton Review, Duke placed ninth worst among universities for interaction between students from different backgrounds. I can't vouch for any particular ranking -- not even the US News & World Report's announcement that Duke is tied with Yale for third place in their list of the nation's best universities for undergraduate education. But the Princeton Review finding is sobering, and it fits with our perception of the problem here on campus. This is a problem that you can solve, by your own interactions with each other.

By the way, there is also good news in the Princeton Review survey. In it, you can read what you already know first-hand: that Duke is considered one of the hardest universities in the country to get into. Furthermore, Duke is ranked Number One in the country in terms of packing the sports stadiums, and student enthusiasm for our teams. Nobody who has ever been in Cameron Indoor Stadium would doubt the accuracy of that ranking, nor the fairness of the fact that our arch-rival in Chapel Hill was ranked only #2.

We expect to keep that #1 ranking as you pack the stadiums in the years ahead, and with your help, also wipe out that perception that Duke students don't interact very much with one another, especially around race and ethnic background. The good news is that precisely because race is so clearly a powerful factor in this historically Southern region, it is harder to ignore it than it is in some other places. This makes it, paradoxically, perhaps easier to do something significant about making connections among people of different races and ethnic backgrounds. That's what we want to do here at Duke, with a breathtaking kind of boldness.

One of Duke's most distinguished faculty members, Prof. John Hope Franklin, has just been asked by President Clinton to head a national commission on race. This gives us, at Duke, an incredible opportunity to take leadership in this area, to support Dr. Franklin's endeavors and to strive to be a model of the kind of change that is needed to turn race into a source of rich variety in our culture rather than a source of deep division and a scourge. In fact, you'll have an opportunity to talk with Dr. Franklin about his most famous book on September 21st, and we're sending a copy to every one of you so you can have a chance to read it and think about it.

*Don't forget about class*

Less visible to most of Duke than the events I have just mentioned, there were two powerful speeches at the beginning and the end of the spring semester that also gave us food for thought.

One was by Ossie Davis, the well-known actor, at the Martin Luther King celebration in January; the other by former President Jimmy Carter, at Commencement. Both these speeches, with different forms of eloquence, focused on another big knotty problem we need to wrestle with at Duke and in America more generally: social and economic class: the fact that some folks here and anywhere have a much larger share of the good things of the world than others do, and are therefore able to enjoy very different kinds of advantages and comforts, and what that fact means to you.

You may not have thought much about differences based on class before, but I encourage you to do so at Duke. Notice how people are stereotyped by their language or their clothes, and watch yourself when you begin to gravitate only to those who look and sound a lot like you. Notice, too, how people in the workplace are treated differently according to their jobs.

I encourage you to stop occasionally and reflect that the folks who are serving your meals and cleaning up after your parties and mowing the grass are actually making a much bigger direct difference in your quality of life than those of us behind a big desk in the administration building, and treat them with gratitude and respect for what their contribution to this place means to you each day. Each year at Commencement, when I ask the graduates to applaud those who have made a difference to them at Duke, the biggest hand goes not to the faculty or the administration, not even to their parents and high-school teachers, but to the people in buildings and grounds, housekeeping and food service; I always find that very heartening, and I hope you won't wait till you graduate to let people in those jobs know that you appreciate what they are doing.

*So where do we go from here?*

That's a lot of heavy stuff I've given you to grapple with today, but it's important. And I guarantee you that if you take some of it seriously, you will have a much better education, be much better prepared to face the world that will await you when you gather in the Chapel in May 2001 for your baccalaureate. I believe that if you take this advice you will even, in the end, have a much better time at Duke, although the way there will be some uncomfortable moments when you face things about yourself, and the world, that it would be easier to ignore.

You have so many gifts, of intelligence, promise, ardent loving support from family, friends, teacher who care about you. Wear these gifts lightly but do not spurn them. Become your own person, at Duke, but remember that you can never be a person all by yourself, and step back occasionally to notice what kind of person you are becoming.

We welcome you with great enthusiasm and excitement, ready to get on with another year of adventure, opportunity and change. A year which is a first for each of you, and therefore, for each of us as well. We wish all the best to every one of you, and look forward to sharing with you the journey that lies ahead.