

REMARKS BY PRESIDENT NANNERL O. KEOHANE
RACE DAY/UNITED WAY KICKOFF

September 26, 1997

I. CARING FOR COMMUNITY

I am glad to be here today. For me, it is an opportunity to restate my commitment to a just and affirming community for all of us at Duke University.

This is an opportunity also to commend all of you for caring about our community. "All of you" includes those who have assembled for the kickoff of this year's United Way drive as well as those who were drawn by the promise of Race Day. Both events speak to the needs of our community on and off-campus. Let me speak first briefly about United Way, and then turn more directly to the topic of race.

With the United Way drive, thanks to hundreds of volunteers and thousands of donations, we hope to raise \$700,000 from Duke this fall. Many of those funds, including the first \$50,000 raised above last year's total, will be used for agencies and programs serving the families in our 12 neighborhoods nearest the campus, and the children in the seven public schools near the campus.

I am grateful to the leaders of the United Way campaign, and I urge all of you to join them in reaching into our pocketbooks, our paycheck deductions, our hearts and minds, to reach out to those nearest and neediest here in Durham. It really does make a tremendous difference, and it shows that Duke cares.

With Race Day, thanks to student initiative and leadership, we hope to improve racial understanding on campus, both by noting where and how we fall short, and then by committing ourselves to work for progress. I commend the leaders among the students from many organizations who have come together to make this an important opportunity for sharing concerns and visions, and building a platform for acting for the future.

II. THE IDEALS OF COMMUNITY

What sort of community do we want Duke to be?

In my inaugural address as president of Wellesley, I spoke about building a "community worthy of the name." I have the same desire for Duke. I want this community to be -- I believe we ALL want this community to be -- "as nearly ideal as possible, rising above all lines of discrimination, built upon cooperation and understanding sympathy as a bond between individuals."

At Duke, like every other college or university, this ideal is subverted by daily realities. It's even harder at a university than a college, because we are a much bigger and more complex place, and it's harder for us to know people from across the whole institution. We also must struggle with poor communications, inefficiencies, misunderstanding, hard choices. But these should not become the excuse for abandoning our efforts to work toward our goals. If we maintain our commitments, our sense of humor and sense of priorities as well, we can create a community that bears a much closer resemblance to one we would call ideal.

III. MOMENTUM

Thanks to the leadership of lots of people -- faculty, staff, trustees and students -- there is a sense of momentum on campus today about dealing with the challenges of diversity and justice. It's primarily a positive momentum, a sense of opportunity, but it also has a sense of urgency: and unless we seize this opportunity to make a difference, there could be a falling back into a sense of apathy and cynicism that will be even deeper for having been through a period of hope, even guarded and wary hopes.

How can we take advantage of this opportunity, this shared focus for this moment in Duke's history (not the first, or the last, but ours...) this shared focus on issues of inclusion, of understanding across ethnic and racial lines, so that diversity may unite us and enrich our lives instead of dividing us?

We need to do this on every level: in large gatherings like this, to affirm our collective purpose; in smaller groups and organizations, like those who have united in the ICC to sponsor this event, and in our individual interactions. All three levels are crucial, and all demand different things from us.

Events like this are symbolic and substantive landmarks, but the real action must be ongoing, everyday, in smaller, more ordinary, less dramatic ways, if we are to improve our beloved university and change our own lives as well. Each of us in our organizations, our friendship groups, must take up the habit of thinking about what we can do to break down barriers and reach out. Each of us must think about our individual interactions: how we react to other people, what kinds of assumptions we may be making.

A few good pieces of advice in these endeavors: from the letter from the concerned black faculty last May -- a big start can be made if you just remember the Golden Rule in the way you interact with others: "We could conceivably have a campus-wide revival if members of the university community approached each action by honestly answering the question: "Would I want this done to me?" Fundamental human needs, for respect, for dignity, for sensitive hearings and listenings, transcend all differences between us, and need our attention.

From the chair of the Board, Randy Tobias: this commitment to increasing inclusiveness and affirming the values of diversity on campus cannot be a "project," to be taken up and then dropped for some other priority: it must become a way of life.

IV. REALISTIC HOPES

So what is it realistic to hope we might do?

First, let's get it straight what the problem is:

Despite my dramatic quoting of the rating in the Princeton Review at convocation about our interactions, I don't think that Duke has a worse problem than other campuses, or other parts of American life, in actual interactions among us on a casual basis. In terms of people walking together on campus, working together in organizations, talking together after classes, supporting each other in teams, Duke has interaction across all kinds of potential lines, including race.

There are, however, numerous specific incidents in which obtuse or malicious behavior can lead to hurtful acts, and we all need to have our consciousness raised about things that hurt others, and why. I do not underestimate the importance of these acts, nor our need to speak of them frankly and try to explain why they are so hurtful. But I think our major problem at Duke is about what we value, how much we are willing to put ourselves at risk to reach out for some deeper communication with others, and most of all, how willing we are to try to plumb our own consciences, identify our unthinking prejudices and subject them to the same careful analytical scrutiny we are accustomed to using in our scholarly work. We all have such preconceptions: it is fruitless to think that you are somehow free of them. Acknowledging that, and trying to think what each of us can do about it, will be a significant step, and not as easy as it sounds.

Then on the organizational level: I commend each of the members of the ICC for commitment to DO something -- to walk the walk in a specific way, this year. I earnestly make the same commitment for the administration: in appointments, in recognitions, in promotions and career advancement, in creating safe spaces and opportunities for dialogue, in working with managers across the institutions to make clear that Duke expects that everyone who works here will be treated with dignity and respect; and that managers who fail to act on this principle will be held accountable in meaningful ways, in their performance appraisals and in their paychecks. We are a long way from that, but we mean to get there.

However, since most of those who work at Duke, managers and people all across the institution, are well-intentioned, the most important thing we can do is to help each other recognize insensitive behavior and improve our ability to communicate with others.

Although the focus of this day is on race, and racial divisions are an important area for Duke to think about and confront, we should also remember that the topics of diversity and inclusion are not just about black and white, not even just about race. There are many interesting differences among human beings, and we need to think of diversity broadly, not simply as a matter of race.

V. PERSONAL NOTE

Finally, Maya suggested that I include in these comments something of a more personal nature as well.

My own consciousness about human diversity and especially race was shaped, as everyone's must be, by the time and place in which I grew up. For me, that was most formatively Arkansas in the 1950's -- not too far from Central High School in Little Rock where nine black students were subjected to such horrifying abuse for trying to attend school.

My father and mother were among the Southern liberal leaders who were trying to make a difference, to help the tide turn towards

tolerance, brotherhood and inclusiveness. I recall most vividly one Sunday in my father's church, First Presbyterian, in Hot Springs, Arkansas, when preparations for the Sunday service were particularly careful and prolonged. That was the Sunday on which, for the first time, parishioners from the black Presbyterian church in our same city were invited to join us for worship.

That sounds simple, but it was not, even for a church -- and churches, religious groups in general, were often at the forefront of these efforts (note the leadership of Duke Divinity School in moving Duke on this front as well). It was important to make sure that the deacons who seated folks knew which pews they should direct our visitors toward, so that they would be seated with people who would welcome them, for we knew that not everybody would. The excruciating care with which the service was planned paid off in a smooth and truly inspirational day, but I will never forget how much attention had to be paid to this apparently simple step.

Nor will I forget the inspirational eye-opening experience when we returned the visit, as guests of the black church: the much greater energy than I was used to as a staid presbyterian, the exuberance of the hymns, the warm welcomes of each family of one another and of us, the chorus of Amens and "say it, brother," that greeted the prayers and urged the preacher on.

That double set of visits stays with me as a lesson in many ways: you need to take specific steps to be truly inclusive, you need to think carefully about how they will work out so you do not do unintentioned harm: but you must be bold enough to begin, and risk mistakes and rebuffs. And in return, you will find opportunities for being invited into a new way of living, learning, worshiping, partying, looking at the world, that will provide precious new dimensions to your understanding of what human life is all about.

VI. CLOSING

You are here, I think, because you understand that what you personally do can make a difference in race relations on this campus. We know that racism will not die today, neither here nor anywhere else. But Race Day is one concrete step toward making a difference. Most likely, that difference will begin with you. You may sense a change in perception -- a sharper awareness that seemingly innocuous words can hurt others. You may have a change in attitude -- a willingness to take the first step in getting to know that "different" person down the hall and take advantage of Duke's diversity.

Most of all, I commend all of you for believing that you can make a difference. You can, you know, on campus with Race Day and commitment, and off-campus through volunteer service and the United Way. Change begins with each of us.

Thank you.