

Address to the Faculty

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In many speeches these days, there is a great deal of millennial hype. Perhaps in reaction to all that florid rhetoric, I will go back to the basics in this address. I ask you to think with me about our purposes in the work we do together. What do we value most at Duke? What are we trying to accomplish?

A small number of ideals have brought scholars together across the decades, and sometimes made our lives together worthy of the much-misused term "community." In my inaugural address at Duke seven years ago, as some of you may recall, I organized my thoughts around the image of one of the most beautiful of all scholarly communities, the Rockefeller Foundation retreat center on Lake Como in Bellagio, Italy. Many of you have had similar experiences at other scholarly retreat centers such as the Center for Advanced Study in the Behavioral Sciences, the Gordon Seminars for chemists and other scientists, or our own National Humanities Center in the Research Triangle Park. These places are "communities" only in an evanescent sense, for the participants are together for a brief period; but during that time, intense and pleasurable reflection, in isolation from other more mundane concerns, can create strong intellectual bonds.

Ironically, it is sometimes harder to create such bonds among scholars in a university like Duke. We are together far longer, and must therefore contend with the typical irritations and frustrations of long-term assemblages of human beings. The ideals of scholarly community tend to get lost amidst personal jealousies and rivalries, organizational turf wars, and contention over scarce resources -- space, faculty positions, money to support research or create new centers and programs. At a scholarly retreat center, there is no reason or room for such contention, since there are plenty of resources to support everything one might want to do, and the group doesn't stay together long enough to allow serious interpersonal tensions to arise.

Universities are far more complex than retreat centers. We all face the challenges of that complexity every day. My purpose this afternoon is to remind us of some of the reasons all of us are here, so that we can more often cut through the complexity and keep our eyes on our real goals.

Most of us chose our profession because we are curious about the world, because we like to *know* things. My own favorite example of this is a conversation with my youngest son when he was two and a half, riding behind me on his bike seat many years ago on the way to his day care center at Stanford. He asked non-stop questions throughout the trip, and at one point, as I was trying to navigate a particularly tricky intersection, I said distractedly, "I don't know, Nat!" And then he said, with considerable irritation, "I don't want to live in a family where the mommy doesn't *know* things." No surprise that he's now finishing his Ph.D. Most of us were probably kids who pestered our parents with questions, wanting to know how the world worked, and why.

This is our distinctiveness as a profession. Scholars are not better people than those who choose other vocations; what sets us apart is our restless curiosity about the world, or some specific part of it. That curiosity made us enjoy intellectual challenges in college, and got us through the traumas and insecurities of graduate school. Our curiosity became fierce and focused. Fierce, because the more we learned about our chosen subject, the less satisfied we were with the conventional answers, even those on the frontiers of our discipline. Focused, because more and more our energies were concentrated on solving these particular problems, tackling these particular anomalies, that intrigued us. Identifying the anomalies, trying out ways of tackling them, was both exhilarating and frustrating, and deeply absorbing.

Max Weber has a wonderful essay on "Science as a Vocation" that I often quote to graduate students; it's well for more mature scholars to remember the truth of this insight as well. Here's one of my favorite passages, with apologies for the gender-specific language:

"A really definitive and good accomplishment today is always a specialized accomplishment. And whoever lacks the capacity to put on blinders, so to speak, and to come up with the idea that the fate of his soul depends on whether or not he makes the correct conjecture at this passage of this manuscript may as well stay away from science. He will never have what one may call the 'personal experience' of science. Without this strange intoxication, ridiculed by every outsider, without this passion .. you have *no* calling for science and you should do something else. For nothing is worthy of man as man unless he can pursue it with passionate devotion."

Such fierce, focused curiosity is not necessarily the road to happiness. Identifying gaps in our understanding and seeking to resolve them are risky activities. We may choose the wrong problem, or define the problem in the wrong way. Even defining it well, we may not hit on a way to solve it. Others may get there first. So often we can be frustrated, and much of the time we will be confused -- not because of lack of intelligence, but as a result of being on a frontier where no one knows the answer. For the active scholar, confusion is a way of life.

So we plunge into the confusion in the faith or hope that we can make it understandable. There is a hubris about scholarship, the desire to turn chaos into order, and a hubris also in the very fierceness of intellectual passion. It was not accidental that Dr. Faustus was an intellectual. Our moral quality is put at risk by our vocation: it can make us singleminded, sometimes egocentric, impatient, hypercritical, insensitive to other people.

Such is not promising material from which to construct communities. Living together successfully requires compromise, attention to the needs and priorities of others -- not virtues that are exemplified or rewarded in the life of scholarship as I have just defined it. It is not surprising that faculty politics are sometimes so contentious -- not always, as the old saw would have it, because so little is at stake. Sometimes a great deal seems to be at stake, in creating or preserving the essential conditions for scholarly activity, as defined by many different scholars with divergent views on what those conditions might be, and little awareness of or interest in such pragmatic sticking points as constraints on resources or the equally pressing needs of other parts of the university.

The scholar's characteristic mindset also has complex implications for the teaching part of our profession. When we teach, we have to reach out to people who not only have less knowledge, but who have mostly not honed their curiosity to the same point of focused fierceness. Graduate students often have done so, or are eager and ready to do so, and that is why teaching graduate students is one of the most rewarding and absorbing activities for committed scholars. It's not just that scholars like to replicate themselves, but that we sense a true partnership in these discourses, or at least the frequent possibility that it will be there.

Teaching undergraduates or professional students, however, often requires engagement with people who have a less intense commitment to the life of the mind, and more pragmatic reasons for their programs of study. If we bring our own intensity to the classroom, we may be able to light the intellectual kindling they provide with the focused lens of committed scholarship, and the results can be brilliant. We can also burn them, if we expect them to share our intensity; sometimes they find this scary. But nobody can demonstrate a more pure, intense intellectual passion than an undergraduate who is truly "turned on" by a course, by an idea, by a question that absolutely must be answered.

In practice, we have to worry less about burning students with intellectual intensity than about hiding that intensity in the classroom in order not to raise the temperature too high. The risks of offering intellectual engagement and having it rejected, or not comprehended, and the energy and art required to offer such

engagements seriously, are great enough that we often settle for an easier path in the classroom. But if we do not display some of our own fierceness, our dissatisfaction, our confusion, we are cheating students of the experience that is at the core of our own identity as scholars. To lead them out of Plato's cave, we cannot expose them immediately to full scorching light; but they need some glimpses of it, so that they do not mistake the shadows -- our distillation of the intellectual struggles of generations of scholars past and present -- for the reality.

Having these points in the back of my mind for the past month or so as I prepared for this address has made me especially attentive to ways in which we as a university sometimes live up to these ideals. Let me give you just two examples.

A few weeks ago, at a regular meeting of the Deans Cabinet, the major agenda item was the presentation of an early draft of the "Campus Master Plan" that we are now working on, to help us think about the physical layout of the campus and how we best preserve and enhance it for future generations. Much of the plan is about such crucial but decidedly non-intellectual issues as pedestrian pathways, possible building sites, and, of course, parking. But right in the middle of the draft, in discussing possible new facilities for student life, our off-campus planning consultants quote from the 1994 report of the Task Force on the Intellectual Climate at Duke, chaired by Professor Peter Burian. This document was provided to them along with other resources, as background for their work.

The consultants note that "the Task Force produced an eloquent report that can serve as a source of guidance for the physical master plan," and quote from it as follows:

"if intellectual, not merely academic, life is the core of the institution, we should reasonably expect all major university activities and facilities to be shaped by their relation to that core. ... The university sends signals about what kind of community it believes itself to be and what it expects from its members by the way it organizes and regulates its residences, eating facilities, and the like."

I choose this example first to assure faculty members who served on this and similar task forces that their work is not forgotten, that it endures to help enlighten our planning and decisions as a university; and second, to remind us that there are powerful connections between our intellectual aspirations and the way we organize our life together outside the classroom. In our current discussions about residential space on West Campus, we are demonstrating our belief that *how* students live and work and play and learn together matters. The way space is organized and deployed on campus says a lot about our intellectual character and goals. The distinctive and precious advantage of a "residential university" is that the campus provides multiple opportunities to advance a student's education, in the deepest sense. Like most institutions, we have not taken full advantage of those opportunities across the years.

My second example is a vivid instance of faculty members sharing something of their own focused curiosity with one another and with students in the initial symposium sponsored by the new University Scholars Program, entitled "What is Knowledge?" It's hard to get more basic or direct than that about our purposes as a university, and the organizers of the symposium were clearly risk takers. Their boldness, and their conviction that such conversations are fundamentally what we are all about, were rewarded, by an exceptionally stimulating two hours in which four faculty members from engineering, physics, political science and art history talked about what constitutes knowledge in their fields. They sparked a great discussion among those present and gave everybody a great deal of material for many future conversations. The response from the students was equally passionate and focused, and the intellectual engagement in that session was truly inspiring.

Of course most of our time at Duke, or any university, is not spent in such sunlit uplands, whether we are

faculty members, students, or administrators. Faculty members have to engage also in the more routine parts of the profession, whether it be grading, peer-reviewing yet one more grant proposal, or convening in a committee to allocate scarce departmental space or research funds. For students, the university is not only a place for intellectual engagement and insights, but also home, for some period of their lives. For undergraduates, the university is classrooms, libraries and laboratories, yes -- but also a hotel, dining room, provider of creature comforts. It is a site for partying and for adolescent angst, for volunteering in the community and starting a new club to make the world a better place or add another line to the resume. It is a platform for their future careers, a place where grades and other identifiable markers have to matter. It is also a place where lifelong friendships are formed with special intensity.

It is important for faculty members occasionally to share in these extra-curricular joys and sorrow, to interact more informally with students, so that the whole Duke experience can be seen as educational, rather than perpetuating a sharp distinction between the life of the mind and all other undergraduate pre-occupations. The impact this can have for good is hard to overstate, and it can richly repay the time and energy required. Again, let me give a couple of recent examples.

Over homecoming weekend in late September, I met with many alumni of different Duke generations in many different settings. Two encounters stand out with special clarity.

This homecoming included the Hall of Fame ceremonies, held every 2-3 years to honor Duke athletes who excelled in their sports and graduated at least ten years ago. The four athletes who were honored that night spoke at length, and with passion, of the importance of their undergraduate years. They said very little about wins and losses and the hoopla of fame; instead, they all spoke about the importance of their teammates, their debts to their coaches and professors, and the impact of the whole Duke experience on their lives.

The next morning I was part of a very different ceremony, at least on the face of it: the tenth anniversary of the Women's Center at Duke, with a special focus on the twelve women who brought that center into being by their ardent advocacy and persistent activism.

I had been told in advance that, quite unlike the athletic champions, these women were pretty bitter about Duke, a place they had found unwelcoming and even hostile. In fact, the event was one of the most upbeat and exhilarating celebrations I have ever attended. The women were amazed and deeply pleased that the Center they asked for -- the center with a library, an art gallery, a full-time staff, robust programming, a safe and richly supported space for women, the center they (and others at the time) regarded as an impossibly bold stretch, a familiar negotiating ploy -- asking for the most in order to get at least a part of it -- all of this and more had come to pass, and become a normal part of Duke University. As one of them said afterward:

"I, like many in the group, felt at times disconnected from Duke. Not any more. The weekend made us all feel so appreciated, so proud, and so connected to the long line of powerful, challenging women that have attended Duke, both before and after us."

The women thanked faculty members who had supported them, and paid tribute to those administrators who, though initially uncomprehending, paid heed to a carefully researched 76 page report showing the need for a Women's Center, and in the end, helped to establish it. Most of all, these women honored their own partnership, explicitly celebrated how it had brought them together across boundaries of race, sexual orientation and class to work for something they believed in and to become powerful together. And in her remarks, a speaker for the group said that the fact that they cared enough to give so much of their time, talent and energy to trying to make it a better place may well have meant that in the end, they loved Duke more than fellow students who sailed through the place in a more conventional fashion.

These achievements, these two very different forms of success at Duke, are part of what makes the university powerful, in addition to the thirst for knowledge that is at the center of the scholarly life.

Those of us in the administration, in all the many jobs that go under that all-purpose rubric, are responsible for the support of all these different activities, for sustaining and advancing a place where they can all flourish -- even the ones that may, at first, seem to many people un-Duke like, irritating, and radical. Administrators do this -- along with many other much more routine and practical activities -- in a spirit which must needs be quite different from the fierce and focused curiosity that is the hallmark of faculty endeavors. It's a spirit of problem-solving, of trying to bring all the pieces of a complex puzzle into some kind of ordered form, holding all the parts of a very complicated institution in some kind of uneasy harmony so that everyone here can get their jobs done, so that the essential supports are in place to enable the real work of the university to move forward.

This is an endeavor that brings its own rewards, and it is important to the university that it be done well, by people who understand the academic enterprise and deeply honor it. It's important, too, that those staff members who keep the place on track be valued for their own contributions, and occasionally thanked for things that go especially well. Many of you do remember to do that, and I can tell you that it does matter to them.

And perhaps most important, in the midst of all the complexity of this fascinating institution and its multiple activities, those of us faculty members who have been "seconded" for a time to administration should not forget how the passion for scholarship feels, nor its crucial role at the center of our work. At Duke, while I am president, we will not forget.

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