



President Nannerl O. Keohane's
**2002 Opening Convocation Address for
Undergraduate Students**
August 22, 2002

I know that the sentiments of the students and the parents are somewhat divergent at this point. As students, you are eager to get on with your life at Duke. You are somewhat bewildered by all the things that are new, picking up the first cues that have come your way about what you're expected to do here and what everybody else is doing; and you are just as glad that the 'rents are about to take off and let you concentrate on the business at hand. As parents, many of you are experiencing some separation anxiety, it's hard to leave your child in a new place and turn the car around and face towards home without them; and you may be inclined to linger for awhile to make sure they have absolutely the right bed sheets and laundry hamper and that everything is in place in the new room they will call home.

However, by the end of the week, the shoe will be on the other foot. Many of the first year students, even if you think of yourself as very independent, will be experiencing some homesickness; and many of the parents will find that there really are quite a few advantages to an empty nest, or a nest with one fewer fledgling, and will be ready to get on with your own lives! Fortunately, both email and the telephone system work quite well at Duke. Please do use them!

Anyway, I know from move-in yesterday that all of the students have *plenty* of stuff, having carried some portion up all those flights of stairs myself to help you out, so I don't think anybody needs to worry about accumulating any more! And parents, if you are concerned about the changes that may occur over the next few years -- or even by Thanksgiving -- I promise you that you will recognize your son or daughter four years from now, despite their heightened erudition and urbane wit.

Christoph has already conveyed some sense of the extraordinary raw talent present in this gathering today. In the coming years, some of you will achieve fame at Duke or afterwards; and others will simply set about the deliberate and risky business of changing the world brick by brick. You won't do it alone, and you won't do it overnight. And please remember that whatever path you may have charted for yourself, education is its own end, and if you manage it mindfully it will serve you well the rest of your life.

Let me pose this morning two specific, contrasting images to help bring into focus the way you will spend your time here at Duke.

First, The Sower.

On the East Campus lawn, there is a life-sized bronze statue of a farmer scattering seed. As you know if you have read carefully the send-home edition of the *Chronicle*, the Sower is an anonymous but powerful-looking 17th century peasant sculpted by German artist Stephan Walter. He has stood on that same spot since 1914--a gift from James B. Duke, who later signed the original indenture establishing Duke University.

When you see the statue, many of you may think first of Johnny Appleseed, a legendary figure

striding through the fields and woods of the early frontiers of this country, planting apple trees he would never see in blossom, moving ever onwards, westward towards new lands. The Sower also evokes the agrarian myth that Thomas Jefferson embraced and that remained dear to the Duke family and others who had made their living from agriculture-in their case, tobacco-the notion that contact with nature and the earth ennobled the soul.

We don't know if those allusions were in the artist's mind, but we do know how students of Trinity College and the Woman's College in succeeding years turned the statue to a practical use. It was said that if a Duke woman student met her date by the statue and the young man placed a penny in The Sower's outstretched hand, only to find the coin missing when they returned from a walk, the young man could claim a kiss. An interesting entrepreneurial approach to romance. The price had doubled to two cents by the 1960's; but nobody seems to need the Sower's help these days!

The Sower will also remind some of you of a parable told by Jesus, a connection which actually was intended by J.B. Duke. A main point of the Biblical parable was that sowers cannot control the fate of their seeds, that depends on the condition of the soil, the luck of the draw, weather and human intervention. A single seed may not look very impressive; yet in a propitious climate, with plenty of water and sunlight, it will provide shade, fruit and beauty. Sowing, like attending college, is an act of faith, and it is all about the future. Henry David Thoreau commented, "Convince me that you have a seed there, and I am prepared to expect wonders."

A Greek proverb holds that society grows great when old men plant trees whose shade they know they shall never sit in; it means people believe that future generations are worth investing in. Past sowers, like Washington Duke and his two sons, could never know exactly how their educational seedling would develop; they would never live to see how things actually worked out across the centuries. But they had faith that it would be all right, that it would be worth their time and money and energy.

You'll see their statues, too -- the patriarch Wash Duke welcomes you to East Campus from his armchair, and B.N. Duke strolls thoughtfully in front of Baldwin Auditorium; J.B. himself stands reflectively with his omnipresent cigar right in front of this Chapel, looking out over the great university that has grown up in the piney woods he bought to build in. All the Dukes had great faith in education. In the founding indenture for the University, J. B. Duke stipulated that great care and discrimination be exercised in admitting as students only those whose previous records show a character, determination and application evincing a wholesome and real ambition for life.

And here you are.

"Character," I know, is an old-fashioned term, but still a useful one. The word may well have come up in your reflections and conversations about "The Palace Thief," and you will hear it again with reference to the new community standard adopted by the Duke Student Government. Character does not entail subscribing to a particular set of beliefs, but it does mean taking responsibility for what you know; for considering how cheating hurts; for considering why honor matters; for remembering to respect yourself, as well as respecting others.

"Sow an act, and you reap a habit," said Charles Reade. "Sow a habit, and you reap a character. Sow a character, and you reap a destiny." Please try not to lose sight of what Mr. Hundert calls "conviction," for your destiny will depend on it, and so will the fate of the world you will lead. The message about character is especially important today, when the lack of character on the part of some leaders has created great hardship for many people and has generated corrosive cynicism in

the minds of millions of others. We have living proof that character -- honor, truthfulness, integrity, social responsibility -- does really matter.

So I hope the Sower will be a useful image for you in thinking about your time at Duke. A university education does not, of course, happen only in the classroom, nor is it a potted plant cultivated and handed to you by someone else. Rather, it sows the seeds for a lifetime of growth, seeds that blossom and flourish as they are needed and as the seasons of your life will call them forth. You will make mistakes, explore the occasional dead end, fall on your face. I read recently about an English professor who had published exciting proof that a certain anonymous poem was actually by Shakespeare, only to have his thesis soundly disproved by other researchers. He said, "No one who cannot rejoice in the discovery of his own mistakes deserves to be called a scholar." That's the true spirit of the intellectual, and it's worth remembering when you make your own mistakes, which will surely happen, as it does to all of us.

I promised you a second image for your education, alongside The Sower. I'm sure many of you are familiar with what's called "extreme" sport. Extreme athletes chug sugary, hypercaffeinated concoctions with names such as Viper and Red Bull. If he enjoys snowboarding, an extreme snowboarder jumps out of a hovering helicopter onto a waiting Alp which iced over in last night's storm. If surfing takes her fancy, an extreme surfer waits for a hurricane -- [and in North Carolina, I assure you, you are unlikely to have to wait very long!] Even on the quads here you can encounter the occasional game of Ultimate Frisbee, which is less dangerous but almost as stimulating. Extreme people love the idea of perpetual motion machines, setting the world record for eating blueberries, and staying up all night talking about the meaning of life.

So what would extreme education look like? Impatient and brilliant students would instantly grasp the concept that their most extraordinary professors want anything other than to have their own ideas lobbed back at them. Challenge and adventure would be watchwords. Extreme collegians would push boundaries that needed to be pushed, challenging in your face the uncritical deference to any status quo. They would tell you that every generation needs a new translation of the *Inferno*, and then start working on it. They would sign up for a course on a subject they never even heard of a year ago, and paint their face blue and white to attend a basketball game after camping out in a tent for three weeks in January in the snow and mud to get a ticket. An extreme student would live for the "Aha" experience, in or out of the classroom. They would crave hands-on, primary research, and at Duke they would get it.

Fortunately, commitment to extreme education is not, as it turns out, incompatible with The Sower's more organic approach. In fact, they are complementary; and I urge each of you to see yourself in both roles as circumstances change. Be a sower, and be extreme; just don't interpret the goal of balance as settling for mediocrity.

One Duke student-Milind Dongre-published an article in the *Winston-Salem Journal* last spring about life as a Cameron Crazie, the name we give to Duke basketball fans who go over the top in Cameron Indoor Stadium. He admitted that he had learned two important lessons from Duke basketball: the delightful but time-consuming nature of being a fan, and the necessity of missing some home games in order to study, do homework, and even catch up on sleep.

On the extreme side, take risks in your friendships, and learn how other people see the world in order to broaden and refine your own understanding rather than huddling in your comfort zone, spending too much time with folks just like yourself. A university-wide competition called "Beyond the Comfort Zone" will be held next month. It will provide money for residential units to get

creative with projects that have to do with forging friendships and building community across racial, religious and gender boundaries. I hope each of you will want to get involved.

If you emerge from Duke unfamiliar with and suspicious of other kinds of people, you will not be well prepared to be a citizen and leader of the 21st century. So get to know people who come from a different country, speak a different language at home, have skin of another color, worship in a different way. Befriend someone with a lot less money than you have, someone from a part of the world you've never visited, or someone whose moral and political views are much more conservative or much more liberal. A difference of opinion, said John Milton, is the beginning of wisdom.

Take care of your body, too -- this sows seeds for your health in the future, even if you engage occasionally in some extreme challenges to yourself! Find the Brodie Gym and Wilson Rec Center, and use them to learn a new sport or develop your skills at an old one. Remember your personal dignity and wholeness, even when you are tempted by the siren song of alcohol or drugs or unsafe sex in ways that will interfere with your health, your education and your self-respect. Ensure that others observe your important personal boundaries, and observe theirs.

Take care of your mind by stretching it - by taking intellectual risks. In the coming decades, each of you will spend a lot of time with many different people-but the person you will spend most time with is yourself. One of your major purposes in college should be preparing yourself to be an interesting person to spend time with. This has little to do with your career, but provides a double advantage: first, that you will enjoy your own company in solitude, when you choose to be alone or find yourself in circumstances where you are alone. And secondly, you will be a more interesting person for other people to spend time with, so that friends will seek you out for your wit and conversation, not avoid you as an airhead or a pompous bore. So be extreme, not cautious, in your intellectual adventures.

On the sower side of the equation, remember to take good care of your spirit and your sense of beauty. Visit the Chapel, if not for a service then to sit and listen to the organ music at lunchtime, or listen to the silence and watch the sun stream through the stained glass windows or the candles go up on a winter afternoon, and think through a problem that has been overshadowing your life. Get to know the dogwoods and the ducks and the resident Great Blue Heron in the Sarah P. Duke Gardens, the seven thousand acres of Duke Forest, the thrill of a "Broadway at Duke" or Hoof 'n' Horn production.

Finally, today, when you get back to East Campus, notice that the Sower does not face toward the other campus buildings. He faces outward toward the city. I like to believe that this siting was done on purpose-to remind all of us that Duke is not an ivory tower, separate from our nearest neighbors.

There's a lot worth exploring on the other side of that little wall. I hope you will soon discover Ninth Street and Brightleaf Square, the Durham Bulls, the Carolina Theatre, the wonderful restaurants, the Hayti Heritage Center and more. At the same time, many people in our neighboring communities can use your help as volunteers. So please use some of your own time, energy and gifts to lend a hand to people striving to keep their families together, to learn English as a second language, to cope with drugs, to build a home, to stay in school -even just to know where the next meal is coming from. Get involved in the Duke-Durham Neighborhood Partnership; I guarantee you that this will make your own life more meaningful, as well as making someone else's a little easier, and it will take your mind off your own concerns.

Our several neighboring colleges and universities are worth getting to know as well. Only eleven miles away is our greatest athletic rival and closest partner, UNC-Chapel Hill, which lies in the direction, as somebody told me the other day, from which all bad weather approaches Durham. Nobody expects the fierce athletic rivalries to dissipate; Carolina is and will be our major rival in almost every sport. But nowadays, every half hour or so, a bus runs forth and back between West Campus and UNC, courtesy of the Robertson Scholars who populate both campuses and seek out the best of both worlds.

The bus, incidentally, is owned and operated by Duke, but if during March Madness you lean out the windows as you pass through Chapel Hill and scream "Go to hell, Carolina, Go to hell!" all I can say is you will deserve what you are likely to get. You are very welcome to use that bus anytime, heading over to Chapel Hill for lectures, to use the libraries, to attend plays or concerts, or just to hang out on Franklin Street. In your upperclass years, you may even decide to take a course or two over there. If that's not extreme education-making the most out of two world-class universities at once-I don't know what is.

Remember that many people here are eager to help you flourish. They include other students, faculty members, advisors and administrators. Take advantage of their advice, their interest, their support. You need never feel that your path-however extreme-is altogether lonely. I look forward to having the members of your dorm over to my house in the next few weeks in a tradition that one source unfortunately labeled "Desert with the President." Sounds like the latest episode of *Survivor*, but it's really a chance to eat some great desserts and meet some interesting faculty members and administrators!

In reality, you will find this place is not so much a desert as a garden, literal and metaphorical, sown by the Duke family and thousands of loyal Duke supporters since, whose ground has been prepared by the love and ambitions and dreams of earlier students who were just like you - and totally unlike you. Whatever balance of extreme and organic education you strike, it will stretch your mind in ways it has never been stretched before-in ways that will be pleasurable and rewarding to you forever.

Members of the Class of 2006: as you sow your seeds at Duke, we hope you will find this an excellent climate for your flourishing as a person. And as you pursue extreme education, may you be safe, inspired, and absolutely unstoppable. I look forward to sharing this journey with you, and I wish each of you all the best along the way.