To Compose Cornell: Cultivating the Mind

Inaugural Address
by
Hunter R. Rawlings III
10th President
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This is an exhilarating moment: to be formally received into this community! I am honored to accept the mace and the great seal of Cornell University, before this body of witnesses, and to follow my nine predecessors in pledging to uphold the University's founding ideals. I take up these symbols with pride, eagerness, and high resolve, mindful of the responsibility that you, Mr. Weiss, the Board of Trustees, and all Cornellians through you, along with the people of the State of New York, are herewith entrusting to me. I want to thank Frank Rhodes for his wise counsel and active support in making this transition smooth, productive, and enjoyable.

Here and now, already at home in Ithaca, I invite you to join me in setting out for yet another Ithaca, as we begin composing a Cornell we can now only imagine. Inspiring us, encouraging us along the way, will be the examples of all those whose earlier endeavors have brought us thus far.

In this American Ithaca, in a land of giddy heights and swirling depths, Cornell University began with a fearless leap. Impelled by an extraordinary

confluence of purpose, Ezra Cornell and Andrew Dickson White -- strong-minded idealists -- willed into being a new kind of American university. It was to be, and has become, a center of learning that encompasses the traditional and the novel, the liberal and the practical, the development of the private self and the fulfillment of public obligation. In its founding manifesto, it recognizes as a "fundamental and formative principle," the "absolute and essential importance of human development in its richest diversity." This school where "any person can find instruction in any study" remains the only university in the country to unite the mission of a highly selective, privately endowed institution with that of a state-assisted land-grant university serving all citizens. That is Cornell's unique history -- and the unique source of its strength today.

First the leap -- and then the composing. Here among these ravines and precipices, rock faces and waterfalls, the physical siting of our campus began with a single bridge: a rough but serviceable structure, wide enough to carry a horse and buggy across Cascadilla Gorge, where College Avenue is now. That first bridge was made of good solid wood, yet within ten years the robust young University, with an eye to the future, replaced it with a bridge of iron -- built for the ages, as everyone believed at the time. But within 30 years, the iron bridge, too, had to be pulled down to make way, in 1898, for the sturdy and picturesque stone arch -- the gift of William H. Sage -- that we still use today.

In 1995, in a country of fissures and fault lines, I believe that Cornell University is called upon to build even sturdier bridges, to compose itself anew -- not only for its own sake, but for the sake of the state, the nation, and the world.

Let me offer you, then, some initial observations on the Cornell I have seen in my first few months here.

This is a place of multiple strengths and remarkable diversity. It has, to a unique degree, fulfilled the destiny of the American research university in the twentieth century: it offers instruction, and pursues research, in virtually every field of inquiry. Each of our separate parts boasts a splendor of its own; but each, in its vibrancy, makes it more difficult to achieve a sense of collective identity, of what unites us, and animates us as a community. It is right to acknowledge the costs of distinctiveness, as well as to celebrate its benefits.

We should begin by seeking to understand our divisions and by discussing them forthrightly. If, for example, we discover an invisible rift down the center of Garden Avenue, roughly separating the perspectives of the endowed and the statutory Colleges, let us plumb its depths. If a more serious cultural divide separates some students on our North campus from other students on our West campus, let us explore and measure it honestly and fearlessly: how otherwise can we establish footings for the stronger bridges of understanding and respect we will need in the future? If, in this University of Janet Reno, Toni Morrison, Ruth Bader Ginsberg, and Barbara McClintock, we find there are still barriers to women's advancement -- whether as faculty, staff members, or students, or barriers to the advancement of racial or ethnic minorities -- then let us have the nerve to reduce them to rubble. And if in the vast terra incognita of the undergraduate experience at Cornell, we discover a chasm separating our students' intellectual lives from their social and personal lives -- a gulf, that is,

between College and Collegetown -- then let us fling a rope bridge, however narrow and tenuous, across that abyss.

Cornell has, throughout its history, taken proper pride in the number and variety of its academic programs. With the passing of each new decade and the rise of each new discipline, we have seen the creation of more departments, graduate fields, centers and institutes -- most of them vibrant and rich with ideas -- contributing not only to our students' education, but also to the world's store of knowledge. But as this process has unfolded ever more intricately, the composition has lost some of its cohesion and motivating force. Academic divisions become ever more isolated from one another, intellectual energy becomes ever more dissipated, and redundancy grows ever more likely. In an era of expanding resources, devolution of academic authority is natural and even positive in many instances. But as state and national support tightens, we can ill afford to see this process continue.

Cornell has a remarkable, indeed unique, collection of academic resources -- statutory and endowed, practical and theoretical -- dedicated to public service, as well as to research, scholarship, and teaching. The question that should now engage us is, can we compose the resources in such a way as to create greater intellectual synergy? Can we bridge the disciplines, the Colleges, the centers and institutes, and restore real substance and meaning to the phrase "academic community"? That is an endeavor not only worthy of our best effort, but <u>requiring</u> our best effort. In recruiting and appointing new faculty members, colleges should -- through the Provost -- consult each other. In

promoting and tenuring faculty members, we need common standards and processes. In designing new programs and evaluating current ones, we should take a broad view of our academic strengths and weaknesses, and plan together our future directions. To some extent, this effort will require a change in our culture, but it is a mandate we share with all research universities, confronted as they are with the explosion of knowledge, the expansion of societal demands, and the erosion of public support. Those universities that can think their way into greater curricular coherence and more collaborative research across departmental and College barriers will be best prepared for the twenty-first century. I want to see us lead in this intellectual evolution and begin composing the Cornell of the future accordingly.

As a keynote for the candid conversations that I hope we will have in the months ahead, I invite you to consider a comment by James Wilson -- one of the unsung Framers of the Constitution. Wilson rose to speak on July 13, 1787, after days of debate on whether the right to vote should be limited to property-holders. He challenged the Constitutional Convention to consider, before anything else, what government or social order is <u>for</u>. He suggested a worthier end than <u>either</u> property <u>or</u> happiness -- values which, in any case, many Americans regard as the same thing. Wilson proposed, as the "most noble object" for government to promote in society, "the cultivation & improvement of the human mind." I cannot imagine a better basis on which to compose a government or a nation, but Wilson's words have been essentially lost from our public consciousness.

Instead, we have directed our energies toward acquiring property and pursuing happiness -- the one defined in terms of the other --and we have pursued these goals not as means to ends, but as ends in themselves. To an extent that would surely have amazed the Founders, we have succeeded in achieving our national purposes, so defined. But amidst our material wealth, how impoverished our intellectual life, how depleted our moral resources! And how low the quality of our public discourse!

If our times require a renewed commitment to "The cultivation & improvement of the human mind," where can the nation look for leadership? Can it look to the nation's best universities -- and especially to Cornell? In the past, whatever the country has required of higher education, Cornell and universities of its stature have stepped forward to provide. Where there was no existing model, we have created one -- just as we created the original land-grant university. In the half-century since the end of World War II, research universities have been at the forefront in meeting the nation's emerging and expanding needs, with results of far-reaching consequence for both the universities and the country: a vastly increased national research capacity; breathtaking advances in the sciences, accounting for a disproportionate share of Nobel Prizes; breakthroughs in medicine, leading to the world's highest quality of tertiary-level care; and, in more recent decades, expanded technology-transfer operations that stimulate economic development.

Now America's finest research universities are the envy of the world. Success has bred further success -- leading to expanded programs, improved

facilities, proliferating staffs and auxiliary operations, and a healthy appetite for expanded resources. After decades of almost uninterrupted growth, paralleling rising demands for our programs and services, it is fair to say that universities of Cornell's quality have amassed a concentration of resources and privilege inconceivable to most Americans.

In this sense American research universities have matched American industry: we have billion-dollar budgets, numerous employees, and real economic and political impact. But this remarkable success in multiplying resources and buildings, subsidiaries and ancillaries, may have distracted us from our primary obligation, the "cultivation & improvement of the human mind."

Of Cornell's long-standing commitment to this purpose, there can be no doubt. According to Andrew D. White's enunciation of this University's "Permeating Ideas," in a passage from his inaugural address that I shall paraphrase slightly to make clear its intended inclusiveness, the purposes of the University are "First, the development of individual[s] ... in all [their] nature, in all [their] powers, as being[s] intellectual, moral, and religious; secondly, bringing the power of the [persons] thus developed to bear usefully upon society."

The cultivation of the human mind for the sake of the individual, together with its moral improvement for the sake of society, remains the University's fundamental reason for being. President Edmund Ezra Day, in his inaugural address of 1937, anticipated the point I want to emphasize today. He said:

> In some ways it is strange that it should be necessary to reaffirm that the primary function of a university is to promote the intellectual life. Yet so potent are the divisive and distracting forces of contemporary society that universities appear at times to be anything but centers of intellectual activity.

President Day made this observation in the late 1930s -- certainly, by the standards of any decade since then, a period of unusual serenity on American college campuses -- supposedly the good old days, when universities stuck to their primary business of teaching, research, and service. But already President Day sensed an erosion of our vital center, an uncertainty about our common purpose. He was concerned about pressures from "the divisive and distracting forces of contemporary society"; today, he would also be concerned about pressures from divisive and distracting forces <u>within</u> the university.

It is exceedingly difficult to cultivate and improve the human mind without informed and patient discourse, precisely what is missing today in our national debate. Left and right rage sanctimoniously at each other, in a morality play of high emotions and low rhetoric. College campuses are not immune to this national affliction; still worse, they often spread the plague. The politicization of practically everything on campus has produced many ills, but none so virulent as narrow allegiance to sect or faction, which corrupts the integrity of the individual and stifles thoughtful commitment to the whole community.

In American society, we suffer from what the cultural critic Adam Gopnik calls a "new ethic of aggression" in the press and in our national politics. As Gopnik observes, "Left-wing thought in America tends to be extremely abstract --that's what makes it so appealing to undergraduates." It leads to the notion that "consciousness produces reality--that cultural politics are the only real politics." On the other side, as Gopnik notes, "right-wing thought in America, even serious right-wing thought, tends to be extremely personal. . . . The right is much better at character assassination, because the right still believes in character."

Ironically -- and this accounts for the extreme ill temper of so much of what passes for left-right debate in this country -- "The left's ambitions are political and its triumphs cultural," Gopnik notes, "while the right's ambitions are cultural and its triumphs political."

Do we not recognize, in this description of our national debates, the bitter disputes of academia? As long as universities themselves suffer from this endemic affliction, they can do little to heal the broader society. In our campus debates, we need more sustained, reasonable discussion, greater composure, less anger and vituperation. Instead of joining a cacophony of outraged voices, we should compose, out of our harmonies and dissonances, a symphony of humane discourse.

As far as I am concerned, this is our obligation as a center of thought. The reason I think Cornell is especially well suited, among universities, to provide this form of leadership centers on our unique tradition of high intellectual quality and devotion to public service. A university that, early in its history, saw as one of its duties the teaching of reading to farm wives is a university with a private conscience and a public

mission. It is a community that, in its best moments, evinces a spirit almost lost in America -- selflessness.

This is not to suggest that Cornell, of all places, become a bland monolith of like-mindedness. As the currents of Cascadilla and Fall Creek have shaped our campus, the energies of our disputes should continue to shape our intellectual landscape. It is right and proper that we value our differences and that we appreciate both our gorges and the bridges we build across them. But we must ensure that our parts, diverse and disparate and often contentious as they are, compose a whole.

In composing the Cornell of the future, I urge that we reclaim, as our common purpose, the cultivation and improvement of the human mind. I urge that we reaffirm the commitment of our founders: our responsibility to provide moral and intellectual leadership for the nation, not only through our research and service, but also by educating our students for contributions to community. And here let me repeat the resounding words of Dale Corson, our eighth president, spoken at his investiture during the 1970 Commencement:

> Above all else, I believe we need to renew our conviction that the universities -- certainly Cornell University -- exist for their students. . .We should insure that undergraduates are provided with a wide spectrum of flexibile opportunities: first to discover themselves and to develop their own capabilities of understanding and appreciation; and second to gain a broad vision and understanding of society and technology and the human values

which should control their interaction. The humanities are central in this and should play a more prominent role.

As we compose the Cornell of the future, one of the great unresolved questions before us concerns the degree to which our undergraduates share in the intellectual life of the university. As early as 1937, President Day lamented what he called "a cult of campus indifference" among undergraduates, a lack of "enthusiasm for things intellectual." I know that our students, among the most gifted and best prepared in the nation, put a great deal of energy into their coursework, and I know they need a change of pace at the end of a hard day. But how many of them, among friends and contemporaries, express excitement about what they are learning? How many, outside of class, eat, sleep, and breathe ideas?

Increasingly, as you know, our students' culture is electronic, while ours continues to be print-based. The young people we are trying to initiate into the intellectual life were born into a world of computers, VCRs, video games, and "virtual reality." Their neurons have developed along with the consumer-oriented technologies that surround us: their thought processes are nonlinear, dynamic, multi-centered, multi-sensory. Most of us on the faculty continue to emphasize the written text. This generational divide may be somewhat less pronounced in the best universities, but it is evident nonetheless, and it is becoming wider with each entering class -- along with many other widening social and cultural differences.

That is why our decade-long obsession with the so-called culture wars, the making and unmaking and remaking of the literary canon, is so utterly beside the point -- and why it is time to put the these over-discussed issues to rest. We should be

building bridges in the direction of our students, not staking out territory on the rifts we have opened among ourselves. The best scholarship today suggests that the human condition is a complex blend of biology and culture. Single causes and dichotomous thinking are increasingly anachronistic in this world of complexity and hyperinformation.

It's not a matter of choosing between patrician and plebeian culture. It's a matter of enlarging our understanding of culture itself, expanding our intellectual horizons. As Toni Morrison has written, "Canon debate, whatever the terrain, nature, and range. . ., is the clash of cultures. And all of the interests are vested." In uncovering these vested interests, and owning up to them in ourselves, we gain fresh perspectives on our disciplines and draw our students into a reenergized, and a more honest, academic debate. Hence the tremendous intellectual vibrancy of hundreds of Cornell classrooms.

Undergraduates need even more opportunities, inside and outside the classroom, to experience this intellectual ferment. They need stepping stones into what is, for them, the remote world of faculty research, where the life of the mind is lived with greatest intensity. Our graduate and professional students already enjoy such opportunities, and we are discovering that, in a number of disciplines, involvement with faculty research is of benefit to undergraduates as well. In the future, I hope we will use our ingenuity to find new ways of drawing all students closer to the heart of our intellectual enterprise, and thus closer to the community as a whole.

I end this monologue, and begin our community conversation, with Emily Dickinson, the most inspired of American intellects and the quintessential cultivator of the human mind:

The Brain -- is wider than the Sky --
For -- put them side by side --
The one the other will contain
With ease -- and You -- beside

The Brain is deeper than the sea --
For -- hold them -- Blue to Blue --
The one the other will absorb --
As Sponges -- Buckets -- do --

The Brain is just the weight of God --
For -- Heft them -- Pound for Pound --
And they will differ -- if they do --
As Syllable from Sound --

As we join in cultivating and improving the human mind, composing Cornell anew, I hope that our endeavor will bring us to a deeper understanding of each other. With you, I look forward to continuing that journey of exploration and discovery.