

1971 Distinguished Teacher of the Year

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Mr. President, Professor Tessin, distinguished colleagues and students, honored guests: in the last few years I have written lectures for various convocations which have covered problems of violence in the ghetto, the urban crisis, poverty and education and the dismal years of adolescence. Always in the past, the topics have been assigned, and now I find myself with only the vaguest of guidelines, asked to produce an essay of some quality equal to this convocation's importance. And it is indeed an important ceremony, not because of the honors bestowed here, but rather because of the consciousness with which we bestow them.

I think that the one word that has been more abused through use than any other by my generation of academicians is "excellence." But it is the meaning of that term that I have elected to discuss. I might add parenthetically that the current generation has abused the word "love" to the extent that its meaning is probably lost for a while as well. In any case, we honor excellent performance by our students which is as it should be. However, we need to pay more attention to the excellence of the standards by which our students have been judged. And that means that those of us on the faculty have to legitimate our right to assert our standards by demonstrating to ourselves and our colleagues that we are in fact contributing and effective scholars. I am asserting therefore that scholarship of recognizable merit does two things beyond advancing knowledge in the various disciplines. It makes the professor subject to collegial judgments of his own excellence, and that in turn gives some legitimacy to his claim to set standards of excellence for others. Perhaps more important, the professor who has engaged in the grueling, sometimes demeaning, always humbling and lonely enterprise of study and scholarship is always in a better position to recognize similar trials by his students, to empathize with them and plead the cause of their very real value. The teaching enterprise is not entertainment for teacher or student. It is in fact absolutely nothing if it is not the building of decent, civil human relationships. Not a relationship between student and teacher that emulates a relationship among intellectual peers, for in spite of some movement in that direction in recent years, that is a relationship that I reject out of hand as useless to both parties. Rather, I prefer relationships that are warm and thoughtful based upon respect for the single-minded dedication to knowing or to the determination of what can be known. I can respect no lazy student, and the finest professor cannot motivate him. But no student should ever be expected to show

deference toward a professor who is not continually engaged in the processes of scholarship, and I fear that for too long some of us have asked for respect based upon incumbency in office rather than respect based upon achievement. The greatest single hindrance to excellence on both sides – students and professors alike – lies in the distinction that David Riesman has made between the "failure of nerve" on the one hand and the "nerve of failure" on the other. We are prepared to reward the student with the nerve to fail, that is, the courage to accept the challenge and to accept defeat without being totally destroyed by it. But we don't know how to reward him. We manage to do it if he wins. But it is the spirit that should be rewarded. And the same is true for the faculty. We need to find more ways to encourage this nerve of failure. That should be a major goal for the universities in the 1970s.

The "community of scholars" notion of the university simply will not do. The products of scholarship are communal to be sure, but the pursuit of truth is a solitary phenomenon and it is presumptuous of the professor with a failure of nerve to claim the status of scholar and standard-setter for students. I would much prefer the professor who has had the nerve of failure – the courage to try – even given the fact that he has indeed failed. His teaching is likely to reflect his own trial and he is able to serve as a model of courage in the life of the mind. He is a particularly valuable colleague. We need to turn then to this criterion for the evaluation of both students and professors: the courage to pursue the absolute limits of their own intellectual abilities. That is an even more ephemeral quality than those which we currently use for evaluation. But it is a necessary addition. Some minds will not comprehend the utility of such a criterion, but then they have never understood either the university or scholarship. It is difficult to explain to some that there must be virtually no activity on this or any other campus which is not ultimately designed to support the courage of students and professors to seek the truth, simply because there is absolutely no other reason for our existence. But the difficulty of explanation must not deter us, and we must do better at that than we have. The frequent complaint that anti-intellectualism abounds in America is both true and false at one time. It is true insofar as we make a competition of learning as though somehow this were a business. Reference to the "marketplace of ideas" too often means competing for academic honors as our local version of profit, and it does not often enough mean seeking the truth from freely competing ideas. But we are not anti-intellectual to the degree that we support the scholar with the nerve of failure – win or lose. While we are not wholly anti-intellectual, as a nation we are turning from the intellectual and I find that disheartening and even dangerous.

But let me add immediately that I sometimes fear that there is as much distrust of reason on the campus as off of it. The faculty is totally obligated to engage in scholarly work, if only to justify its right to evaluate the work of students who are being asked to

learn how to learn. Beyond that justification of right, how else will a professor know his students' feelings if he is not engaged in a similar process? It is not enough to say, "I had to do it; now it's your turn." That is a corruption of the academy that is intolerable. If the people continue to support us, we are obligated to show our faith in reason and to behave in terms of the commitment that such faith implies. Students can only know the university as a humane enterprise when they accept and trust reason, explore their own capacities to know and are judged on their efforts.

On these grounds, then, many more students and professors belong on this stage today. But the truth is that some do not, and we should know that the difference between those who do and those who do not is more than likely a difference between those who trust in reason and have the nerve of failure and those who do not.

Every man in one way or another has some sort of culture hero. From time to time it is important that such heroes be demonstrably wrong, if for no other reason than such error indicates their basic humanity and at the same time magnifies their value. As for myself, I think that it is fair to say that one of my own culture heroes is a man of whom no one here today may have heard and that is too bad, because in so many ways he is indeed a remarkable person. But the point is that this man, who is my cousin, became professor of law at the University of Illinois and has pursued a superlative academic career as teacher and legal scholar. His name is Rubin Goodman Cohn. It was largely through his example, not to mention his personal friendship and kindness, that I finally elected to become a university professor. I insert this personal note here only as preface to discussing a point that he made to me in a most recent letter. In that letter, he noted that at the University of Illinois, as at so many institutions, there was a serious financial crisis, not in the least part due to a wave of anti-intellectualism that appeared to him to be sweeping the nation. On the face of it, that is difficult to deny. A few otherwise responsible legislators are attacking universities as though the universities were somehow the enemies of the people. These few have insisted upon imposition of their own strongly held moralities upon thousands of students, professors and administrators and they do so in the self-righteously held belief that they have a corner on the truth market and that deviations from their own moralities represent the most reprehensible elements in society and must be extinguished at any cost. Professor Cohn is rightfully concerned about such phenomena. In his own state, he notes, the governor is considerably more concerned with reordering priorities in such a way as to virtually omit the maintenance of what is clearly a remarkably great institution of higher learning. But I believe that Professor Cohn has missed the mark in his discussion of anti-intellectualism. And I fear that we here today may miss it also if we lightly dismiss the utterances of some who would indicate that professors do not need to be engaged in research in order to teach a course on Shakespeare or Napoleon and such men should

spend more time in the classroom and far less in the library. I worry equally about those who indicate that students who believe that their rights to equality of knowledge of the other gender represents a mean and even filthy sexuality. If there is anti-intellectualism in this nation, such positions as these represent it at its worst, and they are appeals to the least educated, least enlightened and surely the least tolerant among us in the public at large. Such attitudes in the past have led us to schools that were essentially formalistic and useless on the one hand and to a dangerous separation from each other on the basis of personal characteristics of individuals which are irrelevant to scholarship on the other. We are not in the business of striving after an ante-bellum gentility which no longer serves our needs; we are in the business of pressing the frontiers of human ability and creativity for both students and professors. We are not in business to deny our students the right to know each other because of gender or race or religion or national origin either, because one of the greatest and most unexplored assets of the university happens to be the diversity of the student body and faculty along exactly these lines. If that premise is denied, then let us resolve to close our doors tomorrow morning.

The real issue, then, is relevance. When Professor Gatlin gave his address at the very first of these convocations at Florida Atlantic University, he made the point, with great clarity, that to indicate that universities were irrelevant was not simply banal, which is bad enough, but that it was also dangerously incorrect. Long ago, he noted, the academics had warned of pollution, overpopulation and so on. Hardly irrelevant; it is those who aspire to political leadership and who turn deaf ears to what we say that are irrelevant – worse, they are dangerous. To be sure, as many before me have noted, there is some sterile pedantry on every campus. Too much of it. But I am perfectly willing to pay the price of some sterile pedantry for an academy that will point its finger with precision and a certain drama at clear dangers. Sterile pedantry is far less dangerous to humanity than is a sterile politics designed by those who wish desperately that the nature of human nature would either go away or at least permit itself to be pressed into a mold of sameness that can only lead to a perhaps unintended totalitarianism.

Let me cut to the issue quickly. When relevance in education is dictated by those with political power, the society is in terrible danger. If in fact we are told today that the study of Napoleon is not relevant, but the study of methods for eliminating walking catfish is relevant, then what is there to prevent relevance from meaning finding the final solution to the Jewish Question, rather than finding a way to make black men and white ones live together in mutual trust without fear? Either can happen when relevance is politically defined. We may then like some things that are deemed relevant, but clearly despise others. When a few politicians want to take over the function of defining relevance, and when they in fact exercise their coercive powers in an effort to

do that, then everyone of us will find himself at his own personal day of moral crisis. We have been extraordinarily fortunate to find as much political protection for the university as we have, because to go along with the "true believers" literally means surrender of the basis of the university. To fight them without the aid of those political officials who understand our very reason for being means jeopardy of severe consequences. There should be no set of consequences so great as to force us as students and professors to surrender our situations, our universities, to the would-be definers of morality, truth and righteousness. That potential abuse of political power coupled with a distrust of reason must be met with all of our energies, no matter what the cost. The stakes are extraordinarily high – we are playing for the rights of men to know. More important perhaps, we are playing for the rights of all men to believe in what they know.

So Professor Cohn was right about a wave of anti-intellectualism sweeping the nation. We feel it ourselves. But it isn't solely a question of reordering priorities. I wish it were. It is a question of the potential for despotism, and we need to fear it. If it were a question of priorities, then let me make it perfectly clear that I believe that the schools are our finest assets. We are doomed without them. But let me make it equally clear that as a citizen I am morally outraged at the status of our mental health care, our penal system, our aid to the dependent and our services to the elderly. I would happily settle for some belt-tightening if it meant that such things would improve. But it is not a matter of priorities that is at stake. It is a matter of the right of the human intellect to function at its fullest under the most productive circumstances, standing in opposition to those who do not trust the intellect, and do not trust reason.

If we must confront such attitudes and beliefs from without, then let us be sure that we do not have to confront them from within as well. Let the nerve of failure prevail among us, and let the trust in reason that characterizes our finest moments in intellectual history prevail here and elsewhere.

For some, what I have said here today can only be described as imprudent, and for others much harsher judgments will be issued, I am sure. I do not fear such judgments, as long as they are made on the basis of reasonable argument, and not on the basis of personal bias representing a distrust of reason. But we have been under siege for so very long now that it seems to me that it is time to speak on the side of arts, letters and sciences; they are all we really have to count on in times of human social crisis. This is not then, a commencement-type call to a rededication to the spirit of learning because learning is a good cause. It is rather a call to a rededication to our right to know what is knowable and to know ourselves as individuals who are entitled to explore our own

abilities and limits without hindrance from those who seek the coercive power to force us to give up such rights.

Finally, let me indicate that the honor bestowed upon me today is accepted with gratitude. My only real qualm in accepting it is in the knowledge that what I urge upon my students is urged upon them by most faculty members, and I therefore accept this honor on behalf of those professors who suffer attacks from within and without, and who, nevertheless, pursue truth with vigor, not as opportunists, but as men and women of honor, dignity and courage. There is no finer nor more demanding responsibility than that of preserving the integrity of human culture and expanding it, using every aspect of our abilities and strengths.