

TO BE UNITED IN SHARED PURPOSES

Inaugural Address by
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The Ohio State University

Commencement Exercises
December 15, 1972
Columbus, Ohio

Members of the Board of Trustees, Faculty and Staff
Colleagues, Graduates, Parents and Friends: Mr. Shocknessy,
your eloquent and most gracious words are deeply appreciated.
So that there will be no breathless suspense about the matter --
I accept the charge of office. Be assured that I will fulfill
my duties faithfully to the best of my ability, grateful
always to all who have confidence in me.

One of my predecessors in this office said, in a quota-
tion that I stumbled upon only a few days ago, and I quote: "We
need to learn that what we are, other people have helped us be-
come." As I stand here today I think of all of those who over
the years have helped, and I hope that in some small way I
can make repayment.

Today we combine in a single ceremony two ancient aca-
demic traditions, the Commencement Address and the Inaugural.
Both dictate that the academic gown continue to be impressively
and awkwardly long, but that the rhetoric be charitably short.
In this connection, the early history of Ohio State Univer-
sity confirms my preference for brevity. It may not have
been entirely coincidental that, of the eight distinguished
presidents of Ohio State University, the president who gave
the longest Inaugural address (well over 8,000 words) had
the briefest tenure in office.

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Here, in the presence of persons who have invested much in the University and in whom much has been invested, I ask each of you to join me for these next few minutes in an odyssey of discovery of the world of Ohio State University. Voyages of discovery, as we know, reduce the mystery of things. They convert the strange and the exotic into the familiar and the commonplace, so that even today, to the restless television viewer, the landscape of the moon may now be Dullsville, less interesting than your local shopping center in full Christmas splendor arrayed. I invite you today to a different kind of odyssey, one which takes the familiar landscape of Ohio State University and asks that we look at it afresh -- as if both eye and universe were strangers to one another, with nothing finally seen, settled, or defined. In the words of Abraham Lincoln, "We must disenthral ourselves . . . and think anew."

The Ohio State University: this giant among the giant institutions of the world can be described in awesome detail.

If you are enamored with the conventional criteria of excellence, we can tell you the number of degrees earned in all fields and summarize the many honors received by our faculty and alumni. We can impress you with the dollar volume of research and with the incredible sweep of our research efforts.

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If your taste runs to the mundane, we can tally the books checked out in our twenty-seven -- twenty-seven -- libraries, overwhelm you with statistics about meals sold, credit hours taught, and kilowatts purchased. And we can suffocate you with an excess of detail about how a \$270 million dollar budget is spent. Or for those -- and I'm told they exist -- who have a taste for such matter, we can provide performance data on yards gained on the football field.

But in this welter of data, what do we really learn about the university?

One is reminded of the grade school student, told to go to the Encyclopedia for help in writing a paper on the duck-billed platypus. Asked if she got the facts she wanted, she said ruefully, "They told me more than I wanted to know about the platypus." And she might have added, "I still don't know if you have two of them whether you have platypusses or what." Incidentally, the dictionary doesn't provide much help on that. I read it last night but I did not find it persuasive.

So it is with us. We hear so much criticism, often contradictory, that we do not know what to believe. An overload of information clutters the mind, increasing the level of anxiety. But it is not more facts, more bits of information that we need. It is the saving grace of

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understanding.

Many Americans are no longer sure what universities are about. Throughout the land there is a deep-rooted uneasiness about the higher learning. It is reflected in the questions of parents, the protests of students, the concerns of public officials, the outcries of critics. The Ohio State University, fairly typical as a major university caught in the action and passion of the times, is in no way immune to the national uneasiness.

The questions and the criticisms come thick and fast. Does college prepare for jobs? If so, where are the jobs? Is too much education made available too cheaply for too many? Is teaching neglected? Are academic standards collapsing? Is the moral climate largely ignored? Are professors, along with barbers and ministers, to be handi-craft artisans -- alone immune from the demand for improved productivity? Whatever happened to liberal education -- lost, strayed, stolen? Is the university sufficiently flexible, responsive, accountable? And finally, why is the university, the self appointed critic of all other institutions, so reluctant to turn the spotlight of scholarly inquiry upon its own operations?

The most agonizing questions come from deep within the university itself. We ask ourselves: Is there no end

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to ever-narrowing specialization? Is there no escape from a scientism that wears moral blinders? Is the cultivation of good manners and good citizenship a lost cause? And at the deepest levels of concern, we ask why academic freedom, defended so brilliantly from external threats, fails to enlist strong defenders when the threat is from within the academy itself? And some ask, is the university any longer governable?

Now, a fair question is: how has the higher education establishment responded to criticism and to crisis? Mostly in ways typically American -- by tinkering with the machinery of government and by indulging in the national faith in patent medicine solutions. When in trouble, reorganize; when in pain, reach for the latest patent medicine.

Around the nation we have busied ourselves with contriving new Rube Goldberg systems of internal government, meticulously juggling diverse interests into constituent-dominated assemblies. Magnifying differences, exalting the adversary relationship, claiming full rights and all privileges -- we then profess surprise that the university-wide interest is no one's claim and no one's shield! At the state level, the adversary principle is also triumphant. Colleges and universities, each with their own proud and distinctive traditions, are seized and thrust into bureaucratic systems explicitly designed

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to police, to control, and to standardize -- all in the name of Higher Efficiency.

The zeal for easy solutions contaminates the campus itself. With pathetic eagerness we embrace the latest fashion. Yesterday televised instruction, today cable television; yesterday honors programs, today independent study; yesterday computer-assisted instruction, today the video cassette; today pass-fail and the "university without walls" and tomorrow -- almost certainly, new disappointment.

In all this, yesterday's fad is today's failure. And the search goes on -- always for quick and easy and painless solutions which somehow never go to the root of the matter. Ralph Waldo Emerson described our predicament: "Having lost sight of our goals, we redouble our energies." In so doing, we diminish our capacity for solving problems.

I call here today for a new realism in the affairs of this great University. We are inheritors of a grand tradition. It works. The House of Intellect need not be torn down and rebuilt. Renovation, remodeling, repair, always by loving hands, is the true imperative. We must know who we are and what we are about. If we start here, all else will fit into place. Our House of Intellect rests on four strong pillars:

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First, Ohio State University is the chosen instrument of the state in service to public purposes defined by law. It does not exist for its own sweet sake. It survives and prospers only as it is delicately tuned to the aspirations of the people and their changing needs.

Second, Ohio State University is the faithful custodian of the land-grant mission, which skillfully intertwines teaching, research, and public service, each suffusing and strengthening the other.

Third, Ohio State University is the state's most comprehensive institution of higher learning, its reach extending across the entire span of intellectual curiosity. It dare not be a stranger to new knowledge in any domain of life.

And finally, Ohio State University is, above all, a university -- committed to free inquiry and its protection, to the discovery of truth, and to instruction in the best that scholarship can yield.

At the Commencement in June, 1900, seventy-two years ago, William Oxley Thompson wrote of the "new theory of the state," arguing eloquently that the right of the individual -- the right of the individual -- to personal growth and development must be "as secure and sacred as the right to protection

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[of life]."¹ And this is the strong foundation on which the pillars rest and derive their strength.

As I've looked around the country, I've concluded that presidents who unveil bold new programs run the risk of promising more than they can deliver. We had best leave the spectaculars for show business. They have no place in the university. It is clear convictions, steadily applied over the years, that make the critical difference. In this spirit, I ask that we clarify our convictions and put those convictions to work.

This University has a clear obligation to give the poor a chance to compete on a more equal footing. This commitment, which a century ago reached the farmer's son at the end of muddy farm roads, must now be effectively extended to the sons and daughters of fellow Americans in the ghettos of our cities and in pockets of poverty everywhere. The necessary revolution in access to opportunity must now be fully realized. We must enlarge and expand opportunity for minorities, for women, for adults with special needs.

This University must strive as it has in the past for high quality performance in every dimension of its work. It is more important to excel in teaching and in learning than

1) Annual Address at the Commencement exercises of The Ohio State University by President William Oxley Thompson, June 13, 1900.

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to become a service station for society and, trying too much, achieving too little. The University is not a direct action instrument for social reform and it is certainly not a training ground for indoctrination in any political ideology. Our obligation is not that of the civil rights lawyer or the reformer of any persuasion. It is to prepare the next generation in the full range of productive skills, for use as they see fit to perform.

This University must move with the deeper currents of the times. Relevance -- we have heard much of relevance -- is not to be equated with the fashions of the day. True relevance requires the constant revision of courses, requirements, curriculum. And it means -- we must say it -- emphasis on intellectual discipline and on demanding standards of performance.

This University must be dedicated to open inquiry and to academic freedom as its essential ingredient. The careful definitions which so meticulously etch the boundaries of academic freedom must now be matched by equally meticulous definitions of academic responsibility.

This University needs a vivid sense of the importance of bold research on the frontiers of knowledge. We are now a Knowledge Society. People rightly look to us to bring trained intelligence to bear on disease, poverty, violence,

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and all the afflictions of a deeply troubled society. Recently it is popular to denigrate research, as if to diminish research were somehow to enhance teaching. How short-sighted! Agricultural research alone in the state of Ohio -- to cite only one example -- provides a direct payoff in productivity which very likely exceeds the annual state support to the entire University.

This University also requires a saving sense of its own limitations. We are not in the business of providing instant solutions to massive social problems. We dare not embrace the immediate, the sensational, the transient. Our work truly requires the long view. Knowledge yields great power over nature, but little power over the human condition. Knowledge is easily ignored, even abused. It is not self-enforcing. It is not the university that fails when we, the people, turn our back on knowledge that could help in our salvation.

This University must also have the freedom to manage its internal affairs: How else can we be held accountable for performance and results? The modern university is a unique institution in its own way, perhaps as the duck-billed platypus which I referred to earlier. The command structure of the military, the bureaucracy of the corporation -- these have no place in academic life, which relies to an astonishing degree on consultation and consensus. Outside

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intervention -- and we see its danger before us today in Ohio -- outside intervention can cripple the university. It cannot make it whole, make it effective, make it innovative, make it more responsive, make it anything. Constructive change in universities does not await commands, whether from without or within; the good changes we want can only be elicited from people.

Our capacity to build a better Ohio State University lies in what I shall call today "obedience to the unenforceable."¹ In this domain there is no regulation, no law which controls conduct. "It is the domain of actions which we are not compelled to perform but which some inner voice directs us to discharge. It is the realm of kindness and conscience --² the domain of manners, ethics, and morals."

It is obedience to the unenforceable which alone can substitute the dialogue of reason for that "dialogue of the deaf" that we see in confrontation politics.

It is obedience to the unenforceable which alone leads the teacher to demand the best of himself as the necessary condition for demanding the best of his students.

1) The phrase is borrowed from an Englishman, Lord Moulton, see "Law and Manners", The Atlantic Monthly, Vol. I, (July 1924)

2) Address by Albert J. Harno, Dean, College of Law, University of Illinois -- Urbana-Champaign, January 21, 1961

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It is obedience to the unenforceable which alone will lead us to open ever wider the doors of opportunity to all who experience disadvantage.

It is obedience to the unenforceable which alone leads all of us -- students, faculty, administrators, trustees -- to work, each in our respective roles, for a true commonwealth of learning.

It is obedience to the unenforceable that may even lead us to rediscover and restore to the campus the good humor, gaiety, and fun that alone can grace and make rewarding our dealings with one another.

And finally, it is obedience to the unenforceable which gives energy and determination to your new president as he joins his life to the destiny of this University.

To all here today and to all who may read this talk, I pledge you my best efforts in the great task of uniting us in shared purposes. I dare do no less, nor promise more.

Thank you, and good luck to the graduates.

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