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"...In the future men will point to St. John's College and say that there was the seed-bed of the American Renaissance."

—Walter Lippmann



David Levine, Dean

FOUR SIDES OF A CUBE: *Or, Why a Certain Question Needs to be Asked Again and Again*

Dean's Opening Lecture

I. Introduction

To everyone: Welcome! To our new freshman in particular: a special Welcome!

Tonight I would like us to become reflective. I would like us to ask ourselves one question: why do we do what we do?

...Perhaps I need to say more....

Let me first say something about the title of tonight's talk "*Four Sides of a Cube, Or, Why a Certain Question Needs to Be Asked Again and Again.*" (The subtitle will be addressed in the body of the talk.) I understand that people are wondering whether I know how many sides a cube has. Let me assure you I understand that cubes do not have four sides. I was asked to give the title of 'the dean's lecture' for public relations purposes at the beginning of the summer. However, I had not yet written the talk at the beginning of the summer. To be accommodating, I gave a title I had been toying with, even though I couldn't be certain that it would even apply to the final version. (In subsequent versions, I may still have to change it.)

The subject of this talk is the origin of 'the new program' of St. John's College. Its origin is multifaceted, so I thought it appropriate to choose as its image a many-sided figure. I'm not saying, however, that it has six sources—see . . . What is important is not the six but the four, that is, I'll be speaking about some of the sides, not all of them. In particular, this talk will be deficient in at least two respects: I will not speak about all the important ways in which the project of the college has been conceived, nor can I anticipate other important self-understandings of the college still to be articulated. Thus the original idea was an attempt to capture the limited nature of my efforts tonight. Besides, "*Four Sides of a Cube*" is a far more felicitous formulation than "*N-2 Sides of a Polyhedron.*"

II. A Question Needs to be Asked

"That voices, 'grown voiceless from long silence,' might once again be heard." —Dante

It is a curious paradox of human inherence that we often get so involved in an activity that we lose sight of the original reasons for the undertaking. In our case we are, with youthful vigor, about to 'throw ourselves headlong' into the work of the program... with great rewards no doubt, but at the risk of losing sight of the whole. So before we 'rush headlong' and immerse ourselves in our overfull curriculum, it would do us well to step back, seek some distance, and consider anew the reasons for our doing what we are about to do.

That is one of the purposes of a dean's lecture: to provide an opportunity for reflection about our enterprise as a whole. However, instigating such reflection should not be one person's responsibility alone. At various times during our stay here, each of us needs to

consider again and again, for him or herself, the purpose, origin, and benefit that comes from this unique form of education.

But how are we, who are about to ‘rush headlong’ and be submerged in a wealth of particulars to attain that perspective and distance, that generality we call ‘objectivity?’ How might we glimpse again something of the forest of which we are but a tree? ‘Summer’ is a good way. It too gives us distance. However it is often too effective in retrieving us from shortsightedness. It tends, rather, to be a ‘great eraser.’ So perhaps my function tonight needs also to be to remind us of what is at risk of being erased with time.

* * *

Well, I was rummaging around the attic of the college this summer and found some interesting historical documents in the dusty trunk of our past. Attached to these documents were authors’ names perhaps unknown to you, or only distantly: Erskine, Maritain, Meiklejohn, van Doren, Adler, McKeon, Hutchins, etc., and those better known: Barr, Buchanan, Klein, Wilson, Brann. A few of these documents, I thought, might provide a good place for us to begin to reflect anew about why we do what we do, indeed why we are the way we are. But first I need to offer this caveat.

St. John’s College by its very pedagogy seeks to go to the roots of things. But what are its roots? These can be both historical and non-historical (eidetic, noetic, transcendental, trans-temporal, un-historical). This evening I will consider a few of the express historical ones. But in doing so I only want to provide us with an occasion for further thought. By doing so I do not presume that our history provides the sufficient account for our being. In so saying, though, I do admit that history—something we at the college find ourselves uncomfortable addressing—can be helpful. These historical documents are presented as a means by which broader and deeper questions may be highlighted, and its context, a way in which the felt urgency and weighty immediacy of these might be brought to the forefront of our attention. As such it is presented in the service of bringing the taken for granted to light and of bringing the unquestioned presuppositions under renewed scrutiny. Again, my intention in giving what appears a ‘history lesson’ is not such, but as an occasion for thought, that the voices of the past might speak to us in the present and aid us in thinking about our future.

Given this, let me now say that the new program of the college was formed out of an atmosphere of historical crisis and the establishment of this small college with its most curious form of education

was thought the proper and urgently needed response to those world crises.

III. To Bring Us Back To Ourselves

60 years ago, in what has to be one of the most extraordinary reports by a college president to a board of visitors and governors, the first president of St. John's, Stringfellow Barr, wrote the following in May 1941. His concern in his report is the prospect for continued 'liberty' of the democratic peoples, specifically for our own, whose liberty at that moment was threatened on two fronts by a world crisis (World War II). He steps back and seeks to put events into a longer perspective: "Maybe Patrick Henry meant by liberty what Montesquieu... meant: 'In governments, that is in societies directed by laws, liberty can consist only in the power of doing what we ought to will, and in not being constrained to do what we ought not to will.' ... Liberty was conceived by our forefathers as the precious right to act justly towards other men." Along with Henry and Montesquieu, Mr. Barr wonders whether we must not think differently about the word 'liberty' than we normally do, think of it as a positive power rather than a negative notion, as freedom to exercise good judgment and act responsibly rather than mere freedom from external constraints.

But, then, in a moment of dark reflection, he adds: "Perhaps liberty is not the word in 1941 to bring us back to ourselves.... Perhaps justice.... might rouse an echo in our hearts, might move our wills. Certainly the word democracy does not seem [any longer] to have roused or moved." In addition to the significant events abroad, equally significant changes had already taken place at home in our language. Words, and not just words, fundamental ideas had lost their meaning over time. Liberty. Justice. Democracy. Such words, it was thought, no longer moved the heart and will in 1941, that is, even in a time of grave crisis. (And in 2001, what words move us?)

He continues: "Hitler and Mussolini repeatedly declared, long before the shooting began, that democracy was decadent.... It was [the French philosopher] Jacques Maritain who pointed out that the 'moderate Machievellianism' of the democracies could never defeat the all-out Machievellianism of Hitler." This leads Mr. Barr to a painful prospect: "It is just possible that democracy, as we have known it and practiced it and preached it, really **is** dead, and that Hitler is proving it." Remember this is 1941, the middle of the European campaign, whose outcome at this point was in no way clear. But, Mr. Barr continues, "What [Hitler] cannot teach, because it is not true, is that the ideas [that] once made democracy great are also decadent. Ideas do not decay; yet people's understanding of them can decay.... And literally [and here he means

‘literally’] as sure as shooting, a free republic cannot defend itself against aggressive tyranny unless its citizens understand those ideas which make men free and guard their freedom. No free republic can fight off tyranny unless its citizens love...more than ‘their cut.’ Let me repeat one sentence: “Ideas do not decay; yet people’s understanding of them can decay.”

The question here is the underlying reason for our political vulnerability. Mr. Barr’s suggestion is that: “...It is the loss of those [democratic] ideas which has paralyzed the will of the American Republic in 1941, as it has... paralyzed the will of the people Hitler has already subjected. If this Report numbers the consequences of that loss [to a board of visitors and governors], it is because of the inescapable connection between the decay of liberal education and the decay of liberal government. These same forefathers of ours who could use words like ‘justice’ and ‘liberty,’ and make them carry meaning, were deeply aware that no government by ‘reflection and choice’ [Hamilton’s famous phrase in *Federalist Papers*, #1] could hope to stand unless citizens received the sort of liberal education that would enable them to reflect well and choose by the light of understanding.”

And, he continues, “...the task of disciplining and strengthening the intellectual powers of men ... [has been] delegated to the colleges of liberal arts...” that men might reflect and choose well. Given this, Mr. Barr cites the St. John’s College charter, which sets this out as a first principle. And I quote:

Whereas, Institutions for the liberal education of youth in the principles of virtue, knowledge and useful literature are of the highest benefit to society, in order to train up and perpetuate a succession of able and honest men [and women] for discharging the various offices and duties of life, both civil and religious, with usefulness and reputation, and such institutions of learning have accordingly been promoted and encouraged by the wisest and best regulated States: Be it enacted....

The reason that this responsibility cannot be accomplished by political means and has, rather, to be delegated to the colleges, Mr. Barr observes, is that “Ultimately... freedom is internal, and ultimately it is based on a discipline that is equally internal. Today [in 1941],” he says, “we do not possess that internal discipline in a measure adequate to guarantee [for long] our liberties.... [But] if we lose at last our power to govern ourselves, we shall forfeit the right to do so.”

He then elaborates: “...In an important sense, the *Bill of Rights* is negative.... Nowhere does it, can it, or should it tell us either the list of things we ought to do or how to do them. That, in the opinion of our ancestors, was the [proper] business of liberal education. That, in their opinion, was an arduous process; for it is harder to develop in men [1] their native powers of self-control, [2] their native powers of thinking through, [3] their native powers to follow up with courageous and just action than it is to tug and drive them with club and carrot. Tyrants forbid citizens to do their duty as free men. Free government permits them to do it. Liberal education enables them to do it.”

Then Mr. Barr offers this extraordinary test of an education: “Regardless of [the] social contacts or of courses that pretend to be commercially useful, [we must ask:] [1] do our colleges prepare [us] to make fearless and responsible decisions under a Constitution like ours and [2]—equally important, if only recently relevant—does their preparation give a man anything that would stand by him in a concentration camp? A genuine discipline in the liberal arts would meet both tests,” he says.

* * *

There are many things that are noteworthy about this president’s report. Most conspicuous is the extraordinary expectation for liberal education, and by extension for this small college, and, by extension further, for us individually. As presented here, ideas are a principal source of human strength, both political and individual. (They are not ‘mere ideas.’) And the loss of those ideas with their proper understanding results in a loss of strength—‘paralysis of the will’—that shows itself in our being excessively vulnerable to external force.

According to Mr. Barr, liberal arts colleges have a political obligation, implicitly delegated, to complete the work of republican governments. Specifically it falls to them to complete our understanding of freedom and thereby to strengthen us from within. For the seat of freedom is ‘ultimately’ in the individual, and this interior a government of external laws can go only so far to touch. It is rather for the schools, specifically certain kinds of schools, to ‘train up’ and ‘discipline’ us. It is through them that ideas like ‘freedom’ come to their full meaning, in this case come to mean more than narrow self-interest and we, in turn, come to love more than ‘our cut.’ Education in this sense would be enabling, encouraging, and finally ennobling.

This process, he says, is arduous; remember that word, ‘arduous.’

To accomplish this, liberal education promises to ‘bring us back to ourselves.’ As our languages tend to become empty of original significations, so our ‘culture’ and our lives become but ‘shadows of their former selves.’ Mr. Barr sees liberal education as reversing this historical process and as restoring meaningful signification to speech and thence to life. ...These extraordinary remarks need to be explored further.

IV. Impaired by History

For those who may not remember, let me review the background. For those who do not know, let me try to represent again the magnitude of the crises. Simply put, there are times—too frequent to be sure—when life becomes so overwhelmingly complex, not to say, disorienting, and indeed precarious, that it is necessary to step back and reflect, that is, to think things through from the beginning.

World War I was such a time. World War II was another. In particular these two global crises raised new specters and threats hitherto only ‘a mere idea.’ The wars themselves introduced horrific new strategies: mustard gas, saturation bombing of non-combatant populations, atomic weaponry, and Auschwitzes. The human carnage of these wars was unprecedented. The inhumanity of man seemed to have reached new heights. The horrific novelty and inhuman efficiency with which human beings were ‘scientifically’ slaughtered, disabled, vaporized and ‘turned into smoke’ took away our breath and exposed at the same time, for all to see, the human ambiguity of capitalism and commercialism, of science and technology that seemed only to aid and abet the basest inhuman ends. This paralleled the rise of the mass society, with its dilution of human dignity in seas of numbers (and its concomitant statistical methodologies with their indiscriminate tendency toward low denominators). Along with these came worries about the strength of the democracies themselves and their traditional vulnerabilities, their tendencies to mediocrity, their reduction of judgment to opinion polls, their taking false comfort in empty words and ‘abstractions.’ Could they muster sufficient wherewithal to withstand the new threats? All this led many to despair, discouragement, and loss of a future prospect; it led others, however, to wonder about the causes and their appropriate responses.

At such times of crisis, certain things come to the fore. We learn what it means to be historical beings, that is, beings that have a past and carry that inheritance into the present. One author writes: “...Since we happen to be the results of earlier generations, we are also the results of their aberrations, passions, and errors, even crimes; it is not possible quite to free oneself from this chain. “ We thus came to wonder not just about the atrocious deeds of oth-

ers—not just about the horrific excesses of the Axis powers—but about ourselves and our own humanity. People questioned our traditions, our values, our world. It appeared that our ‘European culture’ had lost its moral strength and center. Words such as ‘nihilism,’ ‘decadence,’ ‘cynicism,’ and ‘relativism’ were used and, sorry to say, seemed to ‘carry meaning.’ People spoke of ‘the onset of barbarism’ (Lippmann), of an ‘abyss’ into which we all seemed to be headed (Hutchins), and these were not discounted as hyperbole or hype. We faced, in short, “...the problem of restoring the health of a people which ha[d] become impaired by history. “Could we rise above the all-consuming historical circumstances? What could, in Mr. Barr’s words, ‘stand by’ us in such times?”

V. Indigestible Knowledge Stones

“The free mind must be its own teacher.”—Scott Buchanan

Looking back, the question was asked, what provided the ground for those who made this way of life of ours possible to begin with, the Founders? Thus some looked again at the education that stood under those who made us who we are. Could the Jeffersonian hope (or the Platonic dream) concerning liberal education as the right defense against human disorder and conflict still stand?

It was the conviction of the American Founders that: “If a nation expects to be ignorant and free in a state of civilization, it expects what never was and never will be.” Jefferson argued further, that the vulnerabilities of democracy could be moderated by liberal education:

Experience hath shown that, even under the best forms [of government], those entrusted with power have in time...perverted it into tyranny; and it is believed that the most effectual means of preventing this would be, to illuminate [educate], as far as practicable, the minds of the people...to give them knowledge of those facts, which history exhibiteth, that ...they may be enabled to know ambition under all its shapes, and prompt to exert their natural powers to defeat its purposes...whence it becomes expedient for promoting the publick happiness that those persons, whom nature hath endowed with genius and virtue, should be rendered by liberal education worthy to receive and able to guard the sacred deposit of the rights and liberties of their fellow citizens.

But as we saw others and ourselves ‘paralyzed’ before the onslaught of the Axis powers, this very conviction came into question. Was liberal education ‘standing by’ us? And if not, how were

we to reinvigorate those institutions that, it was believed, once provided a bulwark against such threats?

In 1936 one of the founders of the college posed the same question. “How can we hope to improve the state of the nation?” he asked. He gave this Jeffersonian reply: “We can do so only if some [educational] institutions can be strong enough and clear enough to stand firm and show our people what the higher learning is. As education it is the single-minded pursuit of the intellectual virtues... the pursuit of truth for its own sake... the preparation of men and women for their life work.”

“Why did this education disappear? It [was] the education of the Founding Fathers. It held sway until fifty [that is, a hundred] years ago,” he wondered. The principles that changed the face of American education were established in the early years of the past century: the university system, with its concomitant elective system (Elliot), and the lecture system. It led to a ‘service station’ (Hutchins) (or perhaps better, ‘convenience store’) conception of education, a system that serves many masters except finally the most important one, the new learner. Co-opted by the professions, the elective system had over the years been complemented by fewer and fewer ‘foundation’ or ‘core’ courses. One was required to choose one’s ‘major’ earlier and earlier, which only meant that there were more pre-professional demands one was required to meet. Thus what looked like ‘choice’ proved to be another very empty word. With no common curriculum standing under these ‘choices,’ we come away with no common foundation, with the result that what we have in common finally is not the mutual concern with the deepest human questions, but, for want of a better word, the ‘simplicities’ of daily life.

The ‘delivery system’ that conveyed the matter of education was the lecture method (an old innovation). After years of sitting passively listening to others, one comes away, not surprisingly, a passive learner. Others talk at us, giving us prepackaged, pre-interpreted, and predigested information. But how can what is digested by others be nourishing for us? “In the end,” one of our program authors writes, “modern man drags an immense amount of indigestible knowledge stones around with him.” Talk about indigestion! And because the fruits of others’ thoughts are delivered to us without at the same time making us able to think these thoughts for ourselves, we do not come away transformed or enabled by the experience. The mode of acquisition is external and hence our grasp superficial. One is largely a hearer, seldom a thinker. What we’ve ‘learned’ rarely becomes ‘our own’ but ‘remains someone else’s.’

The general functions of education have not been fulfilled. Being essentially pre-professional education, the existing system can serve us well only if we are willing to accept the reduction of the person to job skills. However, the greatest indication by far that the American educational system has failed us is that one leaves ‘the hallowed halls of academia’ with no good sense of one’s own potential. We are thereby deprived of our ownmost selves. One has not been enabled. In a very real sense, ‘education’ still lies ahead of us.

VI. A Bridge Across Becoming

What, then, can be done? In 1936, the same inspiration for St. John’s declared: “The times call for the establishment of a new college....” But what would a college look like that took such concerns to heart? It turned out that ‘the new college’ would not be very new (indeed one of the oldest), and the new pedagogy and new curriculum would have very old roots, indeed antedating the Founders.

To speak paradoxically, the new college would have a program that advocated primary education, as opposed to derivative, secondary education. It would seek above all to be freeing (that is, liberal) by being an enabling education, making available to each of us both our intellectual inheritance and our own individual intellectual resources. It would seek, in short, ‘to bring us back to ourselves.’ It would do this by re-enfranchising the learner, by making ‘open discussion’ the arena of learning, and by seeking to create ‘a habitual vision of greatness’ (Whitehead) by having us cut our teeth on the best our traditions have to offer.

Let me mention one bone-chilling fact concerning education. No matter how good one’s professor, no matter even how great a great book, no one else can learn for you. Indeed Plato went so far in his dialogue *Meno* to prove that teaching is impossible. This is not to say that learning is not possible, quite the contrary. If there is anything that is effective here, it is learning. Hence the learner, not the knower, has to be the center of one’s pedagogic efforts.

Above all learning is an activity and as an activity is developed (and further actualized) by the doing of it. Hence for us it becomes the question, not the answer, that should be the principal instrument of learning, and discussion, not lecture, that should be its public venue. So too, the focus is on the arts of acquisition (not possession), the arts of reflection and discovery that traditionally are called ‘the liberal arts.’ These are all in the service of ‘the habits of originality,’ of non-dependence, of developed self-resourcefulness. Therewith do we become active agents in our own educa-

tion. Here others may be of assistance, but only as guides not professors, the advanced learner modeling the educational virtues of openness, perseverance, and humility before the work.

What is most conspicuous about this form of education is its lack of lectures... except this one. By design, we refuse to ‘talk down,’ that is, to categorize, to have someone decide beforehand how what is to be discussed is to be discussed. Further, what is equally curious about a lecture is that, more often than not, one is presented only with the results of someone’s thinking and not with the process itself that led to those results. This leads to the very odd circumstance that ‘knowledge’ is decoupled from its origin, from discovery, from the vital, originative questions that led thereto, in short, from the process of learning. But if we are interested in learning how to learn, and not just what is to be learned, then we have to focus our attention on the conditions of learning, for it is the process that is enabling.

By contrast we seek to discover why and how someone thought as he or she did. We seek to place ourselves inside the thought of the thinker, to live (Haggard), to become their question. We seek to go to that place in a thinker’s thought where all the thought-vectors and implications are discoverable by us. A tutor might be of assistance here in helping one to discover ‘the way in’ (Townsend), although once there, it is up to us to think it through for ourselves. In short, we suggest that one very good way to learn how to think is to deeply rethink, that is to parallel-think, the thought of those who have provided extraordinary models of thoughtfulness. This process is not without its own risks, to be sure, namely that of remaining beginners or of ‘getting nowhere fast.’ But it holds out the promise, too, of genuine wonder and real discovery that the thought might become ours in an authentic way and not remain someone else’s.

Moreover, because the question at hand has not been pre-decided and moved off the table by some intermediate authority, or because we’ve not yet fallen into that easy cynicism that avoids a question by dismissing it, our discussions are not precluded from being substantive and consequential, and we, the participants, prevented from accepting the full responsibility for thought. “The exclusion of the truth question from students’ classroom experience, and consequently from their studies,” a former dean wrote, “has a devastating effect: It turns all...studies into a high-class game....” “That ‘truth might matter’ should not be denied us as a possibility, she urged.

The discussion mode, further, has this additional, very important advantage. While thinking might in the end be one’s own, that is,

be a private matter, learning does benefit in a fundamental way from joint effort and mutuality. “Let us learn together,” Socrates says frequently; let us help each other articulate, clarify, and develop one another’s ideas. What we learn in the process of discussion is the primacy of the idea over one’s individual ego, something difficult to learn by oneself. We learn that we sometimes have to forsake our self-interest and our own misbegotten ideas in favor of the possibilities opened up by discussion, if, that is, the argument warrants it. (By contrast, a lecture always seems to carry with it a tinge of proprietorship.) Aristotle says that there are certain things, especially about oneself, that we can only learn from others. Learning about the selflessness of learning may be one of those things. This new openness, moreover, serves us not only in joint inquiry, but as a model for selfless, private reflection as well. Only then are we ready, ready to listen and to read. We are open to what an ‘other’ has to say, a fellow learner, a friend, or the greatest of great books.

We turn to great books not just because they were once meaning giving and provided foundations for different ways of life. (We are not interested in the past as past.) We turn to them rather than the encounter with them might do for us what they did for past generations. We turn to them as world makers, that they might aide us in understanding the world they were instrumental in bringing about, our world. We turn to them that we might confront the whole of our world, its mathematical and natural scientific underpinnings, no less than its humanistic ones. (Here mathematics and science are not ‘handmaidens.’) We turn to them, as well, to face “the great errors as well as the great truths.” On the one hand, they might provide a model for thinking well and deeply, and hence be not just something to replicate but to advance. On the other, they provide us with an opportunity to think differently, in the thinking through of which, the ‘determinate negation’ (Hegel) might provide us with a hint of where thought might go. In short, we turn to them to confront our fullest inheritance in the fullest way.

Consideration of these ‘originative authors’ (Ms. Brann’s wonderfully revealing phrase), moreover, places us at a unique vantage point, at the point of the emergence of an idea, when a question is still open, not yet bound by inherited fences, which then serves as well as a model of deep inquiry where fundamental presuppositions are in question. Lastly we turn to ‘great books’ because they give us an opportunity to unabashedly think ‘great thoughts,’ thoughts that seem least bound by time and space. “If you live yourselves in the history of great men,” one of our authors says, “you will learn from it a highest commandment, to become ripe [yourselves] and to flee the paralyzing educational constraints of the age....” We seek to join thinkers at ‘the height of their human-

ness' (Steadman) as they seek intimations of something more than transitory (something unhistorical).

Thus an encounter with the fullest and deepest of our traditions promises much: that by exercising our minds, unmediated—*mano à mano*—with the most challenging thinkers, we might develop proportionately; that by experiencing original thought in the making, our capacities for original thought too might be inspired; that as we are taken to new heights, we might discover places 'where we have not gone before' and develop new capacities to ascend thereto; that in facing the toughest of the tough human questions, we might thereby be strengthened; that as we are introduced to the whole range of what our authors deem worthy of responsibility, so will our own sense of our responsibility grow; that in learning how very complex the world and its correlate, the world of thought, is, so we might be brought to become ever more self-resourceful; and, lastly, in doing all this 'ourselves,' we might, in the most fundamental way, be 'brought back to ourselves' and achieve a heightened fullness of independence, hitherto unrealized... This is the promise. It is still for us to make it real.

Such was the promise that one of the foremost commentators of the day even waxed... well, you tell me: "I venture to believe that [a rebirth of learning] is true [happening]," he wrote, "and that in the future men will point to St. John's College and say that there was the seedbed of the American Renaissance" (Lippmann). But as we said, that is the promise. It is still up to us to make it real. Ah, and here too is the rub.

VII. "The Silent Artillery of Time"

"It is for us the living, rather, to be dedicated here to the unfinished work which they who fought here have thus far so nobly advanced."
—Abraham Lincoln

We have looked back this evening at some of the circumstances that brought the college's founders to entertain a bold venture: to think the aims of education through from the beginning and to introduce 'the new program' in 1937. But that was 64 years ago. And time, we've learned from one of these founders, takes its toll on human understanding. What does this say to us?

There is a passage in a speech by the young Abraham Lincoln (1838) that casts light on this question of the recessive quality of time past. He too is looking back that he might understand better the prospect for his day. With the urgency of the formative revolutionary war period now past, with the reality of immanent conflict long gone, with there being no external threat uniting us in a

heightened awareness of what we value, in short, in his word, with the ‘passions’ of the founders receding—he too is reflecting on events 60+ years prior—Lincoln is compelled to raise the question of ‘the perpetuation of our [political] institutions.’ In short, he had to take up as a question what, in earlier times, might have been taken for granted.

The problem, as he sees it, is that the founding passions of the prior revolutionary period are not, indeed cannot be the motivating passions of the present and subsequent generations. As he graphically brings us to realize, the history that once touched every family—the testimonies of limbs mangled and scars from wounds visible—what he calls, movingly, ‘the living histories’—this living evidence was no longer available to his generation. This vivid evidence had given gravity, clarity of purpose, and a sense of common destiny to the generations immediately following the war. But, he notes, ‘what invading foemen could *never do*, the silent artillery of time *has done...*’ His question thus becomes: what can provide for his and later generations that which ‘the living histories’ did for earlier ones?

Lincoln’s response is that we must become reflective, thoughtful proponents, not passive perpetuators, of what is best in our inherited tradition. He compares our inheritance to an ancient temple that, the worse for time, is no longer able to stand in its original glory. He says, now that the ‘pillars of the temple of liberty... have crumbled away, that temple must [inevitably] fall, [...] unless we, their descendents, supply their places with other pillars, hewn from the solid quarry of sober reason... Unimpassioned reason must furnish all the materials for our future support and defense’ (43). Descendents thus have a responsibility not unlike that of founders. A refounding must necessarily follow a founding, if what is valued in the present is not to become irretrievably ‘past.’ It can only be perpetuated and thought ‘lasting’ if its reason for being what it is becomes an explicit object of thought and reflection, and thence actively and self-consciously reaffirmed. In human things, inertia and custom are never enough to sustain them. (Nor is it for us.)

It is also more than 60 years since the beginning of the new program. These reflections on the temporal predicament of foundations—the loss of the original principle of vitality, of the founding inspiration, of the intense feelings of shared origination and destiny—puts our present circumstance at the college into a deeper perspective. We do not have a revolutionary war nor a world cataclysm threatening our shores, that is some external motive forcing us to think hard about why we do what we do. Quite the contrary, ‘the silent artillery of time’ does its work of putting the original motivation and clarity of purpose at a distance from us—making it

‘past’—lulling us into unreflectively perpetuating what has come down to us. But, Lincoln advises us, every new generation has to take up the question of its foundations, for otherwise the ‘pillars of the temple’ weaken.

VIII. A Sad Tale

One can see this problem of inheritance in another way. The same commentator mentioned above (Lippmann) tried to capture our predicament in the following tale:

“Once upon a time I knew an old gentleman who had inherited from his father, who had made it, a great and noble organ. The old gentleman tended it with pious care and on the slightest provocation he would play it with resounding eloquence. And then in the course of time he died, and his son inherited the house and the organ, with all its intricate pipes. The son liked the organ, too, and had learned to play it, though he played it somewhat apologetically in the presence of his family....

...So he used the organ less and less, but it still pleased him to think that the great and noble organ was there, and if ever he needed it to withstand the vicissitudes of outrageous fortune, he could rely upon it to fortify his spirit. And then, one day things did go very badly with him, and feeling that he must play the organ again, he sat down to it [but] found to his dismay that something had gone wrong inside and that he could raise no sound except the most horrid wheezing and groaning. Obviously, the organ needed to be repaired. But unlike his grandfather who had made it or his father who had often taken it apart and put it together again, he had not the slightest notion of how an organ works.

So he looked in the classified telephone directory to find the service [station] for pipe organs. But there was none in his town, and there was none in his county, and none in his state. But at last at great expense he induced an expert who lived in a distant city to come and inspect the trouble. The expert came, made an examination, said the organ had been a very fine old instrument but that the broken part was no longer made, and that no one knew how to make it, and that, unhappily therefore, the organ could never be played again.”

The commentator who relates this ‘sad tale’ sees it as “...a parable of the history of the free peoples during the past three or four [perhaps now five] generations. For they have inherited great and noble institutions from their forefathers who made them. But because they have not inherited the knowledge which enabled their forefa-

thers to make these institutions, they do not really know how to preserve them, and improve them.”

History is therefore an imperfect medium of transmission. Our ‘inheritance’ is only partially conveyed to us. It takes work on our part—remember, ‘arduous’ work—to realize its fullness. Though a ‘musical instrument’ and even a political ‘institution’ may be handed over relatively easily, the ‘knowledge that enabled [one] to make and preserve them’ is not so easily handed down. Again, it is up to us to bring them to fullness.

IX. Books Unread, A Question Unasked


Our talk this evening, though long, has sought to accomplish one ‘small thing’ (as Socrates would say), to have us ask ourselves one question, the question of our origins and reasons for being. Several reasons have been brought forth as occasions for such reflection. Even absent a world crisis, ‘the silent artillery of time’ by itself—its accretions and loss of evidence, and our neglect, forgetfulness, and indeed even our newness—requires that we each take up this question for our own. For we have only to realize that “To put an end to the spirit of inquiry that has characterized the West, it is not necessary to burn the books [as the Nazis and many others have done]. All we have to do is to leave them unread for a few generations.”

Along the way, many questions have been raised: Are we fulfilling our delegated responsibility to enable ‘positive or reflective (Starr) freedom’? Are we restoring meaning and strength to the fabric of language, and indeed to life? Are we providing a basis for ‘fearless and responsible decisions’? Are we developing our native powers of ‘self-control, thinking through, and of following up with courageous and just action’? Have we become ‘worthy to receive and able to guard the sacred deposit of the rights and liberties of [our] fellow citizens?’ Are we learning how to learn? (And there are others.) A college was founded where such questions have a home. We’ve sought to bring into being a place where clarity about the question is as important as the answer, where insight into the problem is as decisive as the possible solutions, where the conditions of well-being accompany considerations of the threats thereto, and where the counter-argument is as alive as the proposed resolution. We have sought, in short, to found a Socratic institution, if that is not a contradiction in terms.

So we ask you tonight to forget ‘what you think you know’ and dedicate yourselves to primary learning, that you might have something indisputably yours and not ‘someone else’s.’

And we ask you tonight to learn to read well and wisely, that what is worth preserving in our traditions does not ‘wash up on the sands of time’ (Goethe).

And we ask you tonight to join us in our efforts not to allow the past to be unreflectively perpetuated and to pledge yourselves to the unfinished work that these authors so nobly began.

And though the ‘sad tale’ above was offered as a parable of the state of our education in years past, let it not be applicable to the present. **So we ask you tonight as well**, not only to learn how to play ‘the organ,’ but to learn how it works, that, should it ever need repair and improvement, you will not be at a loss to restore it, indeed might even advance its musical capabilities, and that you might play it ‘with resounding eloquence,’ reaching new heights of achievement. 

Thank you.

Friday, August 31, 2001

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