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Nomination Hearing (1993)

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1993

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Sheldon Hackney

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Statement by Sheldon Hackney  
Nominee for the position of Chairman,  
National Endowment for the Humanities  
June 25, 1993

At first glance, my life does not appear to be one that was ever in need of transformation, yet I can bear personal witness to the sort of personal transformation that I believe the humanities have the power to accomplish.

I was born and raised in Birmingham, Alabama, the third son of a thoroughly Methodist family that eventually included five sons, the offspring of a marriage that is now in its sixty-fourth year. My childhood was spent in the Great Depression and World War II, and I was acutely aware that my world was one of scarcity and vulnerability. Nevertheless, my childhood was unproblematic, at least if one doesn't count my being continuously terrorized by my older brothers.

My father was a newspaperman before the war. As that was not the era of the journalist as hero, and as his family was large, when he returned from the Navy he set himself up in business buying and reselling war surplus material. His business evolved, and he eventually did very well.

As I went through public school in Birmingham, like most children of middle-income families, I could imagine various futures for myself, each of them honorable and productive, but I never imagined the life I have actually had. That life was opened up for me in part because of two superb History teachers at Ramsay High School, Mary McPhaul and Ellen Callen, and in part because I loved to read. My mother read to us a lot when we were young, and when I was a bit older I remember listening wondrously to her practicing the dramatic book readings that she did for literary clubs around the city, legitimate theater not having a very lively presence in Birmingham then. Although reading was a bit of magic for me, I was

thoroughly imprisoned in the myth that real boys did not work very hard in school and real men were men of action rather than thought.

The major reason, however, that the world was saved from having yet another lawyer was my older brother, Fain, whom I worshipped. He was charismatic and multi-talented and very imaginative, so that he was always the leader in the neighborhood and the one who would organize our play, not only the standard games like kick-the-can and hide-and-seek, but elaborate war games and a game we called "town" in which everyone had a role selling something, and Fain was always the banker because he could draw so well and make beautiful dollar bills. My brother, Morris, always got the lemonade concession and ended up with all the money that Fain had issued from the bank.

Fain was a young man of grandiose projects, usually too grand ever to finish but always exciting enough to draw in everyone else. Despite all his talent, he had an uneven academic record, reflecting his enthusiasms and his lack of focus, but he had a great time and made all those around him have a great time also. He went off to the University of Alabama where parties were then known to occur. He had a wonderful time his freshman year, and his abysmal grades showed it.

Something happened to him that following summer, and I don't know what the transforming event or experience was. In any case, he became a different person. He started reading books that were not required for school. He began to listen to classical music, to write poetry, and to talk of serious subjects. He transferred to Birmingham Southern College and started to work at his courses. I was fascinated.

Part of his plan for remaking his life was to become a Navy pilot, which he did. When I went off to Vanderbilt on a Naval ROTC scholarship, he was on the West Coast and then in Japan flying amphibious patrol planes. Letters from him were not only reports of adventures

in exotic places but accounts of what he was reading and thinking and guilt-producing questions about my intellectual life, which even at Vanderbilt could be as sparse as one wanted it to be.

It was at about this time, because of Fain's example, if not his specific recommendation, that I was captured by the novels of William Faulkner, Ernest Hemingway, and especially Thomas Wolfe. I am almost embarrassed to remember how much I identified with Eugene Gant, a young Southerner coming of age by trying to read his way through the Harvard library. Vanderbilt was saturated, of course, with the tradition of the Fugitive poets and the Agrarians, and I studied them with appreciation. Though the Agrarians had taken their stand twenty years before in very different times and had since then taken diverse political paths, the big questions they had raised (about what is the good life, and what is the value of tradition, and what is the function of government, and what are the perils of modernity) were common and lively topics of debate among my friends.

We also talked of race relations, an omnipresent concern of Southerners black and white that was intensified by the Supreme Court's ruling in the Brown case that put an exclamation mark in the middle of my college years. For reasons that I find difficult to explain, but that probably have to do with my religious training, I had broken away from southern white orthodoxy even before going to college and had concluded that racial segregation was wrong. As a historian, I have continued my interest in race because it is a major factor in American history. As an individual, I have continued my commitment to racial equality because I believe it is right and that group relationships are one of the major unresolved questions on the domestic scene. In the more formal curriculum at Vanderbilt, Dewey Grantham, Herb Baily and Henry Swint in the History Department increased my interest in History.

I was devastated by the death of my brother in a military plane crash in Japan in 1954 during the summer after my sophomore year. He had meant so many things to me that it was not until years later that I realized that his most important gift to me was to give me permission to use my mind in serious ways, to risk pursuing a subject that I enjoyed, to spend my life in pursuit of education for myself and for others. Watching him change, and being lured into the pleasures of thought as a way of enhancing experience, transformed my life and gave it purpose.

After three years on a destroyer and two years teaching weapons at the United States Naval Academy in Annapolis, I went to Yale to study under C. Vann Woodward, the leading historian of the South and the man who became the most important influence on my career as a historian and on my devotion to academic freedom, intellectual honesty, free speech, and the obligations of collegiality. I had been attracted to Woodward not only by his reinterpretation of the history of the South from Reconstruction to World War I, but by his subtle exploration, in the essays collected in The Burden of Southern History, of what it means to be a Southerner and what the history of the South means to the nation and the world.

After Yale, I joined the faculty of Princeton where I worked away at becoming the best teacher and scholar I could possibly be while raising a family and doing the sort of committee assignments and quasi-administrative tasks that faculty are called upon to do. My career as a historian, in fact, was diverted because I kept saying yes to such requests. When William G. Bowen became President of Princeton in 1972, he invited me to become Provost. The slippery slope turned into a water chute. I became President of Tulane University in 1975 and the University of Pennsylvania in 1981. This confirms the truth of the aphorism that life is what happens to you while you are planning something else.

I believe my twenty years of major responsibility in universities has prepared me to lead the National Endowment for the Humanities. For the past generation, universities have provided tough environments. University presidents operate in a sea of powerful and conflicting currents. To succeed, one must have a clear sense of strategic direction, a fundamental commitment to the core values of the University, the strength to persevere through contentious times, and the ability to gain and keep the support a variety of constituencies. I have not only survived in that environment, I have prospered, and my institutions have thrived.

Among the values that I hold dear is a belief that a university ought to be open to all points of view, even if some of those views expressed are personally abhorrent. I take some pride in having protected the right to speak of such diverse controversial figures from William Shockley at Princeton to Louis Farrakhan at Penn. The university should belong to all of its members and not be the exclusive domain of any particular person, group, or point of view.

During my twelve and a half years at Penn, I have made the undergraduate experience my highest priority. Penn has revamped the general education components of the curriculum in each of its four undergraduate schools, provided a livelier sense of community through the creation of freshman houses within the residential system, added a reading project that asks freshmen to read a common book and then to discuss that book in seminars during orientation week and throughout the year, revised our advising system, revitalized the freshman seminar program, and drawn senior faculty into the teaching of introductory courses. I have increased the diversity of the Penn student body and worked hard to sustain an inclusive and supportive atmosphere on campus, to provide a campus in which everyone has a very strong sense of belonging and in which our animated debates are carried out with civility. I have also created a new sense of partnership with the neighborhoods around us, as a close working relationship

with the school system of the City of Philadelphia, and a national model program of volunteerism that I institutionalized a year ago by establishing the Center for Community Partnerships to stimulate and coordinate the involvement of faculty, staff and students in off-campus service activities.

Universities exist to create new knowledge and to preserve and communicate knowledge. The NEH, as a sort of university without walls, through its research, education, and public programs, is engaged in the same effort. I am dedicated to the proposition that we can improve the human condition through knowledge and that our hope for tomorrow in this troubled world depends on the sort of understanding that can come through learning.

I have great respect for the NEH. It is the single most important institution in American life promoting the humanities, and it has a long record of accomplishment. I believe there are things that can be done to extend and broaden the impact of the NEH as it fulfills its statutory task of stimulating the humanities.

I like to think of the humanities as human beings recording and thinking about human experience and the human condition, preserving the best of the past and deriving new insights in the present. One of the things that the NEH can do is to conduct a national conversation around the big questions: what is the meaning of life, what is a just society, what is the nature of duty, and so on. In this big conversation, it is not the function of the NEH to provide answers but to insure a discussion, to create a forum in which all voices can be heard.

Because they are not just for the few but for everyone, no single approach to the NEH mandate is adequate. There is a need for balance among research aimed at creating new knowledge, educational programs to insure that the humanities are creatively and invitingly represented in the curricula of our schools and colleges, and public programs to draw everyone

into the big conversation. Those three activities should be related to each other and should be mutually supportive.

The country has never needed the humanities more. We not only face the challenges of a new geopolitical situation and the problems of adjusting to economic competition in a new global marketplace, but we face a crisis of values at home. What is happening to family and community? Who are we as a nation and where are we going? What holds us together as a nation and what do citizens owe to each other? What is the relationship of the individual to the group in a society whose political order is based upon individual rights and in which group membership is still a powerful social influence.

Even more importantly, the humanities have the capacity to deepen and extend to new dimensions the meaning of life for each and everyone of us. They have the capacity to transform individual lives, not necessarily in the external circumstances of those lives, but in their internal meaning.

Every human experience is enhanced by higher levels of knowledge. When I listen to a piece of music, I may like it and think it beautiful, but the person who knows the historical context of its composition understands what the composer was trying to accomplish technically and can compare the composition and the performance to others will get infinitely more out of the experience than I will. That is why I enjoy talking about common experiences with people who will see it through a lens different from mine. The task of the NEH is to enrich the conversation and bring more people into it.

The premise of my approach to the tasks of the National Endowment for the Humanities is simple but profound. The more you know, the more you hear and see and feel. The more you know, the more you can know. The more you know, the more meaningful life is. Such can be the gift of the NEH to the American people.