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Address by Albert J. Kuhn
Provost, The Ohio State University
at OSU Winter Commencement
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THE ESSENTIAL UNIVERSITY

Mr. President, Members of the Board of Trustees, colleagues in the faculty and administration, honored graduates and your families and friends, I am privileged to speak to you at this important ceremony. In its Latin origins "ceremony" is related to the words "care" and "cure". This ceremony then symbolizes both a caring and curing, a caring in that the University honors you upon your academic achievement, and a curing presumably of your doubts and anxieties in having reached this ceremony. (And doubtless as parents who have provided moral and financial support, some of us may well feel that their graduates have not only been well cared for but also hope that their desire for a higher degree is cured.) The purpose of ceremony in general of course is to invest major events in our lives with their essential meaning and significance. This ceremony in the University invites us to reflect on why we are here and to reaffirm the central values of education and the essential university.

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At my graduation from the University of Illinois in June, 1950, the speaker was the governor of the state, the Honorable Adlai Stevenson. It was in many ways a typical commencement talk. It was one generation talking to another, looking back and lamenting the mess it had made of a world full of promise, and looking forward to a new world rising out of the ruins of World War II.

Ours was a new dimensioned world, Stevenson told our generation (many of whom were veterans), one in which restless forces were at work, spiritual, scientific, political, and philosophic. "The remotest corners of the earth feel the ferment," he said, and it was our challenge and opportunity to develop what was good in the new and keep what was better in the old.

Then--characteristic of his vision, and his eloquence--he struck a somber, admonishing note. Ours, he observed, was an Anxious Age in which we were "doubting our beliefs and believing our doubts," an age more concerned with personal security than personal achievement, an age of nutty neurotics looking

for subversive enemies under the bed and behind the curtains, of irresponsible accusations of disloyalty, of guilt by association, of timidity and intolerance. "The shadow of a nameless fear slopes across the land," he said. "There is talk of thought control among Jefferson's people." In our efforts to combat the various fanatic "isms" that make up totalitarianism, we were in danger of becoming the very thing we opposed.

Which point brought Stevenson to the heart of his message to the graduates: that we, each of us, born as we were in a free and democratic land, were obliged to exert "a confident fighting faith in freedom." And in a manner reminiscent of the prophetic style of Whitman and Sandburg, Stevenson exhorted the sons and daughters of Illinois: "you are the inheritors of a great tradition born and nurtured in centuries of pain and effort. You have received here its best gift--an education. Man the defenses of the humane individualist tradition against its avowed enemies, its covert foes--indifference and ignorance--and its frightened friends who

would surrender it to save it. You have the components of good judgment and wise decision."

In short, as graduates we were to know and prize the university--through its continual search for and communication of the truth, itself an exemplar of freedom--for its capacity to free us from the bondage of ignorance, indifference, intolerance, and our baser selves. In truth is freedom, in freedom fulfillment of mind, spirit, and self, and that whole cluster of values sought for and prized at all times by civilized people everywhere.

I cite these remarks of Adlai Stevenson at length because of their intrinsic merit, but chiefly because I think there is no nobler definition or more essential purpose of a university than his statement of it. The highest condition to which man can aspire in this world is freedom--freedom of mind, spirit, and being. It is a condition earned, not conferred. It is earned by act of will, not by faith or fiat. Its reward is independence, the possession of one's true self and happiness.

The University is at once a means and end to that high

aspiration. It offers courses and grants degrees to give us knowledge, which gives us choice, which is itself a first condition of freedom. Through learning and the pursuit of truth, the university fulfills our humanity, our capacity for civility and humaneness, our capacity to know and be ourselves. Universities everywhere proclaim the adages "know thyself" and "the truth shall make us free"; they are indeed cause and effect.

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These are high sounding sentiments, I know, and susceptible to skepticism or neglect in our age of mass education when a college degree is generally viewed as a credential for a job or profession rather than the mark of the liberated mind and spirit. But of course these are not mutually exclusive achievements, as the classical arguments about the idea of a university would sometimes suggest.

In 19th century England--to whom we owe much for the shape and informing spirit of our educational institutions--

the argument about the essential university usually pitted Sir Francis Bacon and the philosophy of utility and progress against Plato and liberal education--or more harshly juxtaposed as the philosophy of works versus words, or, from the other point of view, the doctrine of sweetness and light versus philistinism.

To what earthly purpose, Thomas Macaulay complained, was the cultivation of the Platonic ideal, of the good, the true, and the beautiful? A very poor harvest indeed, he thought. "There had been plenty of plowing, harrowing, reaping, threshing. But the granaries contained only smut and stubble." To follow Bacon, on the other hand, was truly to advance learning in the service of practical and progressive ends, in short to make imperfect men comfortable. "In Plato's opinion," Macaulay asserted, "man was made for philosophy; in Bacon's opinion philosophy was made for man; it was a means to an end; and that end was to increase the pleasures and to mitigate the pain of millions who are not and cannot be philosophers." Plato's was a philosophy of mere words,

Bacon's the philosophy of fruitful works.

So much, under Macaulay's strong club, for the Platonic ideal and its cluster of human values--values which Bacon himself had scorned as "the arrogant dallying of mathematicians" or as Coleridge--in a sympathetic and wistful mood--styled "the dear gorgeous nonsense of Plato."

On Plato's side that knowledge was its own end, its own reward, was the eloquent John Henry Newman. Contrasting commercial or professional education with liberal education, he asserted that the purpose of a university education was to free and fulfill the mind and spirit. Knowledge, like health itself, is capable of being its own end, worth pursuing for its own sake. Without demeaning useful knowledge, he claimed there was a higher knowledge of self realization, whose genuine attributes were freedom, individuality, moderation, and wisdom. Such knowledge was the realization of one's individuality, one's best self and character. Education, therefore, was "a high word; it is the preparation for knowledge; and it is the imparting of knowledge in proportion

to that preparation.... A university is, according to the usual designation, an Alma Mater, knowing her children one by one, not a foundry, or a mint, or a treadmill."

Newman set forth his ideas on liberal education in 1852. Ten years later in America President Lincoln signed the great Land-Grant Act, establishing the public state colleges and universities, in whose formation the dichotomy of useful learning and liberal learning was widely debated.

At the very first meeting (on May 11, 1870) of the Board of Trustees of this University (then The Agricultural and Mechanical College of Ohio), the nature of the new institution was argued. Asserted one trustee, "the college should educate our farmers as farmers and our mechanics as mechanics." That, responded another, would be to set a narrow educational purpose surely doomed to fail. Instead, he argued, the thing to do was "to educate the man as a man and not a machine...." The College was not "to teach boys to plow, but to educate them," and he hoped that issue would be fully considered by the Board.

This point of view was forcefully stated a few months later by Joseph Sullivant. A broad and liberal foundation of education was necessary, he said, and if the trustees had the means, he would have taught in the College everything worth knowing. "What the farmer and mechanic needed, like all other men, was a good education; and in proportion as that was general and liberal would they be best fitted for their special vocations.* Hence Sullivant's proposal for organizing the College into ten major areas of the basic and applied arts and sciences, symbolized in the seal of the institution--as it stands today--by an eternal pyramid whose base is knowledge and body the arts, sciences, letters, and agriculture, the latter because it was the chief occupation of man.

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How has the University served its founding philosophy? Does it creatively balance useful and liberal learning,

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* Alexis Cope, History of The Ohio State University,pp.24,36,37.

vocationalism and self-realization, the Platonic and Baconian ideals? There is no calculus, of course, to measure the responses to these questions, anymore than the sum of the credit hours required for each of your degrees indicates the quality of your individual education.

In the hundred and eight years since Sullivant's seal was adopted, the Ohio State University has conferred more than 225,000 degrees and it has touched the lives of countless people. The lamp of learning that crowns the pyramid in the seal has beckoned all these seekers because of the University's essential purposes:

---to seek, preserve, and advance knowledge in the quest for truth;

---to preserve, promote, and appreciate our cultural heritage;

---to stimulate discovery, reflection, research, and creativity for their usefulness and for their own sake;

---to train and educate for the professions and occupations which are the complex fabric of our free society;

---and to promote individual and personal growth, for the sake of self, citizenship, and society.

Ultimately, its success in fulfilling these purposes has been and always will be personal and individual. As Newman said, a university is truly an Alma Mater, knowing her children one by one, the children--to continue his figure of speech--thereby knowing themselves, who they are and of what they are capable.

This self-knowledge is generally not some Newtonian law, or grand Eureka of revelation, or patent or key to wealth and happiness. It is usually very modest indeed--as modest (and funny) as Thurber's discovery in his botany class that he had drawn not a plant cell from his microscope but the speckled reflection of his own eyeball. It is the modest but true discovery some one pencilled on a wall in University Hall, GOD IS DEAD! NIETZSCHE. Printed right below in another hand is, NIETZCHE IS DEAD! GOD. And perhaps student discovery may be even more modest (and late) than that. I'm told by a dean he overheard a graduating senior showing his mother the Campus. As they walked across the Oval

toward the Faculty Club, she asked, "what's that tall white building on the right with the statue in front?" "That, hmm, that," he said, "I think is the library."

What the essential university is most commonly for its students, then, is simply a personal and incremental succession of the experience, "Oh, I see!" But, as great poets assert, the act of seeing--into and through--is the ultimate act of self-realization. Through insight we remove our mind-forged manacles. As the eye is formed, observed William Blake, such are its powers. "The tree which moves some to tears of joy is in the Eyes of others only a Green thing that stands in the way." The infinite variety of experience that is the university constantly challenges each of us to see freshly, into and through things and ourselves.

I am aware that for some--though surely nobody here--the university serves none of the noble or modest purposes I have cited. For a few the college campus will peak in a respite from responsibility, a playground for dissent, a

prolonged summer camp for recreation or revelry, a laboratory for "a life-style", an honorable place to loaf--at least for awhile--"a hot bed of rest", as some wit has said.

Citing such things and ignoring the central purpose of higher education, some critics assert that the University has no constituency. Perhaps not, in a narrow partisan sense. But the faith that supports and sustains the essential university is in fact the abiding faith in the American Dream, in progress, the improvement of self and society, and the quality of our lives. As an American institution the university, therefore, remains one of our best investments in freedom; and as students, faculty, and alumni--friends of The Ohio State University--we should prize it, praise it, and rejoice in it. It may be after all that the best gift of the University is to teach us how to rejoice, how to praise. W. H. Auden's splendid tribute to the poet Yeats as a great teacher is appropriate as well to our great, great University:

With your unconstraining voice
Still persuade us to rejoice;

In the deserts of the heart
Let the healing fountain start,
In the prison of his days
Teach the free man how to praise.

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In the generation since Stevenson exhorted my graduating class to rise up and be the new resolute breed of Jefferson's people, we have indeed witnessed a world in social, spiritual, economic and political ferment. We have seen nations in the throes of nationalism, ourselves having suffered a national trauma. We have seen the accommodating effort for international interdependence because we know there is no other world or global community to move to. We have voyaged to the cold surface of the moon and the rings of Jupiter and have yet fully to learn that through our abuse or negligence our own environment can become as hostile and alien as theirs. We have seen the slavery of cultism and the senseless crimes and terrorism of man's inhumanity to man.

And yet, the sun also riseth. While ours is hardly an age of heroes, it is a time that is serious and determined in its search for peace, personal dignity, and the quality of human life. It is a time that seeks purpose and personal achievement. In that search the University will continue to play an indispensable role. And since the one freedom we do not have is the choice in which time we would live, we must be guided by Stevenson's wise advice to develop what is good in the new age and keep what is better in the old, confident in Emerson's faith, that "This time, like all times, is a very good one, if we but know what to do with it."

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