COMMENCEMENT - INVESTITURE SPEECH

BY DALE R. CORSON
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DR. STRATTON, MR. PURCELL, HONORED GUESTS, Trustees PARENTS, STUDENTS, MEMBERS OF THE FACULTY, FRIENDS:

THERE ARE TWO WAYS TO INSTALL A COLLEGE PRESIDENT THESE DAYS. ONE IS TO INAUGURATE HIM THE DAY HE ASSUMES OFFICE, AS ONE OF OUR SISTER IVY INSTITUTIONS DID RECENTLY. THIS WAY ASSURES THAT HE WILL STILL BE AROUND FOR THE INAUGURATION. THE OTHER WAY IS TO WAIT FOR A YEAR, AS WE HAVE DONE. BY DOING THIS THERE IS THE CHANCE THE NEW PRESIDENT WILL BE GONE BEFORE THE TIME FOR HIS INVESTITURE. AT ONE NEAR-BY INAUGURATION I ATTENDED THIS YEAR, ONE SPEECH WAS LISTED AS A SALUTE TO THE PRESIDENT. THE SPEAKER BEGAN BY SAYING THAT THESE DAYS ONE SALUTES THE COURAGE OF THE NEW PRESIDENT, NOT HIS JUDGMENT.

I HAVEN'T FELT THE NEED TO BE INSTALLED. I HAVE BEEN AT CORNELL FOR NEARLY A QUARTER OF A CENTURY - AS A FACULTY MEMBER,

AN ADMINISTRATOR, AND, EQUALLY IMPORTANT, AS A FATHER OF COLLEGE STUDENTS. FOR THE SIX YEARS PRECEDING THIS ONE/MY ADMINISTRATIVE RESPONSIBILITIES WERE SIMILAR TO THOSE I ASSUMED LAST SEPTEMBER. BUT MY COLLEAGUES HAVE PERSUADED ME THAT I SHOULD LET MR. PURCELL HAND ME THE MACE - THE FORMAL SYMBOL OF AUTHORITY - HERE/IN FULL PUBLIC VIEW OF ALL OF YOU/- STUDENTS, PARENTS, AND GUESTS/- SO THAT WHEN I CONFER THE DEGREES ON OUR GRADUATES TODAY/THERE WILL BE NO DOUBT IN THEIR MINDS/THAT THEY HAVE INDEED GRADUATED.

THE LAST SEVERAL YEARS HAVE BEEN INCREASINGLY/CRITICAL AND TRAUMATIC/FOR THE COUNTRY AS A WHOLE/AND FOR THE UNIVERSITIES. CORNELL HAS BEEN NO EXCEPTION. IT HAS FELT ALL OF THE TENSIONS AND THE TURMOIL/ARISING FROM LOCAL, NATIONAL, AND GLOBAL PROBLEMS OF GREAT MAGNITUDE, COMPLEXITY, AND DIVISIVENESS. FROM TIME TO TIME, I HAVE PUBLICLY STATED MY VIEWS ABOUT THESE CONCERNS, AND I HAVE NO NEW WORDS TO BRING TO YOU TODAY. I WOULD, HOWEVER, EXPRESS THE HOPE THAT ALL OF US MAY LEARN INCREASINGLY TO RESPOND TO THESE PROBLEMS OUT OF A DEEP SENSE OF OUR COMMON DESTINY, AND WILL DEVELOP OUT OF THESE RESPONSES/A NEW SENSE OF COMMON PURPOSE.

BUT, FOR THE NEXT FEW MINUTES, I WISH TO BACK OFF SLIGHTLY FROM THESE MOMENTOUS, IMMEDIATE PROBLEMS IN ORDER TO EXAMINE SOME WAYS IN WHICH HIGHER EDUCATION CAN BE ADJUSTED TO MEET MORE EFFECTIVELY THE DEMANDS OF OUR SORELY TROUBLED WORLD. OUR COLLEGES AND UNIVERSITIES MAY INDEED NEED A COMPLETE OVERHAUL, BUT CONTEMPORARY PRESSURES MAKE IT IMPERATIVE THAT, SHORT OF A COMPLETE OVERHAUL, WE AT LEAST KEEP OUR INSTITUTIONS RUNNING AND UNDER CONSTANT REVIEW AND REFORM. WHAT THEN ARE SOME OF THE THINGS WE CAN DO TO BRING HIGHER EDUCATION BETTER IN TUNE WITH THE TIMES?

ABOVE ALL ELSE, I BELIEVE WE NEED TO RENEW OUR CONVICTION THAT THE UNIVERSITIES - CERTAINLY CORNELL UNIVERSITY - EXIST FOR THEIR STUDENTS. THE FUTURE, OUR OWN AND THE WORLD'S, TURNS UPON OUR ABILITY TO DEVELOP THE CAPABILITIES OF EACH NEW GENERATION SO THAT EACH MAY LEARN TO LIVE EFFECTIVELY AND USEFULLY IN THE WORLD. THE great MAJORITY OF STUDENTS TODAY ARE NOT THE EXTREME REVOLUTIONARIES WHO HAVE GAINED SUCH PUBLICITY, BUT SERIOUS-MINDED INDIVIDUALS, CONCERNED THAT WHAT THEY ARE LEARNING SHOULD BE RELEVANT AND USEFUL FOR THEIR FUTURE ROLE IN SOCIETY. I HAVE KNOWN MANY STUDENTS WHO,

DURING THEIR STAY AT CORNELL, HAVE WORKED HARD ON COMMITTEES CONCERNED WITH CAMPUS LIFE, BOTH ACADEMIC AND NON-ACADEMIC. THE PERFORMANCE OF THESE STUDENTS REINFORCES MY CONFIDENCE IN OUR ABILITY, AS A NATION, TO RESOLVE MANY OF THE ILLS NOW FACING US. SO WHEN WE SPEAK OF STUDENTS, WE SPEAK OF THE FUTURE, AND WHETHER WE ARE TALKING ABOUT FRESHMAN SEMINARS OR RESEARCH AT THE FRONTIERS OF THE MOST ABSTRACT SCIENCE, THE FUTURE MUST GUIDE OUR EDUCATIONAL PLANS. TODAY, I WANT TO STRESS THREE POINTS ABOUT CORNELL'S FUTURE. THERE ARE MANY OTHERS, BUT I GIVE THESE THREE HIGH PRIORITY.

FIRST, SPECIALIZATION IN CONTEMPORARY HIGHER EDUCATION HAS BECOME AT ONE AND THE SAME TIME A BASIC STRENGTH AND A BASIC WEAKNESS. ON THE ONE HAND, FROM SPECIALIZATION HAS COME THE PRODIGIOUS FEATS OF HUMANISTIC SCHOLARSHIP AND SCIENTIFIC AND TECHNOLOGICAL ADVANCE. ON THE OTHER HAND, SPECIALIZATION IS ISOLATING OUR STUDENTS AND OUR FACULTIES FROM EACH OTHER, FROM THE WORLD, AND FROM THE ACCUMULATED BODY OF KNOWLEDGE AS A WHOLE - AND ALL OF THIS AT A TIME WHEN NO ONE DEPARTMENT OF KNOWLEDGE

OR PROFESSIONAL SKILL BY ITSELF CAN RESOLVE THE COMPLEX PROBLEMS OF POVERTY, WAR, SOCIAL INJUSTICE, POPULATION GROWTH, OR THE ENVIRONMENT. WE HAVE BEEN TOO PRONE TO MAKE SPECIALIZATION THE PRIMARY AIM OF UNDERGRADUATE EDUCATION, AND IN THE GRADUATE SCHOOLS WE HAVE BEEN TOO CONTENT TO DEVELOP SCHOLARS WITHIN THE RESTRICTED SCOPE OF EACH RESPECTIVE DISCIPLINE. THIS PROBLEM HAS BEEN PARTICULARLY APPARENT IN THE SCIENTIFIC AND TECHNICAL FIELDS AND, HERE AT CORNELL, OUR EFFORTS TO CORRECT THIS HAVE RESULTED, AMONG OTHER THINGS, IN THE START OF A [redacted] SUCCESSFUL PROGRAM ENTITLED "SCIENCE, TECHNOLOGY AND SOCIETY" WHICH EXPLORES THE INTERACTION OF TECHNOLOGICAL and scientific ACHIEVEMENT~~S~~ WITH THE HUMAN NEEDS OF SOCIETY. SPECIALIZATION IS, OF COURSE, NECESSARY IF KNOWLEDGE IN ALL ITS BRANCHES IS TO ADVANCE. BUT THE AIM OF SPECIALIZATION IS DEFEATED WHEN IT PRECLUDES RELATING TO OTHER SPECIALTIES WITH UNDERSTANDING AND COOPERATION.

AS A RESEARCH SCIENTIST AND FACULTY MEMBER I KNOW THE THRILL OF DISCOVERY AND ACHIEVEMENT AND THE SATISFACTION OF PARTICIPATING IN EXCITING INTELLECTUAL ENDEAVOR, AND WE SHOULD BE SURE THAT

SUCH OPPORTUNITIES ARE NOT LOST. WE NEED TO DO ALL WE CAN TO MAINTAIN THE FACILITIES - THE LABORATORIES AND LIBRARIES - THAT MAKE SUCH ACHIEVEMENT POSSIBLE. BUT, WE MUST KEEP IN MIND TWO THINGS: RESEARCH WILL BECOME A CAREER FOR ONLY A HANDFUL OF STUDENTS, AND ALL STUDENTS, EVEN THOSE WHO DO BECOME SCHOLARS, SHOULD HAVE THEIR VISION BROADENED BY LEARNING ABOUT SUBJECTS NOT RELATED TO THEIR CHOSEN FIELD.

IN COMBATING THE DANGERS OF SPECIALIZATION, I BELIEVE WE SHOULD ENSURE THAT UNDERGRADUATES ARE PROVIDED WITH A WIDE SPECTRUM OF FLEXIBLE OPPORTUNITIES: FIRST TO DISCOVER THEMSELVES AND TO DEVELOP THEIR OWN CAPABILITIES OF UNDERSTANDING AND APPRECIATION; AND SECOND TO GAIN A BROAD VISION AND UNDERSTANDING OF SOCIETY AND TECHNOLOGY AND THE HUMAN VALUES WHICH SHOULD CONTROL THEIR INTERACTION. THE HUMANITIES ARE CENTRAL IN THIS AND SHOULD PLAY A [redacted] MORE PROMINENT ROLE.

WHEN STUDENTS BEGIN GRADUATE STUDY, WHETHER THEIR OBJECTIVE IS BUSINESS ACUMEN, POLITICAL SKILL, SCHOLARLY INVESTIGATION, OR

SOME OTHER PROFESSIONAL COMPETENCE, I BELIEVE WE SHOULD SO DIRECT THEIR STUDY AS TO INSURE THAT THEY DO NOT BECOME SCHOLARLY ISOLATIONISTS. MORE NEEDS TO BE DONE TO BRING TOGETHER STUDENTS AND FACULTY FROM ALL AREAS OF STUDY TO ENABLE THEM TO BECOME SPECIALISTS WITH UNDERSTANDING OF OTHER SPECIALTIES. LET THEM THEN QUESTION AND CHALLENGE EACH OTHER AND THUS GAIN GREATER UNDERSTANDING AND MORE EFFECTIVENESS BY WORKING TOGETHER.

IN SHAPING OUR GRADUATE SCHOOLS TO ACHIEVE THIS PURPOSE, I BELIEVE WE NEED TO [redacted] RE-EXAMINE THE TRADITIONAL, RESEARCH ORIENTED, PH.D. DEGREE PROGRAMS TO MAKE SURE THEY ARE AVOIDING TOO NARROW SPECIALIZATION. I ALSO BELIEVE WE NEED TO QUESTION THE APPROPRIATENESS OF STUDY FOR THIS DEGREE BY THOSE WHOSE PRIMARY OBJECTIVE IS NOT RESEARCH. TOO OFTEN WE ARE NOW MAKING RESEARCH SPECIALISTS OUT OF PEOPLE WHO WISH TO DESIGN AND BUILD THINGS OR WHO SIMPLY WANT ADVANCED STUDY TO ENABLE THEM TO BE BETTER BUSINESSMEN, OR DIPLOMATS, OR POLITICIANS. I THINK WE NEED TO GIVE SERIOUS THOUGHT TO NEW DEGREE PROGRAMS FOR SOME OF THESE NON-RESEARCH-ORIENTED STUDENTS WHO WANT ADVANCED EDUCATION.

MY SECOND QUESTION ABOUT THE FUTURE OF OUR UNIVERSITIES IS: HOW CAN THEY DEAL WITH SOCIAL PROBLEMS? HOW, THAT IS, CAN THE EXPERIENCES OF THE CLASSROOM AND LABORATORY PREPARE STUDENTS ADEQUATELY TO DEAL WITH THE OVERWHELMING SOCIAL AND TECHNOLOGICAL ISSUES OF OUR DAY?

Among THE PRINCIPAL OBJECTIVES OF A UNIVERSITY IS THE DEVELOPMENT OF INTELLECT AND IMAGINATION, AND THE ABILITY TO SOLVE PROBLEMS. THE CHALLENGE IS HOW TO TEACH MEN AND WOMEN TO SET RIGHT A WORLD THEY DID NOT MAKE AND ARE UNWILLING TO LIVE WITH. I SEE A TWO-FOLD APPROACH; ONE IS THROUGH INSTRUCTION, AND THE OTHER THROUGH RESEARCH.

MOST INSTRUCTION IS IN ESTABLISHED ACADEMIC DISCIPLINES. BUT INCREASINGLY OUR TEACHING IS PROBLEM-ORIENTED AND WE ARE MOVING OUT OF THE CLASSROOM AND OFF THE CAMPUS. THE PROBLEMS OF WAR AND POVERTY, OF POPULATION AND RACISM, CANNOT BE SOLVED BY ANY ONE ACADEMIC FIELD OR DISCIPLINE BUT only BY COOPERATIVE INTER-DISCIPLINARY TEAM EFFORTS. THIS IS WHY I AM SO SURE WE NEED TO

CORRECT THE DANGERS OF SPECIALIZATION AND GIVE BREADTH TO HIGHER EDUCATION. SURELY STUDENTS CAN BE TAUGHT TO THINK JUST AS CRITICALLY AND RATIONALLY ABOUT POVERTY, OR THE DELIVERY OF HEALTH CARE, OR RACISM AS THEY CAN ABOUT ANY OTHER SUBJECT. AND THEY CAN BE TAUGHT HOW TO SOLVE DIFFICULT PROBLEMS AS WELL BY WORKING ON POPULATION GROWTH AS ON ANY OTHER INTELLECTUAL PUZZLE.

IN THE LABORATORY, BROADLY CONCEIVED, THE PROBLEM IS ALSO CLEAR. WHEN WE HAVE AN URBAN PROBLEM WE BRING TOGETHER, IN A UNIFIED RESEARCH EFFORT, ALL MANNER OF SPECIALISTS - ECONOMISTS, HOUSING EXPERTS, PUBLIC HEALTH EXPERTS, AND EXPERTS IN [redacted] TRANSPORTATION. WHETHER THESE ARE CALLED TASK FORCES OR CONGLOMERATES THEY ARE MULTI-DISCIPLINARY, AND PROBLEM-ORIENTED, AND ENGAGED IN APPLIED RESEARCH.

SOME PEOPLE ARE SKEPTICAL ABOUT WHETHER UNIVERSITY FACULTIES CAN PERFORM COOPERATIVE APPLIED RESEARCH IN SUCH FIELDS, AND THE DECLINING SUPPORT FOR RESEARCH IN UNIVERSITIES STEMS TO SOME

DEGREE FROM THIS BELIEF. I DISAGREE. WE HAVE ONLY TO LOOK AT OUR OWN COLLEGE OF AGRICULTURE AND AT OTHER LAND-GRANT UNIVERSITIES/WHERE, FOR A HUNDRED YEARS,/RESEARCH IN AGRICULTURE HAS RESULTED IN BENEFITS TO PEOPLE THROUGHOUT THE WORLD. HERE, IN MY JUDGMENT, IS NO BOLD VENTURE INTO UNCHARTED SEAS. WE HAVE PROVED OUR CAPABILITY; WE HAVE ONLY TO EXPAND IT.

THIRD AND FINALLY, PERHAPS THE GREATEST CHALLENGE OF ALL TO THE UNIVERSITIES/IS THE HIGHER EDUCATION OF MINORITY GROUPS IN OUR POPULATION - EDUCATION FOR BLACK AMERICANS, AMERICAN INDIANS, PUERTO RICANS, AND MEXICAN AMERICANS. I BELIEVE THAT THIS COUNTRY'S BIGGEST PROBLEM TODAY/IS BRINGING TOGETHER AMERICANS, REGARDLESS OF COLOR OR ETHNIC ORIGIN,/AS EQUAL PARTNERS IN EVERY ASPECT OF OUR NATIONAL LIFE, AND THAT AN IMPORTANT PART OF THE SOLUTION LIES IN THE EDUCATION OF MINORITIES, EQUAL IN QUALITY AND IN RELATIVE QUANTITY/TO THE EDUCATION PROVIDED FOR OUR WHITE POPULATION. THIS IS A RESPONSIBILITY NO COLLEGE OR UNIVERSITY CAN AFFORD TO DISREGARD. TO ATTAIN OUR OBJECTIVES, EXPERIMENTATION IS NECESSARY/AND THE MEANS WILL VARY. BUT WE

MUST PRESS ON CONTINUOUSLY AND RELENTLESSLY, WITH IMAGINATION AND DEDICATION TO THIS PURPOSE. FAILURE HERE MAY WELL TEAR US APART.

I TURN BACK NOW TO THOSE OF YOU WHO ARE GRADUATING FROM CORNELL TODAY. MANY OF YOU WILL BE ACCEPTING GAINFUL EMPLOYMENT FOR THE FIRST TIME. OTHERS OF YOU WILL BE GOING ON TO GRADUATE AND PROFESSIONAL SCHOOL. BUT WHATEVER PATH YOU CHOOSE, FIGHT FOR BREADTH AND DEPTH OF VISION EVERY INCH OF THE WAY AND DO NOT FEEL THAT YOUTH AND INEXPERIENCE ARE INSUPERABLE BARRIERS TO MAKING YOUR INFLUENCE FELT.

GOODBYE, AND GOOD LUCK.