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This address is dedicated to Charles Wegener.

There is no greater privilege for a teacher here than to deliver the Aims of Education Address: no topic is more important, no other academic event gathers every member of the class under one roof, and no other setting on campus better weds the ambitions of architecture with occasion. I cannot explore all of the aims of every part of your education, of course, but perhaps like the choirmaster's pitch pipe before the concert, I can momentarily strike a helpful note.

Eight years ago, a first-year student whom I will call Rachael sat in these pews and listened to one of my colleagues exemplify the Aims of Education by explicating a poem. She went on to graduate with a degree in English and then crossed the Midway where she graduated last June from the Law School. Several weeks ago, she was summoned for a job interview by the Chief Justice of the United States, who was considering whether to hire her as one of his three clerks. The Chief Justice reviewed her résumé and remarked in passing that the College curriculum had been "in the news." "What did you get out of it?" he asked her.

"It taught me to think," she replied evenly.

"Well," responded the Chief Justice, "most people say that about law school."

Pausing for a polite breath, she said: "Chicago is different."

"So it is," the Chief Justice agreed, in what apparently was intended as both an acknowledgment and a compliment to the College—and not necessarily at the expense of the Law School.

Later, I asked Rachael to explain to me what she meant or, more precisely, what a more complete answer to the Chief Justice would have been. This is what she wrote to me:

I think the act of learning how to think rather than the ultimate learning on the actual subject matter was what I really took away from the whole experience. I couldn't discuss the categorical imperative effectively at this point. I probably

couldn't offer more than a sentence or two on the Wealth of Nations or the Communist Manifesto. I certainly can't tell you whether the Mesozoic period came before or after Cretaceous. But I did learn intellectual discipline and an enthusiasm for tackling future scholarly enterprises ... [I]t turned out to be law (for now at least) but I feel comfortable that it could have been almost anything else and I would have been well-equipped.¹

Rachael's testimony and the Chief Justice's remark are the latest variations on a theme which now stretches back for decades and which suggests more than coincidence. Some years ago, graduates of the College who were pursuing advanced work at Stanford were said by administrators to be impressive for

their unique and recognizable intellectual style. This showed itself most typically as a habit of phrasing and then revising questions and attempted answers, a habit that sometimes extended to offering, helpfully if not always endearingly, to rephrase the questions and statements of their elders.²

More recently, the president of another university told me that "Chicago graduates have a cutting edge and clarity that is distinct, full value, and sometimes uncomfortably direct."

There is more evidence in the same vein, although it, too, is anecdotal and perhaps subject to some discount. Nonetheless, assume for the moment that the quoted witnesses are on to something. What could account for a "unique and recognizable intellectual style" which meets the most demanding standards of rigor? The Dean of the College has rightly dismissed one possible explanation—"the raw numbers of required elementary courses we demand of our students."³ Hard work and lots of it does not necessarily produce a cast of mind, because the work could consist simply of memorization or the acquisition of data or the absorption of the views of others.

Obviously, the content of the curriculum is more important than its gross tonnage. So is the "Chicago style" the product of an ingenious curricular design? Some would like to believe that, but as my late colleague Phil Kurland liked to say, in his own direct style, "simple solutions appeal only to the simple-minded." Our curriculum is actually a succession of rather different structures spanning the last seventy years—from the "New Plan" in the 1930s, to the Hutchins College of the 1940s, to the divisionally controlled College of the 1950s and 1960s, to the unified College curriculum of 1985 and its recent adjustments. General education has comprised 25 percent or 100 percent or 50 percent or 40 percent of an undergraduate's degree work here since 1929. The current curriculum, which was adopted by the faculty two years ago but which takes effect on your first day of classes, allocates your time among general education, electives, and your concentration almost equally.

I will have more to say about the theory underlying that structure in a few minutes, but for the moment, notice that the college curriculum has changed its structure radically over time. In every case, the changes have been fiercely contested. Indeed, the Hutchins College came into being only after a bitter fight and charges that the fundamental governance structure of the University had been manipulated in order to achieve the victory, which was secured by only one vote—that of the presiding officer, President Hutchins.⁴ By contrast, curricular changes in the last two decades have proceeded on the basis of due deliberation, passed overwhelmingly, and adhered strictly to Roberts Rules of Order.

For many, the curriculum enjoys a mythic quality. But there are two myths apparently enjoying some lingering credence that must be corrected once and for all.

Myth One: The general education curriculum is based on the “Great Books.” Several members of the faculty proposed in 1937 that the College curriculum be comprised solely of so-called great books, but the faculty rejected the proposal, so the losers decamped to Annapolis, Maryland, where they imposed their design on St. John’s College. Our general education curriculum is built on original texts and fundamental questions, but it spans disciplines and genres. The goal is to pursue ideas, not to master specific tomes. (Here, I should add a parenthetical note about the Great Books. I am not hostile to the Great Books; indeed, I am a member of the board of directors of the Great Books Foundation. I think, however, that the pure Great Books curriculum fails, both as a full realization of liberal education and as a vehicle for improving society. Robert Maynard Hutchins thought that assiduous reading of the works approved by his compatriot, Mortimer Adler, would reveal truth and produce a “higher degree of social consensus.” But as my colleague James Redfield, a loyal product of the Hutchins College, wrote several years ago: “[Hutchins] could think this only because his mind was working, not on the books, but on the interpretation of them; at his table one sat down with Plato and Kant, but one got up with Adler.”)⁵

Now, Myth Two: All wisdom resides in Hyde Park. Until recently, concentration programs were structured such that junior years or terms abroad were barely feasible. There was an unspoken assumption among many of my colleagues that your I.Q. would drop fifty points if you left the neighborhood for educational purposes. That attitude is thankfully now obsolete. Our overseas programs are flourishing, especially our civilization sequences. The Core outside area code 773—a heresy until recently. (In fact, that has almost always been true to a limited extent. For example, no matter how ingenious our offerings may be in the natural sciences, you may be exempt from them if you satisfy established advanced-placement or other proficiency standards. In other words, you may have already satisfied part of your general education requirements, without even knowing it, at Lyons Township High School in La Grange, Illinois, or St. Agnes Academy in Houston, Texas.) The larger point is that our curriculum at some levels is a set of compromises between intellectual judgments and institutional imperatives. We may be confident and insistent, but we are not wholly impractical.

So much for lingering mythology. The heart of what we do here and what in my view accounts for whatever distinctive results we may enjoy has less to do with the number of courses or the precise configuration of subject matter than with the premises and standards of deliberation that inform our enterprise.

The fundamental goals of general education here were best expressed by Ronald Crane, who taught English, in 1931:

[F]orming or developing what may be called basic intellectual habits—basic in the sense of being fundamental to all more advanced and specialized intellectual effort whether within the University or without. The ability to see problems, to define terms accurately and clearly, to analyze a question into its significant elements, to become aware of general assumptions and preconceptions upon which one’s own thinking and that of others rests, to make relevant and useful distinctions, to weigh probabilities, to organize the results of one’s own reflections and research, to read a book of whatever sort reflectively, analytically, critically, to write one’s native language with clarity and distinction—the development of these powers ... would seem to me to be no less the business of “General Education” than the communication and testing of knowledge, and I am not sure that they are not, in the long run, the most important and valuable fruits of a well-considered “General Education.”⁶

In other words, Crane believed rightly that general education should be designed to establish an intellectual foundation in which skills and habits of mind were developed and honed. What we call the Core should encourage, by example and by practice, a cast of mind that is reflexively measured and deliberate, which weighs and responds rather than dogmatically proclaims.

“Example and practice” are essential components of the learning process which aims for Crane’s results. But allow me to raise a caution flag. Charles Wegener, who has thought as hard as anyone in the University about what we are doing, has remarked, “It may be that all such teaching—from fly-fishing to laboratory science—amounts in the end merely to saying, ‘Watch me; do what I do, and I promise you something interesting will happen.’”⁷ The intertwined problem should be obvious, and is captured in the title of an essay on the art of teaching by our most famous fly-fisherman, Norman Maclean: “This Quarter I Am Taking McKeon.”⁸ When subject matter is reduced in the mind of the student to the intellectual style of an individual instructor, be it Richard McKeon or even Norman Maclean, the process of reflection has broken down. Or, as Wegener more elegantly puts it: “[M]ere imitation runs the serious risk of confusing the character of the activity with the way in which it is carried on by a particular person or persons—even, perhaps, a school or a tradition, whether of fly-fishing or physics.”⁹

One neat solution to the problem was suggested several years ago by Grant Gilmore, the great commercial law teacher: “Great teachers should be taken out and shot at sunrise.” There are solutions with lower transaction costs, of course. Indeed, the cure is to be reflective not only about substance but also about method. If you recognize that you are doing ne type of literary analysis, you will simultaneously recognize that you have not exhausted the possibilities of the genre. That realization logically raises the possibility of other approaches. Anyone who insists that they have a corner on the ideal, in fly-fishing or in literary analysis, should be subjected to thoughtful skepticism, if not to Gilmore’s brutal dictate. Our obsessions here, especially in recent years, with core curricula have tended to obscure an earlier emphasis of general education, an emphasis loosely referred to as the “liberal arts.” The term has been so abused in popular discourse that its principal function today is to distinguish what expensive American colleges and universities do from what technical or professional institutions do. The condescending implication of the usage seems to be irresistible to those in colleges and universities, at least until the question of vocation rears its ugly head. It is nonetheless worth considering for a minute what the liberal arts historically were meant to stand for and what relation they bear to the goals of general education that I have sketched.

Without quibbling too much over the difference between liberal arts and liberal education,¹⁰ let me say that their ambition is liberation, that is, at least initially, to free men and women from dogma, comfortable choices, hasty conclusions, the confusion of sincerity for cogency, and all of the other features of slack thinking. But that is only the beginning. Habits of mind are in play whether you are reading ESPN—The Magazine or St. Augustine’s Confessions. The value of the College is that you are encouraged to apply your capacities of mind to the most fundamental aspects of your life. As Charles Wegener has written: “[T]he liberal arts ... are products of reflection upon activities in which we are already engaged. They are, to put it very directly, attempts to give some account of what we are doing and what we have done.”¹¹ So, when Plato asks “What is justice?” or Kant asks “What can I know?” the inquiry resonates in all of us. The process of refining the question and developing the answer then unites the development of both habits of mind and their application to urgent questions that frame our entire lives. “Human beings,” wrote Michael Oakeshott, “are what they understand themselves to be; they are composed entirely of beliefs about themselves and about the world they inhabit.”¹² The function of education is to inform and discipline those beliefs. If, working together, we are successful, we will have initiated a process which carries past your baccalaureate convocation and which provides you with an intellectual apparatus for engaging your world. “What we are trying to do is never exhausted by what we actually do.”¹³ Speaking for myself, I can imagine no larger achievement than providing the means for an individual mind to interpret its own humanity in the world that it inherits.¹⁴

My brisk catalog of the components of liberal education, at least as I conceive of how it is practiced here, obviously lacks one very important factor, which might be called moral education. The topic is both so vast and so grave that under the circumstances I must deal with

it quickly and somewhat facetiously. Secular institutions do not enjoy a comparative advantage in providing comprehensive moral education. In fact, the only academic curriculum of which I am aware, excluding church-controlled institutions, which addresses the issue directly was proposed, unsuccessfully, by dissenters to the “program” at St. John’s. One tutor who escaped the Holocaust and thus felt the urgency for a syllabus of both moral and intellectual strenuousness, suggested this regimen:

In the first year, students would read the Bible—both Old and New Testaments—and there would be daily beatings. In the second year, to demonstrate the limits of the human intellect, students would read Kant. In the third year, to show the human intellect gone astray, the text would be Hegel. In the final year, students would re-read the Bible, but there would be no beatings.

The curriculum obviously displays both coherence and risk, but none can doubt its integrity. I suspect it would be a non-starter here, although after five years at ground zero of curricular debates, I no longer make predictions on the issue.

Spirituality is not part of our curriculum in a prescriptive sense, nor is there a party line on public questions involving moral issues—although individual instructors certainly hold their own views. Everyone in the community, however, is committed to scholarly integrity and to intellectual honesty. Without fastidious treatment of sources and honest treatment of each other’s positions, everything I say this afternoon would be a pious fraud. To say more on this point would insult your intelligence and the character that has brought you here.

So far, I have focused exclusively on general education, because that is the realm you will encounter first and because, as the Chief Justice lightly pointed out to Rachael, the Core has been “in the news.” If you play your cards right, however, you will be finished with your general education requirements in two years, and you must elect your concentration and decide how to utilize your electives. I have less to say on these portions of your education, because they must seem achingly remote at this point and because their variety defies meaningful general treatment. In fact, the most I can confidently say at this point is this: Based on experience, at least 10 percent of you will concentrate in economics, 30 percent of you will at least begin as pre-med students, and 40 percent of you will change your concentration at least once.

The comparative advantage of a college located in a research university is both virtue and vice to the undergraduate. On the one hand, you can move immediately from general education and the introduction to disciplines to pre-professional and in some cases even graduate-level professional work. What could be more heady than advancing from the edge of a field to working with those men and women who are redefining it? The cultural racing change can be jarring—from generalist to mini-graduate student with the stroke of a pencil declaring what

other colleges call a major. The risk is that you will consume the last two years of college absorbed exclusively in your concentration and even using electives as quasi-concentration courses to bulk up your portfolio.

At the risk of excommunication by my more professionally oriented colleagues, allow me to plant this thought in your mind for gestation in the fullness of time: no matter how consuming your concentration, approximately one-third of your course work here can be devoted to what are locally called “free electives.” Some of you will spend advanced placement credit on your electives, perhaps to accelerate your graduation. Unless financially compelled, I think that would be a mistake. Electives are an opportunity to indulge the impulses of a dilettante without succumbing to the standards of a dilettante.

Put in different terms, which perhaps make the enterprise more worthy and reasonable, electives are an occasion to tailor your education to the person, in the exercise of growing maturity and responsibility, who you are choosing to become. “A human life is composed of performances,” Oakeshott observed, “and each performance is a disclosure of a man’s beliefs about himself and the world and an exploit of self-enactment. He is what he becomes; he has a history but no ‘nature’... Human beings pursue satisfactions which they believe to be desirable, but human conduct is not the flowering of settled potentiality.”¹⁵ Remember the challenge at the end of Milton’s *Paradise Lost*? “The world was all before them, where to choose / Their place of rest, and providence their guide: / They hand in hand with wandering steps and slow, / Through Eden took their solitary way.”¹⁶

The elective provides the means for you to exercise self-definition, to develop taste and discernment if not authority, and to shape a life’s attention. In vulgar terms this will be, for most of you, the last chance to receive expert tuition in what may be yearning curiosities or perhaps even the source of sustained leisure enjoyment from now until rigor mortis sets in. In many respects, the free elective provides a tailor-made liberal education in the second phase here of your undergraduate career and allows you to prevent your education from becoming another brick in your own wall.

What unites general education, specialized education, and what I have just re-cast as another form of liberal education is that all involve, indeed, consist of, acts of interpretation. The world does not come pre-packaged in units labeled “declining biodiversity,” or “displaced aggression,” or “Pareto-optimality.” Describing, labeling, and measuring are all social acts committed with a deliberate purpose. The skills I referred to earlier provide the techniques for disciplining claims about what we observe. Those claims form the bases for interpretations, which generate arguments. If arguments are developed with care and discipline, then responsible judgments are possible. “Education,” my colleague Jonathan Z. Smith says with italic emphasis, “is argument about interpretations.”¹⁷ Whether you are patiently developing an argument in the classroom or preparing the three-to-five-page essays which are central to the

Hum and Soc cores, you are making a claim, identifying a thesis, substantiating your positions, anticipating counterarguments, in short, offering—with energy and enthusiasm, I hope—your “take” on a problem deserving serious and sustained attention. Argument disciplined by these simple protocols is the life-blood of what we do.

Arguments here take place in an atmosphere variously described as “bracing,”¹⁸ intense, or some other intimidating adjective. There is some truth to the refrain; our penchant for self-mythologizing is also in play. The terminology and protocols of debate are different from many academic institutions, beginning with the category you have unwittingly fallen into: you are first-year students, not freshmen. This is not an accommodation to political correctness; the terminology pre-dates the feminist revolution. (I have always thought it was a concession to what I hope is a vestige of the past—the implication that there might be fifth-, sixth-, seventh-year students, and so on. In all likelihood, the terms became fixed during the period when President Hutchins was trying to figure out whether higher education should begin with the eleventh or thirteenth grade.¹⁹) The most immediate tic of etiquette of which you should be aware is that professors are not called professors: they are referred to as “Mister,” “Mrs.,” or “Ms.” The point is that good manners require decorum, not honorifics. (This is true everywhere, as far as I can tell, except in the Law School, and word apparently has not reached that distant shore.)

Once you know who you are and what to call your instructor, you are ready for what Hutchins insisted on calling the “great conversation” to begin. I will not tell you how to negotiate your classes. Nonetheless, I can give you one inside tip: if you are stuck at the outset in the face of what seems to be a tenable but dubious claim, your reply should be, “But what’s your evidence?” No rejoinder is more time-honored. It is the ultimate trump card, but it is most effective against the impetuous antagonist whose cart of convictions has gotten ahead of the horses of proof. If you decide to use the rejoinder, you need not raise your voice or employ any other histrionics: a good argument is its own amplification, and vehemence would be gratuitous and bad form.

Nor should you hesitate to raise fundamental questions. My colleague Rick Shweder even suggested on this occasion several years ago that you begin right away by arguing in your houses today that the Aims of Education Address “is nothing more than an arbitrary imposition of values by some power elite bent on preserving its privileges.”²⁰ You may think that I am joking, but I am not (nor, I suspect, was Rick). If there is a cardinal feature of the ethos of our community, it is that no idea is off limits. David Daiches, the British literary critic, remarked that he was startled when he arrived on campus in the late 1930s that every feature of the educational program was being contested: “In Oxford it would have been bad taste to ask such fundamental questions, [but] in Chicago nothing was assumed, all questions were asked point blank, and you were not allowed to get away with a perfunctory answer.”²¹

The attitude carries over, if anything with greater force, to intellectual claims about basic questions. Conventional wisdom is difficult to sustain if it is subject to chronic revalidation. In many social contexts, such incessant re-examination and “point-blank” debate would produce a cultural implosion. To the extent that we are largely free from that doleful feature that pervades so much of the academy, I think the reason is what might be called the “Godfather Morality.” You may remember Sal Tessio’s request to Tom Hagen as he was being taken away to pay the ultimate penalty for betraying the Corleones: “Tell Mike is wasn’t personal, it was business.”²² So with argument here. Visitors from other institutions are struck by how little personal by-play transpires among colleagues here. In another place where I have taught, the ice-breaking question between colleagues was, “How ’bout those Redskins?” Anyone here who asks, “How ’bout those Bears?” would draw a blank stare, on principle, let alone on the merits. One final tip: if you are absolutely struck dumb during office hours with an instructor, ask, “What are you working on?” The question is the social equivalent of “What’s your evidence?” during an argument. It, too, is time-honored, reflexively respected, but, for obvious reasons, it cannot be over-used.

No ethos can be captured in a snapshot or reduced to a signal incident, although every time I think of the themes we have explored today I think of a conversation several years ago at an annual event held at this time of year—the Transfer Students’ Dinner (this year a luncheon). Every year, we enroll 100 or so transfer students from colleges and universities throughout the country. At our table, I was paired with the late Roger Weiss, who taught for many years in the Social Sciences Division and who seemed to embody the University’s uncompromising commitment to intellectual standards and direct argument. Seated with us was a young man who was leaving a well-known eastern university after two years. He was bright, voluble, and eager to establish a rapport with faculty in his new digs—although that is not necessarily the point of the dinner. In any event, at one point Roger asked the man why he had transferred. The student delivered an extraordinarily revealing answer—one that immediately forced us to be confidantes as well as colleagues: “My philosophy teacher,” he said. “He’s also the president of the university, you know, and a real bully.” I wanted to stop the story, for neither detail nor tone held promise, but the student forged ahead. “So one day in class, a dude asks a question, and you know what the professor says? You won’t believe it, but he said: ‘That is a stupid question which confirms that you have understood nothing today or all term.’ ” Our new colleague looked at both Roger and me, inviting if not begging for confirmation of his revulsion at the instructor’s shocking behavior. I think in retrospect that the moment lasted only three or four seconds, but it seemed like minutes. I saw a social disaster gaping before me: the student sought solace or bonding or some other form of social intimacy. Unfortunately, he had mis-read his audience. Roger Weiss pulled himself up, somewhat more archly than necessary, and replied thoughtfully: “Well, was it a stupid question?”

If we—teacher and student—collectively do our jobs properly, in four years you will develop the taste to ask Roger’s question, to have a firm foundation upon which to measure the answer, and to cherish an unremitting passion for the conversation.

Good luck and Godspeed.

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1. Compare Jonathan Z. Smith, “The Aims of Education [1982],” in John W. Boyer (ed.), *The Aims of Education* (Chicago: The University of Chicago, 1997), p. 230 (cited below as *Aims*).
 2. F. Champion Ward, “Requiem for the Hutchins College,” in John J. Macaloon (ed.), *General Education in the Social Sciences: Centennial Reflections on the College of the University of Chicago* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1992), pp. 77, 87.
 3. John W. Boyer, *Three Views of Continuity and Change at the University of Chicago* (Chicago: The University of Chicago, 1999), p. 75.
 4. William H. McNeill, *Hutchins’ University: A Memoir of the University of Chicago, 1929–1950* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1991), p. 116 (cited below as “McNeill”). For another treatment of Hutchins and the College curriculum, see Edward Shils, “Robert Maynard Hutchins,” in Joseph Epstein (ed.), *Portraits: A Gallery of Intellectuals* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1997), pp. 124, 132–36.
 5. James Redfield, “Midway Dialogue: Robert Maynard Hutchins and His University,” review of Harry S. Ashmore, *Unseasonable Truths: The Life and Times of Robert Maynard Hutchins*, in *Change*, May/June 1990, pp. 48, 50–51.
 6. Quoted in Boyer, note 3 *supra*, at p. 52.
 7. Charles Wegener, *Liberal Education and the Modern University* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1978), p. 93 (cited below as “Wegener”).
 8. Norman Maclean, “ ‘This Quarter I Am Taking McKeon’: A Few Remarks on the Art of Teaching,” in Ron McFarland and Hugh Nichols (eds.), *American Authors Series: Norman Maclean* (Lewiston, Idaho: Confluence Press), 1988, p. 57.
 9. Wegener, p. 93.
 10. Compare Leon R. Kass [1981], “The Aims of Liberal Education,” in *Aims*, pp. 81, 86.
 11. Wegener, p. 92.
 12. Michael Oakeshott, “Education: The Engagement and Its Frustration,” in Timothy Fuller (ed.), *The Voice of Liberal Learning: Michael Oakeshott on Education* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1989), pp. 63, 64 (cited below as “Oakeshott”).

13. Wegener, p. 64.

14. Compare Wegener, p. 95: “The problem of liberal education is to institutionalize those intellectual circumstances under which it is maximally probable that the reflective moment of intellectual activity will serve the purpose of permanently transforming the relationship of an individual mind to the intellectual world so that persons may become freely functioning participants in intellectual activity and autonomous members of the intellectual community.”

15. Oakeshott, p. 64.

16. Book XII, ll. 647–50.

17. Smith, note 1 *supra*, at p. 226.

18. Hanna H. Gray [1987] in *Aims*, p. 63.

19. See Boyer, note 3 *supra*, at pp. 47–58, 67.

20. Richard A. Shweder [1993], “Fundamentalism for Highbrows,” in *Aims*, pp. 191, 212.

21. McNeill at p. 88.

22. The line is rendered in the novel as, “Tell Mike it was business, I always liked him.” Mario Puzo, *The Godfather* (New York: G. P. Putnam’s Sons, 1969), p. 434.