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Students! Welcome to the University of Chicago. I am happy you are here, for you are a vital part of the life of the University. The University of Chicago is one of the great research universities in the world. Indeed, if one wrote a history of great institutions of advanced thinking and teaching, from Plato's Academy to the present, the University of Chicago would have to be in that account. There is no place I would rather be. The buildings are, of course, magnificent: not just the imposing grey stone and gothic architecture, but the somewhat dilapidated corridors and comfy cafes. The library is almost magical: you wish for a book and—poof!—it is in your hands. The administration is saavy and committed: it wants faculty and students to flourish. The lake is sublime: if you leave this chapel and take a left and walk straight out to the lake, then take another left and start walking northward towards the city center, you will find yourself walking a fine line between the sublime and the beautiful. On your right is this overwhelming lake, it is almost as long as England. Its colors—and thus its moods—change with the hours.

But then straight ahead and on your left is the beauty of human creativity: the Chicago skyline is a museum of modern architecture. And in terms of the human, there is great music, great theater, great art, great coffee and great food, to be found all around us. We also live in Hyde Park, a wonderfully racially mixed neighborhood, full of unique vitality. Obviously, there have been problems, reflecting the national—and world historical—blight that has been racism, and problems remain. That said, this is a real neighborhood. It is a place where people of all sorts of different backgrounds cherish being neighbors with each other. Living in this neighborhood one can learn a deeper meaning of civility. It is not, I think, an accident that the first African American President of the United States comes from our neighborhood. All of this adds significantly to the joy of being here, but it is not what makes the University great.

It is actually easy to say what does make this University great: conversation. In this community we not only have some of the best minds in the world—leading experts in virtually every field of inquiry—but we also value talking things out with each other. There is a shared understanding that if, in this brief time we are alive, we are going to figure out anything genuinely worthwhile, it will be through conversation. Each of our individual ideas needs to be tested against the countervailing thoughts of others; but even more important, it is the imagination of others that sparks our own. When I write an essay, the first dozen people I want to try it out on are colleagues here at the University. And by colleagues, I do not just mean

fellow faculty members: I am indebted to the students I have worked with and have learned from their comments and criticism. The conversation transcends departments, divisions, and schools. And it is utterly egalitarian in this sense: it does not matter what your age is, what your rank is, or where you have come from; all that matters is whether you can join a conversation that is trying to think out loud. This does not mean that anything goes, or that an idea is special just because you are. Learning how to think takes hard work, practice and patience. But it does mean that no idea is beyond question. Even the issue of how to think well is open to debate.

Enduring conversations about how things are—and how they might be—are as vulnerable as they are precious. I have seen universities where there are great minds but no conversation. This seems to me a living form of death, a university only in name. And once a conversation dies, it is all but impossible to get it started again: people go their own ways, pursuing their individual careers, and the whole becomes less than the sum of its parts. Even worse, I have witnessed conversations where there is pressure to conform to a particular point of view, as though right thinking requires agreement with current fashion. In the not-too-distant future, you will be sitting in a classroom, or on a student committee; you will hear the group coming to a consensus that you think is mistaken, and you will feel internal pressure to keep quiet. It is natural that you should feel this; the question is how you will act on it. Be warned: It is from such seemingly small moments that cowards are born. Plato, Aristotle and my wife, Professor Gabriel Lear, have taught me that one excellent reason for not acting in a cowardly way is that if you do so, you are likely to become a coward. From such moments character is built. (Similarly, one excellent reason not to cheat is that, if you do cheat, you are likely to become a cheater.)

I said earlier that you are a vital part of the life of the University. We can now see what that means: you play a crucial role in keeping this precious conversation alive. One might at first think: Why should a great research university have an undergraduate college at all? Why not let great minds do their research unencumbered by teaching? And why not let undergraduates be taught by teachers who may not be that good at research, but are good at explaining the accumulated wisdom of the ages?

The University of Chicago is committed in its very being to the thought that such a partition does not ultimately work. Professors need to be brought back to the open, questioning minds of those who do not yet know what we purportedly do know. We need to be able to explain ourselves. You have a way of keeping us honest and open, of reminding us of what we do and do not know. It is, quite literally, refreshing. I am going to be teaching in the Human Being and Citizen core this quarter, and I expect to learn from my students and revise my opinions about what is involved in being a human being and a citizen. I expect some of you will teach me to read a passage differently in books that I have read and re-read throughout my adult life. Conversely, a great undergraduate teacher is someone who not only has a love for the accumulated attempts of human beings to figure out what is true or to grasp something

beautiful, but also has a healthy suspicion of anything that tries to pass itself off as “accumulated wisdom”. The healthiest form of suspicion is to be found in the active researcher, who has a lively sense of how much she or he does not know. Welcoming undergraduates into a great university and having its professors teach at all levels is its own form of truthfulness.

Some of you may feel you have come to just the right place, but others may feel a bit overwhelmed. I would like to offer a word of reassurance. I have been teaching for decades, and all that time I have been looking for a special student I have not yet found. That special student is the one who will write a first undergraduate paper that is even worse than the one I wrote when I entered university. I can still vividly remember going to see the professor—believe me, not to complain about the grade, but because he asked to see me. He had the delicacy of an ambulance driver who has just arrived at a bad accident. He just wanted to know: How did this ever happen?! To say that I wrote a very bad paper is to give me too much credit. I don’t think one should call what I wrote a paper. It did not have enough unity for that. You might think this meeting must have been an excruciating embarrassment, but it actually came as a relief—an even greater relief than that dawning moment in tenth grade when I realized, two months into the course, that plane geometry was not a precursor for fancy geometry (whatever that is), but was actually the study of spatial figures on a plane surface. The meeting with the professor was a relief because I did have an inkling that I was lost, and for a professor to recognize that I was lost helped me to get my bearings. At last I knew where I was: I was lost! The professor gave me this advice: When you write a paper, do not write what you think you are supposed to write. Instead, read the book and take time to think about it. If you are asked a question, think about what the question is really asking and then try to answer it as clearly as you can. This simple advice has helped me ever since.

By the way, if you think professors are assigning too much reading for you to take the time to think, you should say something about it. Talk to your professor or bring it up as an issue in class. This is important. One way a conversation dies at a university is if professors assign too much reading. Students then feel the need to skim or grab clichés off the internet and, instead of a real conversation, students and faculty trade slogans. Everyone can say they have read the books when in fact no one has. On Saturday Night Live, there used to be a character, Father Guido Sarducci, who offered to teach you everything you would learn at college—and remember five years later. Tuition was 20 bucks, money-back guaranteed. I suppose with Plato’s Republic one might remember it had something to do with a cave. The reason I teach that book in a course that is entirely devoted to it—taking up an entire quarter—is that I do not think you can even be introduced to the book, you certainly cannot read it, unless you are willing to devote that kind of time and thinking to it. I want every course I teach to be one where Father Sarducci would have to refund the money he charged—not because you have remembered lots of facts, but because you have learned how to read. He could never teach that.

When Dean Boyer invited me to give this Aims of Education Address, my first thought was suspicious: what is the *s* doing in the title? Why isn't there a single aim that education has? Obviously, there are many things we are trying to do here at the University, and many values we can articulate. But is there not also one overarching aim—that encompasses these diverse projects and ideals, that is the aim of education? And if there is one *s*, why aren't there two: the aims of educations? If there is not one overarching aim, why think there is a single activity—education—as opposed to a plurality of educations, each fulfilling its own aim? The University would then be a kind of holding company—perhaps a physical location where all these different educations happen to occur. I was suspicious that the *s* might be covering over laziness. After all, if there is nothing more to say than that there are multiple aims, then year after year a speaker can get up and talk about an aim of education without any sense that he or she might be in conflict with past or future speakers, without any sense that there is a problem that still needs to be worked out. The assumption would be that people are simply speaking about different aims.

I wrote to the Dean, who is a distinguished historian of this institution, to ask if he knew how this annual lecture acquired its title. His answer is too long to recount! But the title goes back to a lecture that the philosopher and mathematician Albert North Whitehead delivered to the British Mathematical Association as his Presidential Address in 1916. When I read Whitehead's lecture this summer, I became convinced that he gave it the wrong title for there is only one aim that he puts forward. Whitehead is aware that he is speaking in the midst of World War I which he calls a “crisis in European civilization”. But even more than the threat of German guns, he is worried about the effect of teachers on the next generation. Here is a quote from his address that still ring true:

Culture is activity of thought, and receptiveness to beauty and humane feeling. Scraps of information have nothing to do with it. A merely well-informed man is the most useless bore on God's earth. ... In training a child to activity of thought, above all things we must beware of what I will call “inert ideas”—that is to say, ideas that are merely received into the mind without being utilized, or tested, or thrown into fresh combinations. In the history of education, the most striking phenomenon is that schools of learning, which at one epoch are alive with a ferment of genius, in a succeeding generation exhibit merely pedantry and routine. The reason is that they are overladen with inert ideas. Education with inert ideas is not only useless: it is above all things harmful. ... The solution which I am urging is to eradicate the fatal disconnection of subjects which kills the vitality of our modern curriculum. There is only one subject-matter for education, and that is Life in all its manifestations.

Our curriculum is in much better shape than the one Whitehead deplored. But the way I would put the basic point he is making is this: the aim of education is to teach us how to be students.

By student I do not mean a member of the socially recognized category: those people, like yourselves, who are enrolled in a social institution, a school or university. Rather, a student in the deeper sense is a category of human being. A student in this deeper sense is a person committed to holding him- or herself open to the lessons the world has to teach. To put it mildly, this is not as easy as it might at first sound. For “holding oneself open” is not some vague good feeling about being in the world. It regularly requires enormous hard work and self-discipline: rigorously adhering to methods of inquiry that the world has taught us is the way to ask it questions; sometimes it requires us to question and re-think those very methods of inquiry; and sometimes we are required to adjust the way we see the world and to adjust the way we live. On occasion that is painful: we are forced to recognize that beliefs that matter to us are unjustified; indeed, that we have held them through some combination of complacency, arrogance and prejudice. By “the world” I do not mean just learning from nature but also from other people living in the world, along with their creations. There is no end to the process of forming ourselves into people who are genuinely open to what the world has to teach us. Becoming a student in this deeper sense is a life-task. Part of what it is to be a student is to be forever in the process of becoming one.

It seems to me that this is the form that human flourishing takes— though it has infinite variations. For it is given to us in our very nature that we are not gods. We are not omnipotent beings nor are we omniscient. It is built into our situation that we inhabit an environment upon which we depend for our very existence—and certainly for our happiness— but over which we have limited control and imperfect understanding. This is not just a fact that happens to be true of us it is the structure of our very being. Some of our vulnerabilities are obvious: individually, we might get hurt or injured, our loved ones may die, and at some point each of us is going to die; collectively, we might starve, be wiped out or wipe each other out. Other vulnerabilities are harder to spot, but just as important: great scientific and social revolutions have taught us, through painful disruptions, that the very concepts with which we think may break down as we attempt to understand ourselves and the world. To be or become a student is basically to say hooray! to all of that. It is to embrace our inevitably limited, vulnerable condition by committing ourselves to being open to learning what we do not yet understand. And that includes revising the concepts with which we try to understand.

Thus being a student manifests astonishing hopefulness. In my writing I have called it radical hope because, unlike ordinary cases, we cannot say in any detail what we are hoping for. And we need not be selfconsciously hoping for anything. But the hope is there, manifest in the very activity of reaching out to the world to try to understand it. To put it in broad, if somewhat enigmatic, terms: In trying to understand the world we inhabit, we manifest the hope that the world will show itself to be intelligible to the best efforts of finite, fallible creatures like ourselves. Why, after all, should the world be intelligible to the human mind? Why, when we inquire, do things start to hang together in intelligible wholes, rather than falling apart into a disparate, incomprehensible mess? And why, when things do not hang together, do we keep

looking for ways they might? One could teach a course in the history of philosophy organized around the different attempts to answer these questions. I still have not found answers I find satisfying.

So in all seriousness I can say that if you make really good use of your time here at the University and if we do a really good job of educating you, by the time you graduate you will be ready to become a student. We will try to help you develop into a person who is good at examining and learning from the world, other people, and your own experience. That is the aim of education.

Being a student in this deeper sense is, I think, to inhabit the realm of human freedom and human happiness. Anything else that puts itself forward as a candidate—wealth or pleasure, power or recognition and honor—either gets its plausibility because it can be integrated into a life that is genuinely holding itself open and in so doing provides an added bloom to that life, or it is a false appearance. It is one thing to incorporate these goods into a life that is holding itself open to learning, but it is a true disaster to give up a life of learning in order to obtain one of these other purported goods. I am not saying anything about social professions. There are infinite ways one can hold oneself open in life. One can be a student in this deeper sense while occupying all manner of social roles; conversely, one can occupy the social role of student (or teacher) and be dead as a doornail.

Let me put in a word for the humanities. My education is primarily in philosophy which is a humanities discipline. If I were a scientist or a social scientist, I would be giving a different lecture. What fills me with admiration for scientists and social scientists is the way they are able to ask bold questions while at the same time holding themselves to strict and widely agreed-upon norms of inquiry. Of course, one can argue about the norms—that too is part of the conversation. And sometimes agreed-upon norms are disturbed or even overturned. But to be someone who can direct her inquiries into nature (or human nature) and all the while constrain herself to strict norms of inquiry that not only the scientific community but she herself endorses: that is a truly remarkable answer to the question, What is it to be a student of nature? And it shows that scientist is an ethical category: for one is freely choosing to live according to strict norms of inquiry in community with other scientists and as a member of the larger social world.

But when it comes to the humanities, what entrances me is their ability to open up the deepest questions where we had previously thought everything was obvious. For example, being a student: there really is no bottom to the question, What is it to be a person who can hold himself open to what can be learned from the world? Even after we have measured everything we can measure in nature and in the human world, there are still going to be questions: What is it to hold oneself open? What is it to be a person? What is it to learn something? What do we mean by “the world”: is the world another thing? And if not, what is it? To let the humanities

enter your soul is to realize that these are not just theoretical questions, from which one can stand back and inquire in a disinterested way. The questions have not really been heard unless they start to strike you in the first person and demand from you answers that consist not just in papers you write, but in practical decisions about how you are going to live. In trying to figure out what it is to hold oneself open, one is naturally led to study the myriad attempts humans have made over time to open themselves to the world's lessons. I take it that many of the great works of literature, history and the visual arts are inquiries into what such openness ultimately is. But these great works have not reached their target unless for some I, it grabs me. Not just as an item of aesthetic interest, but as a confrontation with the way I live.

I would not need to be telling you all this if there were not something in our character that pulls us away from becoming a student. In the very first line of the *Metaphysics*, Aristotle says, "All humans by their nature desire to understand."<sup>1</sup> But history has taught us that we human beings also have a desire not to know. In peculiar but characteristic ways, we are motivated to hold onto our ignorance— though that is never how it seems to us at the time. It marks us as human that we both desire to know and are motivated not to know. In December 1784, the philosopher Immanuel Kant published in the *Berlinische Monatsschrift* "An Answer to the Question: What Is Enlightenment?" As the title suggests, it was a response to a question that had previously been posed in the magazine. The first paragraph is stunning in its confrontation:

Enlightenment is the human being's emergence from his selfimposed immaturity. Immaturity is inability to make use of one's own understanding without direction from another. This immaturity is self-imposed when its cause lies not in lack of understanding but in lack of resolution and courage to use it without direction from another. *Sapere aude!* Have courage to make use of your own understanding!: that is the practical saying of enlightenment.

I find this statement both unignorable and confusing. There are two imperatives: "*Sapere aude!*"—normally translated as "Dare to know!" but it could also be understood as "Have the audacity to understand!"— and "[M]ake use of your own understanding!" But if Kant wants us to think for ourselves, why is he telling us what to do? Why should we take his word for it? Presumably, we need to think for ourselves why it is a good idea to think for ourselves. I think we should hear these imperatives not as orders coming from Kant, but rather as a direct address: Kant wants to "get in our face"—that is what "confront" means—like an insistent beggar who will not let us walk by without facing up to the fact that that is what we are doing. It is not an order; it is a challenge. If Kant is right that it takes resolution and courage to think for yourself, we must be creatures who tend toward childishness. For courage and resoluteness are remarkable human qualities: One does not find them often among humans. We seem to be creatures who want to follow along, to take other people's word for it. This is the immaturity that Kant says is self-imposed—and it is not at all correlated with biological age. He thinks it takes courage and steadfastness to think, to inquire, to come to understand something. Why should that be?

As for why it takes courage, I think the answer is that every time you try to think something through for yourself—no matter how trivial- seeming or obvious—you risk alienating your own community. That is, there is at least a chance that you will come up with a different answer from the settled opinions of your neighbors; and there is also a chance that, instead of honoring you for expanding the scope of our shared understanding, the community will be irritated with you for rocking the boat—and will seek to bully you, ridicule you, ostracize you or worse.

So to understand the courage required for thinking, one must also take a sober look at the lack of courage that is so common in human life. Let us consider what happened to the best student in the history of the world—at least my candidate for that title. He was condemned to death by a majority vote of those fellow citizens who participated on the jury. How could that have happened? It is uncanny for me to be talking to you about Socrates, for I first read Plato's *Apology* when I was your age. Little did I know then that I would be reading this text countless times throughout my life. But when I read it now what sticks out is different than what bothered me then. Back then I was struck by the pathos of the situation: that a majority of jurors would vote for the death of one of the finest human beings who ever lived. What stands out now is that, in an important sense, no one voted for his death.

In the *Apology*, Socrates says that much more formidable than the explicit charges against him are the rumor and slander that people have been hearing about him since childhood.<sup>2</sup> These are rumors that get hold of us in our genuine immaturity, before we are able to examine them. And by the time we are able to examine them, they are already structuring our outlook. As a result, Socrates says that when it comes to his defense, he is forced to “fight with shadows” and to “cross-examine when no one answers”.<sup>3</sup> He gives an account of how these rumors arose— as if a genealogy of falsehood might free the jurors from their haze of prejudice. As a student, he questioned people who claimed to have knowledge—and he repeatedly came up empty. In their injured pride they accused him of “corrupting the youth,” but, Socrates says, “If one asks them what he [Socrates] does and what he teaches to corrupt them, they are silent, as they do not know”.<sup>4</sup> Instead they throw out clichés about philosophers that are patently not true of Socrates. And then Socrates utters a sentence I used to pass over, but now has become the most haunting line of the text: “If you look into this either now or later, this is what you will find”.<sup>5</sup> That is, Socrates tells the jurors that if they will only consider the matter, they will see for themselves that the charges against him are baseless. So if a disagreement does persist, it must be because some are actively refusing to think things through for themselves. In Kant's terms, they are insisting on their immaturity. But children cannot vote. In an important sense, there is no one there making up his mind. Rather, there is only a childish going along with rumors— the “shadows” where “no one answers”. In his cross-examination of Meletus, the person who is officially bringing the charges against him, Socrates shows with devastating clarity that Meletus is only mouthing clichés that he does not understand and cannot defend.



Nor can anyone else. And so Socrates is put to death in spite of the fact that, in an important sense, no one has really made a charge against him (that is, there is no substantial charge) no one really understands what the charge is, no one has any evidence for the charge, and those who are inclined to vote in favor are motivated not to understand the situation which, if they chose, they could easily understand and which they are called upon to judge.

This, I suspect, is what horrified Plato: not Socrates' death per se, but the motivated ignorance that led to it. And what is truly horrifying is the thought that this is not simply a tragic historical moment, but that motivation towards ignorance is pervasive in human life: that it is present in each of us and marks us as human. On reflection, it is not surprising that this should be so. For it goes to the heart of the human condition that none of us is in a position to make up our minds about absolutely everything and we must inevitably rely on the judgment of others, as well as on the accumulated wisdom of society. For some things we must take other people's word for it: and in some respects this is a very good thing, building community and common purpose, as well as extending our knowledge far beyond what any individual could achieve. It is obviously an evolutionary advantage that we share our knowledge. But this also creates a vulnerability: precisely because we rely so heavily on our community to provide an orientation, we often do not know whether what we are relying on really is knowledge or accumulated prejudice and unquestioned assumptions. And, strange as it may seem at first, it makes sense that we should be motivated not to find out the difference: for the whole package of knowledge and assumption provides an orientation to the world on which the community has been relying. It can feel threatening to a whole way of life to question any part of it. The problem is intensified by the fact that society tends to reward people who are good at telling us what we already purportedly know, and we have been selected so as to care about winning society's recognition. Thus there are powerful forces, within us and around us, that motivate us not to question the received wisdom of the moment. Luckily for us, this is not the only motivation we have, but we are motivated to stick with what we purportedly already know.

That is why it takes courage to think. The point is not that everyone around you is a herd animal relying on prejudice and that when you think you will inevitably alienate yourself from the group. Often, when you think you will come to discover for yourself that the received wisdom is indeed wisdom. And on many occasions when you think for yourself you will be honored and rewarded by society. Good things often happen. The point is rather that every time you think you risk the possibility that you are going to come up with an answer that puts you out on a limb, and as you attempt to think again you only end up further out on that limb. That possibility may not actually come to fruition in your life, but it will be there as a possibility every time you try to think a problem through.

That is why the conversation at the University of Chicago is so precious. At its best, it is a community that encourages us to be courageous: to think a problem through precisely because it is worth thinking it through. This capacity for thinking also marks us as human, and it is well

worth supporting. I am told that in Lake Wobegon, “all the women are strong, all the men are good-looking, and all the children are above average.” I cannot tell you how happy I am that I live at the edge of a different lake! Our students are certainly not all above average, and I don’t even know what it means to say they—you—are all outstanding. What I hope is that each of you is willing to take on the risk of trying to think something through. That is, each of you is willing to take on the risk of becoming an oddball. Let me be clear: I do not think there is anything valuable about being an oddball as such. It is thinking that matters, as well as living in the light of one’s thinking. The courage Kant is talking about is in recognizing that when you think a problem through it is at least possible you will find yourself on the other side of an established consensus. You can then try to convince others with your reasons: sometimes that will work; other times others will help you to see reasons you have overlooked, reasons that support established opinion. But if thinking does lead us to an unusual position, so be it. This is no more than saying that at the edge of our lake we live in a community where our students are students.

But if you are going to take on this challenge to become a student, you have to take on another: how are you at one and the same time going to think for yourself and submit yourself to the teaching that the University of Chicago has to offer? This is a difficult question: for you both have to make up your own mind about what to learn and whether a proposed course of learning really does help you in your own attempts to develop, and, at least provisionally and up to a point, you have to take other people’s word for what learning consists in. How does one walk this tightrope? This is a question that confronts you directly, and you have only four years to answer it. Speaking for myself, I made poor use of my freedom when I was in college: I used it to avoid educational challenges that would have helped me to grow. And I lacked the maturity to see what I was doing. This time I offer my failure not as consolation, but as a warning. I was lucky enough to be offered a chance to do a second BA degree at a university abroad, and the second time around I made better choices. If I had not had that chance, my life would have taken a significantly different course, and I do not think it would have been for the better. So the decisions you make now do matter, and it is perfectly possible for you to make important bad decisions. I wish there were a way to protect you from this, but the alternatives are even worse.

The obvious alternative is for us teachers to direct your studies even more than we already do. Actually, we are such a contentious lot that it is unlikely we could agree on any such course. But that is for the good. It is a culturally significant fact that when Professor Whitehead gave his Aims of Education Address, he was speaking to teachers, whereas the Aims of Education Address at the University of Chicago is addressed to students. Again, one might at first think that if the lecture really is about the aims of education, it ought to be directed to teachers who themselves need to learn how to teach. But if the aim of education is to teach you how to become and be a student, then I’ve got the better audience. It is constitutive of teaching openness to inquiry that you, the students, should be granted serious conversational

partnership in what that openness consists in. That does not mean that I think your judgment is as good as mine. For many educational issues, I do not think it is. But it does mean that for a wide range of issues neither I nor anyone else has the power to require anything of you: the most we can do is offer our reasons for thinking that a particular course of study is a good or a bad idea. It is up to you to exercise your reason and decide whether the reasons we have given you are good or not. We, of course, may criticize your choices, but again we have to give our reasons, and again you must decide what you think of them. This is what it is to teach openness— or, at least, it is one crucial ingredient—and it is what Kant called enlightenment, the leaving of one’s childish practices behind. But the fact that we teach people to make important, life-shaping decisions by treating them as though they are already capable of make such decisions is a serious business, fraught with dangerous missteps. It is not an accident that the words “dogma” and “dogmatic” have become pejorative terms. The ancient Greek word *dogma* comes from the verb *dokéō* (to seem), and it meant opinion, belief, decision and judgment. It came to mean a received body of principles or a doctrine. I hope you can spend a moment to conjure up the heart-wrenching aspect of our predicament. Dogma in the original sense is the accumulated wisdom of the ages. It is that learning which one generation has to pass on to the next. And no civilization is stronger than the link between generations. If a civilization cannot pass on its wisdom, it is over. If only one could simply pass on the dogma of an age. As it turns out, that is not possible: dogma inevitably becomes dogmatic, and one ends up murdering the learning that one is trying to pass along.

So, the decisions about how to become and be a student are significantly in your hands, though we are here to help. I hope I have said enough to make it clear that Kant was not kidding when he said it took courage. Let me give you three concrete pieces of advice. First, go talk to your professors in their office hours: not to impress them or curry favor, but for conversation about the issues that matter to you. I have found that conversations I had with my professors continue to resonate with me decades later. Second, take risks. I have said that the decisions you make now matter, but you have completely misunderstood me if you conclude that you should be very cautious in the courses you take.

That is a prime example of the bad decision that matters. You should be trying out courses that stretch you, that do not come easily, that open up realms of inquiry that are at the moment closed to you. Above all, do not become a slave to your resumé. That is no way to live. When I sit on an admissions committee I am much more impressed with the student who got lower grades because she stretched herself to take a wide range of challenging courses than with the student who aced a familiar field.

Third, be on guard for moments in our own university life where our conversation is unwittingly disrupted by gossip, rumor and conventional wisdom. This can happen in seemingly small moments. Let me give you an example with which you may well disagree. At the end of every quarter, students are encouraged—I believe by the Dean’s Office—to fill out

an online questionnaire evaluating the courses they have taken and the professors who taught them. I warn my students that filling out that questionnaire is dangerous; they are taking their lives in their hands. It is not that I am opposed to students evaluating teachers; quite the opposite.

And I am also in favor of transparency: that student evaluations should be open for all to consult. But why is this initiative coming from the Dean's Office rather than from you, the students? And why is the Dean's Office responsible for setting up the form of the evaluation—why does it take the form of a questionnaire, rather than some other form? And why aren't you the students deciding what form it should take? My worry is that tacitly—without anyone quite realizing it—you are being taught that you are consumers. It is as though education is a product you can purchase and courses are commodities. Just as I regularly get an online questionnaire from a car rental company or a hotel after I have used their services, so you too can register customer satisfaction or dissatisfaction. I think this misleads you about who you are and what you are doing. To teach you that your relation to education is basically one of consumption is, I think, a grievous misunderstanding.

But don't take my word for it! The important point is not whether you agree with me, but whether you are willing to think for yourselves about what it is to be a student and not simply accept the established routines as already providing the answer. This takes resoluteness, that other term Kant used alongside courage.

What does it mean? I think he is referring to the steadfastness required to think a problem through, the sustained hard work involved in getting things right, rather than settling for a cliché, a hunch or received opinion. And he is also referring to the resolve to revise one's beliefs or even give them up altogether if they cannot stand up to scrutiny. At the beginning of his *History of the Peloponnesian War*—and if you want to know about the human condition, this is one of the best books ever written—Thucydides writes of the effort involved in constructing his narrative. He was not willing to settle for the first accounts he received of an important event or battle; nor was he willing to trust even own impressions. He recognized that even eye witnesses have faulty memories, and their sincere accounts might be skewed because they favored one side or another. So he tested the alternative accounts against each other, subjecting each report to “the most severe and detailed tests possible”. This, Thucydides tells us, was hard work. The result, he says, is not a romantic tale, but an accurate account of what happened for those in the future who would like to know about it. He concludes with a line that, from the perspective of two-and-a-half-thousand years, packs a wallop: “I have written my work, not as an essay which is to win the applause of the moment, but as a possession for all time.” Now that is resoluteness. He is willing to give up on recognition and honor in his own lifetime—he even dismisses it by calling it “the applause of the moment”—because he is committed to the idea that accuracy, getting things right, about this important historical event will have its own enduring power. Was he right about that? I do not think the answer is at all

obvious—in spite of the fact that we are still reading it and learning from it. Again, this is something you need to think about. What is it for something to be a possession for all time?

I am reminded of something the philosopher Bernard Williams wrote close to the end of this life. Williams was my teacher when I first started to study philosophy; later he became my colleague and friend, and we taught seminars together. He was awarded an honorary doctorate here at the University of Chicago. Williams wrote:

Nietzsche ... got it right when he said that once upon a time there was a star in the corner of the universe, and a planet circling that star, and on it some clever creatures who invented knowledge; and then they died and the star went out and it was as though nothing had happened.<sup>6</sup>

What then of Thucydides' aspiration to create a possession for all time? Do we want to say that Thucydides got it wrong: that his book only lasted for a short time, and the universe then went on without it? Or do we want to say that Thucydides' history was a possession for all time, but time itself ran out? These are difficult questions, and I am without an argument or a confident thought on the matter. But I do have an intuition. My intuition is that Thucydides did create a possession for all time. If the universe should come to be a place where that is no longer apparent, then that is a terrible loss for the universe, but Thucydides was on the right track. Think about it: what would it be for the universe to look as though truly great things had happened—the creation of possessions for all time, the creation of beauty, and the discovery of significant truths, as well as the performance of good acts? What would it be for the universe to appear as though these things had happened before it ran out of steam? It would look exactly the same way. As I said, I do not yet have an argument. But, if you are interested, we are lucky enough to be in an institution where we can talk about this over time. So let me close with the words with which I began, though I hope by now they have a deeper resonance: Students! Welcome to the University of Chicago.

1. Aristotle, *Metaphysics* I.980a21.

2. Plato, *Apology* 18b.

3. *Ibid.* 18d.

4. *Ibid.* 23d.

5. *Ibid.* 24a–b.

6. Bernard Williams, *Philosophy As a Humanistic Discipline*, p. 138. The original quote comes from Friedrich Nietzsche, “On Truth and Lies in a Non-Moral sense.”