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**THE FIRST FOUR THOUSAND YEARS (2000 BC – AD 2000)**

Welcome to the University of Chicago! I'm delighted to welcome you all on behalf of the 2,700 teaching and research faculty members, the 10,000 graduate students, and your fellow 5,000 undergraduate students—as well as the 10,000 staff employees in the offices of student counseling, career placement, safety, registrar, attorneys, maintenance, dining services,... and more. You are joining a committed, engaged, and dedicated community of scholars and educators. And (no pressure now) every single one of us is counting on you to succeed.

As John Boyer notes (in “An Introduction to the Annual Lecture or The Aims of Education”), these annual addresses to the incoming first-year class began 50 years ago, during orientation week in 1962, with a presentation by Christian Mackauer, a historian and legendary teacher who embodied the ethos of UChicago's Western Civilization courses for decades, inspiring generations of students. While you might think that 50 years makes for a venerable tradition, you should know that these lectures take their inspiration from the lecture titled “The Aims of Education” given 100 years ago, in 1912, not to students but to educators, at the International Congress of Mathematicians in Cambridge, England, by Alfred North Whitehead. The address quickly crossed the Atlantic Ocean and was published in 1917 in England and again in 1929 in the US along with other essays delivered in England and America on the practical and intellectual goals of education. Whitehead—who spent his career at Cambridge, University College London, and finally Harvard from 1924 until his death in 1947 (but not, alas, UChicago) —wrote extensively on metaphysics, mathematics, the philosophy and history of science, and education. The thesis of the essays collected in the volume titled *The Aims of Education* was simple and still resonates a century later: “The students are alive, and the purpose of education is to stimulate and guide their self-development.” Furthermore—and radically— “... the teachers should be alive with thoughts.” “The whole book” (he wrote in the preface) “is a protest against dead knowledge, that is to say, against inert ideas.”<sup>1</sup> My musings this evening will parse three of the themes from Whitehead's thesis, working backwards: inert ideas; that teachers should be alive with thoughts; and that students should be guided in their journey of self-development.

### “Inert ideas”

I start then with “inert ideas” and “dead knowledge,” defined by Whitehead as “ideas that are merely received into the mind without being utilized, or tested, or thrown into fresh combinations.”<sup>2</sup> I begin here because I might seem to some people an odd choice for someone to talk about “inert ideas” or “dead knowledge.” I am an Assyriologist and lexicographer who has spent most of the last 33 years here at the University of Chicago, in the index-card-filled offices on the third floor of the Oriental Institute, the building immediately north of us sitting here in Rockefeller Chapel, working to complete a 90-year project called the *Chicago Assyrian Dictionary*, an encyclopedic 24 volumes recording the legacy of ancient Mesopotamian civilizations, the Sumerians, Babylonians, and Assyrians: peoples whose records document their civilizations from about 2500 BC until the first centuries of the Common Era; in the countries now known as Iraq, Syria, and Iran. This work might seem to some people the very embodiment of “dead knowledge.” But Whitehead was protesting against studying, teaching, and learning dead *ideas*, not dead *civilizations*. Any topic, including long-vanished languages and cultures—indeed, often and most especially long-vanished and therefore distant and unfamiliar cultures—can be relevant and provide insights into more immediate questions. The ancient Mesopotamians laid the foundations for much of what we take for granted today: they built the first urban centers; forged metals; irrigated and cultivated; domesticated plants and animals; conducted complex trade and diplomacy from China to the Mediterranean Sea; waged wars, built temples and palaces; observed and recorded the movements of the stars and planets, the tides and weather patterns, the fluctuating prices of crops and commodities, and the progression of disease. And we know they did all this because they had the foresight to write it all down on millions of clay tablets (lumps of clay) impressed with cuneiform wedges. They wrote love poetry and letters home from school, treaties and contracts, political propaganda and epics and myths, and lists of trees, foods, gods, fishes, metal objects, reed objects, etc. That is, they strove to capture their world in a way that was retrievable: retrievable in some cases for a few hours, days, or weeks when they wrote letters or grocery lists; for decades or generations when they recorded and witnessed land transfers or wills; for centuries or even millennia when they sought to explain the history of the cosmos, of the gods’ favor or displeasure, of the arc of history.

And they sought to teach what they learned to future generations. In ancient Mesopotamia, by the late third millennium BC (that is, by about 2400 BC), “education” —systematic organization of knowledge along with systematic means of transmitting that knowledge—was a deep and abiding concern of the cultural elites, the bureaucrats, politicians, and businessmen in the large urban centers. Remember (if I may jump ahead a thousand years or so) that the word “education” derives from the Latin *educatio*, “the breeding of young animals, the nurturing of young persons,” and includes the idea not only of providing the young with food and nourishment but also of shaping character. The young in ancient Mesopotamia were *educated*—nourished and shaped (at different times and places, and for different purposes) either at home, in an apprentice system, or (at the earliest periods) in formal schools. The Sumerian term for

“school” is *edubba* (Akkadian *bit tuppī*) literally “house of the tablet” —that is, identifying the medium on which learning was recorded (as if our institution were called “the Reg”). Thus the “school” is that place where students learned by and from writing, and writing not only for mundane purposes but explicitly to record and to transmit cultural legacy and heritage. The curriculum followed was explicitly directed (aimed) at scholarly literacy: the knowledge of the even-then archaic language Sumerian and its esoteric literary and ritual texts. Thousands of school texts excavated in sites in modern Iraq and Syria permit us to reconstruct the school curricula, from elementary education (the ABCs), through advanced mathematical and metrological texts, proverbs, poems, model contract and law cases, and literary compositions: hymns to gods and kings; proverbs, epics and myths; even humorous tales and riddles. These curricula were aimed at preserving the Sumerian language and its complex orthography as a means of preserving knowledge and perpetuating a glorified past.<sup>3</sup>

I cannot say whether all this knowledge was imparted by the Mesopotamian teachers as “inert ideas” (as Whitehead would have termed it) or if the students were encouraged to test the ideas, to recombine them, to challenge them—although frankly the latter seems more unlikely to me given what we know of the conservative nature of Mesopotamian political and cultural efforts. It is less likely that in ancient Mesopotamia, at least, there was the sort of emphasis on educating the whole person—mind, body, and intellect—that we know prevailed in ancient Athens and later in Rome, and which was emulated in Renaissance Italy. Certainly, the centers of higher learning throughout the globe over the last four millennia—the imperial Han dynasty *taixue* of Confucianism and literature in China; the *madrasah* and *masjid* of Islamic legal thought, mathematics, alchemy, and philosophy; the episcopal and monastic academies in Europe in the Middle Ages that gave rise to the institutions we now know as “universities” —have rarely if ever reached so much of the population, imparted so much specialized and general knowledge, had such a profound effect on so much of society as today. For today, universities like the University of Chicago—and truly, there are only very few in this group—stand in a unique position historically, with a unique mission: to create new knowledge: not only to preserve received wisdom, but to test, distill, generate, recombine, and reconceive knowledge, and to transmit knowledge to prepared and receptive students, those who will in their turn challenge, refine, refute, and generate yet more knowledge. That is, the mission is not to preserve passively, but to cultivate the body of knowledge actively and deliberately in a partnership of generations, a partnership of teachers and students.

“Teachers should be alive with thoughts”

This brings us to the participants in this adventure, to you the students and to us the teachers, those who impart knowledge, and to Whitehead’s plea that “teachers should be alive with thoughts.” It is not enough to ask students to take knowledge and use it. We teachers are responsible to impart information in a way that encourages you students to turn what could be (in other hands and circumstances) “inert knowledge” into active, vibrant, engaged tools. It is this area, teachers, that I turn to now and that I am certain will concern every one of you in the

coming years. Here at the University of Chicago, you will find yourself engaging with many teachers. They will teach you formally in the seminar room, laboratory, and lecture hall, and informally in their offices, your dorms, in coffee shops, and perhaps in their homes. They will teach deliberately and accidentally, by lesson plan and by example. They will hold ranks and titles within the University that mean little to you: named professors, lecturers, visiting scholars. Some of them will be Nobel laureates; others will have just defended their dissertations and stepped across the line from student to professor. They will have published scholarly books, given papers at international conferences, advised governments, and composed concertos. They will have mapped the genome, excavated dinosaur bones, and exhibited at major international museums. Some will have been at the University for decades and won teaching awards and recognition, others will be facing a class for the first time. What they will all have in common is that every one of them will have an effect upon you, whether they intend to or not. This effect might manifest itself immediately, of course. But it might also creep up on you slowly. I'd like to tell you something about how we select these people as you begin your studies.

As dean of the Division of the Humanities, I have the responsibility to oversee the hiring and the careers of about one-sixth of the University's instructors, numbering more than 200 members of the professoriate. In the last five years, the faculty of the Division has conducted 94 searches and succeeded in hiring 68 new professors. That means that fully one-third (34%) of the professors in the Humanities have been at UChicago for fewer than five years. These new professors come from institutions throughout the world, from North and South America, Europe, the Middle East, Australia, and Asia, and they bring with them new ideas and new ways of experiencing the academy that often challenge those of us who've been here a while. Moreover, in the last five years, another 40% of all the professors in the Humanities have undergone a review of their performance as teachers, citizens, and scholars on their career paths through the assistant, associate, and full professor ranks. This review involves a thorough examination of their scholarly productivity by their colleagues here at the University and at peer institutions, and of their effectiveness as teachers and mentors by their undergraduate and graduate students. On some level, therefore, about 75% of the faculty is being assessed and reviewed by peers every few years. And meanwhile, everyone is engaged in conducting a review of peers almost annually. This combination of the constant influx of new (often young and always eager and ambitious) faculty members and a culture of perennial reviews of ourselves keeps everyone, junior and senior faculty members, alert and on our toes. Although it might make for an anxious faculty (and whoever thinks the tenure system is cushy has not experienced the University of Chicago culture), it also contributes to a smart, ambitious, and stimulating faculty—and you will be its direct beneficiaries.

One of the most valuable things about the teachers you will encounter here at the University of Chicago is that they are not only striving to impart knowledge, they are striving to create knowledge. At a major research institution such as this one, the professors are selected for their dual ability and ambitions both to create and to disseminate knowledge. This is a rare thing that

you always should be aware of, in part because you will, in your undergraduate career, be a party to the back-and-forth of this tension. You will hear something in the classroom or witness something in the laboratory that will not yet be found in any book or article, because it is new scholarship that is being developed and honed by the teacher in partnership with you, the student. It might be something tentative, inchoate, innovative, revolutionary—even wrong. But I guarantee you that it will be exciting for you to be there, on the edge of creating new knowledge, in the lab, classroom, and library.

You will discover these scholars for yourselves, but I ask you to indulge me for a few minutes while I tell you about three teachers I've had in my life. I intend this to serve as a testament to these special people, and as an illustration of the deep and abiding value of excellence in teaching.

The first person I want to tell you about is Mrs. O'Brasky. She was my high school French teacher, and to my sorrow, I can't remember her first name or anything about her life. I remember that she had retired from the tumult of the public high school where she had taught for decades and arrived at my small parochial school for a few more years of what she thought would be peaceful instruction of young minds. I phoned my 91-year-old mother a few weeks ago to ask her if she remembered anything, and she said "Mrs. O'Brasky was strict and you learned French." And that about sums it up: Mrs. O'Brasky demanded a lot from us—this was, you may want to know, the mid-sixties, and some of you might have an idea of what temptations were swirling around a teenager then—and she demanded it in the context of learning French grammar, vocabulary, history, and culture. Many decades on, I'm not sure how she did it, but she inspired in me a love of the language and a greater desire to succeed than I think I ever experienced before.

The next years (like much else in the '60s) are a blur for me, but I next perked up my academic ears in college, when I encountered Peter Machinist at Case Western Reserve University and I took a class that both fit into my schedule and had an intriguing title: "History, Kingship, and the Gods of the Ancient Near East." (I had been a Psychology major when I'd taken a class the year before in Greek mythology and written my term paper on flood myths throughout the world.) The young man offering this course was then in his first or second year of teaching, still writing his Yale dissertation, developing new classes in a new institution. He was only a few years older than I was, but he spoke and taught from a vantage point of far greater and deeper knowledge. I don't think I did very well in his class—in that class or perhaps a subsequent one he gave me one of the lowest grades I ever had (other than the D in penmanship I got in 5<sup>th</sup> grade, still shamefully burned into my psyche). But something in the combination of the subject matter—esoteric, exotic, intriguing, different—and his vivid passion for imparting it enticed me to keep signing up for his classes. By the next year, I was taking one-on-one, independent study classes with Peter, the only student (or sometimes one of two) learning the extinct ancient Akkadian language. Again I had encountered someone who demanded that I not waste his time, that I take what he had to offer me and somehow make it my own. From

him, I experienced the difference between being in high school, where one generally is a passive receptacle for information, and being at a university, where one is an active partner in the exploration of knowledge.

I continued to benefit from the mentorship of Peter Machinist when I went on to graduate school at the University of Pennsylvania, where I was thrown into intermediate and advanced classes with more senior graduate students. The first week of graduate school I phoned Peter in tears, lamenting that I couldn't do the work and had to drop out; he gently suggested that I think about dropping only a class or two. The next week I desperately phoned him again; this time he suggested I take a class or two pass/fail. The next time I phoned him, he suggested the option of taking incompletes. By then, the semester was almost over and somehow, because of his confidence in me, I had made it through without dropping out, without dropping classes, without taking pass/fails, and without taking incompletes. I'm not sure if Machinist's greatest impact on my student life came from the time I was his student as an undergraduate or later. I do know, however, that he had faith that I would succeed and I couldn't let him down.

The teacher at Penn who most closely witnessed this drama—and who was the immediate cause of my distress—was Barry Eichler, a scholar of Mesopotamian and Biblical legal history, and the person with whom I worked most closely throughout graduate school. Every semester I took one or two classes with him, exploring Mesopotamian legal and social history at ever deeper levels. Every year there were stories about students, both men and women, leaving his classes distraught and in tears. His classes demanded a huge investment of time—I would typically spend 20 or 30 hours preparing for a single three-hour seminar. We were all determined to have prepared for any and every possible question he might ask—linguistic or grammatical, historical or bibliographic. The greatest joy would be when one of us unearthed an argument or datum with which he was unfamiliar.

You must by now see the pattern: here was another scholar, possessing deep knowledge, willing and eager to impart that knowledge, demanding from his students the same degree of dedication and commitment he asked of himself.

In spite of what I said a few minutes ago about the excellence of our superb faculty, I won't lie to you: it isn't impossible that you may encounter one or two teachers in the next four years who are going through the motions, are uninspiring, even possibly ineffective. But it only takes one superb, stimulating, teacher—someone with deep learning and passion, who is herself “alive with thoughts” as Whitehead put it—who will take what could be “inert” ideas and turn it into active engagement. And the subject matter doesn't really matter. You might meet this teacher in a literature class, a math seminar, the computer lab, or the sculpture studio. You might find her in one of the classes you'll take to meet the requirements of your major or in your Core distribution, or in a class that you pick up for the same reason I did when I found my field: it has an intriguing title and fits your schedule. But I can guarantee you that you will encounter such a person, and that he or she will truly change your life.

“The students are alive”

I come now to the third and final part of my talk—you—and to Whitehead’s revolutionary idea that “students are alive” (even if some you are now asleep) and that “the purpose of education is to stimulate and guide their self-development.”

In a *New York Review of Books* essay last May, Princeton historian (and UChicago alumnus) Anthony Grafton, in a review of one of the spate of books published recently on the perennial question of the nature, condition, and value of higher education in America, related an anecdote about Otto Neugebauer, an Austrian-born historian of ancient Babylonian astronomy, who had spent time during World War I in a prisoner-of-war camp in Italy (where he befriended fellow inmate Ludwig Wittgenstein), studied at the German universities in Graz, Munich, Göttingen, left Austria when Hitler came to power for employment at the University of Copenhagen, and later found refuge in the United States, at Brown University, for 45 years, ending his career at the Institute for Advanced Study in Princeton. Grafton asked Neugebauer about his experience of universities in Europe and America, to which Neugebauer replied: “No system of education known to man is capable of ruining everyone.”<sup>4</sup>

What I draw from these statements made by Whitehead (that “students are alive”) and Neugebauer (that “no system of education ... is capable of ruining everyone”) is the reminder that students—you—are not passive recipients of information but active participants in—indeed, directors of—your own educational experience. You choose your field of study and the courses that will give you the specialized knowledge within it. You choose the faculty members to supervise your work. You choose how deeply you wish to delve into special fields and how broadly you want to survey others. You decide if you want to study the human condition through Byzantine art or economic market theory or computational science, our place in the universe through astronomy or law or molecular biology. Any of the courses in these fields will present you with information—and to prevent that information from being simply dead knowledge and inert ideas—you will work with teachers who are “alive” with thoughts. Education is about “self-development” and empowerment. You are, in other words, entering into an active partnership with this institution.

### Conclusion

It is imperative that you take active ownership of your futures, beginning right now. The future is never certain and uncertainty is always scary. Many of the things you grew up taking for granted are fragile and under attack outside of the safe halls of the university and often within them also. Throughout the country, at respected, responsible institutions, departments are closing, costs are rising, values are changing. Especially the humanities are under siege, as fields and entire domains of knowledge are relegated by short-sighted policymakers to the dispensable pile. At the University of Chicago and a small handful of other institutions, however, we strongly maintain that no knowledge is trivial, useless, or wasteful, no interaction with a teacher or mentor is without impact. You were wise to select the University of Chicago,

and we were wise to select you: everything you learn and everything do here at the University of Chicago over the next few years will influence who you are going to be, the course of your life, the decisions you will make, the satisfaction you will find, how well equipped you will be to navigate the future.

I began my remarks this evening by welcoming you to a community of more than 30,000 students, teachers, and staff. I conclude by reminding you that in this large community you will be embedded in smaller groups in the dorms in our House System. In your classes and seminars you will have intimate engagement with only 20 or so other students and with one professor at a time. Approach each professor prepared to find that he may be that one person who opens an unexpected door for you, who reveals and “makes alive” some new knowledge. You begin this adventure tonight, when you leave Rockefeller Chapel and return to your dorm for an intimate conversation with one faculty member. Tonight will be your first real taste of the UChicago-style of intellectual inquiry: pushing you beyond your comfortable boundaries, demanding that you articulate your positions, and encouraging the critical thinking skills you will continue to exercise and to hone over the next four years. Above all else -- have fun!

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1. Alfred North Whitehead, *The Aims of Education and other essays* (New York: Free Press, 1929), p. v.
  2. P. 1.
  3. Niek Veldhuis 2004, 2011; Andrew George, “In search of the é . d u b . b a . a : the ancient Mesopotamian school in literature and reality” [http://eprints.soas.ac.uk/1618/1/GeorgeEdu\\_bbaa.pdf](http://eprints.soas.ac.uk/1618/1/GeorgeEdu_bbaa.pdf)
  4. NYRB May 24, 2012.