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Speech, Virginia Tech University, 01/21/04

Before I begin, I wish to thank Anne Moore and Karen DePauw for their invitation to speak at Virginia Tech. Karen DePauw is one of the most brilliant, vigorous, and formidable graduate deans in the United States today. Virginia Tech is lucky to have her, and I hope that she does not come close to New York University. For if she did, people there would realize, by contrasting her with me, how much I lack as a graduate dean.

"Letter to a Graduate Student"[1]

My subject today is graduate education. I have debated with myself about the form my remarks should take. Normally, I would choose to speak in standard analytical prose, but I have felt restless with this genre. As a result, my remarks are cast in the form of a letter to a new graduate student, to a person who will shape the future of graduate education, who will inherit from today both the stones of tradition and the winds of change.

With your permission, a letter to a new graduate student, who is, after all, the future of graduate education.

In August 2003, a cartoon was reprinted in The New York Times. It showed two lithe, white undergraduates lying comfortably on a beach, the man facing the sun, the woman facing the sand. In the first frame of the cartoon, the man sits up and says to the woman, "When I graduate next year, I want to do something that's good for the country, plus good for myself." She answers, "You could enlist in the Marines before they start the draft again." For the next six frames, they lie in the sun, and then, he speaks again, "Or graduate school." [2]

My motives for going to graduate school were not such a combination of post-9/11, mid-Iraq patriotism and self-interest. My decision flowed from my answers to three questions that I had to ask myself in my mid-twenties. The first question was economic: how could I support myself? The second was psychological: what could I do well? What were my skills and strengths? The third question was existential: what work , what profession, would provide me with dignity

[1] An earlier version of this speech was given at Bryn Mawr College on 10/29/03.

[2] Jeff Danziger, New York Times (Sunday, August 31, 2003): p. 4-6.

and freedom? My answer was to go to graduate school in English in order to join a college or university.

Unhappily, I hated graduate school, at Columbia University. Once in, I wanted to get my degree and get out as expediently as possible and join my profession. It was not simply the racism and the sexism, although they fumed unwittingly through the place. It was not simply the endless anxieties and gossip of my fellow students, although that swarmed through the lounges. It was not simply the reputation that some professors had for being bullies, although that reputation reinforced itself at oral exams and dissertation defenses. Unfortunately or fortunately, I was never a TA, so I missed out on much of the anxiety and gossip and bullying that position can entail. I earned my living as a typist and then as a part-time lecturer at Barnard College, where I ultimately gained tenure. Perhaps most devastatingly, what I missed in graduate school was a crackling air of intellectual excitement and of discovery. I longed for both passion and irony, and found instead
routines. To be fair, I also found, in my dissertation adviser, a deep kindness, real knowledge, and an amused tolerance for my exuberance, immaturities, and snobberies.

The memories of what I hated at graduate school drive me as a graduate dean. Let me say this to you as simply as possible: as long as I work in graduate education, I want to help shape a school that is unlike my graduate school --- except for the kindness, the knowledge, and the tolerance of my mentor. I realize that you will have entered graduate school for a variety of economic, psychological, and existential reasons, but one deep motive must be animating you --- you love exploration, discovery, theories, ideas, experiments, observations. In brief, you love learning. Your brain can burn with it. If you are a historian, you are compelled to study the narratives and processes of the past; if you are a scientist, you are compelled to study the structures and processes of nature; if you are an engineer, you are compelled to study how we build on nature and create technologies; if you are an economist, you are compelled to study the ways in which we get and spend; if you are a literary scholar, you are compelled to read Wordsworth's great sonnet, "The world is too much with us; late and soon,/Getting and spending,

we lay waste our powers." Unless learning compels you, you will fret your time away in graduate school, especially in doctoral programs, which last much longer than master's programs..

You must already know people ---- who have not had the chance to learn about higher education --- who think all doctorates are medical doctors. You can disspell their understandable confusion. More disturbingly, the know-nothings and the crass will dismiss graduate education as the province of pedants and nerds. How silly and how stupid. You may be tempted to ignore their comments, unless they have power over education. Then, they must be fought.

Resist the temptation to fight with sarcasm. Instead, teach, with patience and conviction. Why patience? Because the defense of learning is unending, and patience is a survival technique. Why conviction? Because you believe, or so I hope, that graduate education is central to human survival. The graduate school is the most important arena, the most important stadium, on any research university campus. This crucial place harks back to the founding of the university in the 12th century in an Italian town called Bologna and a French town called Paris. However, the modern graduate school evolved in the 19th century with the appearance of the modern research university. It has two parents. Perhaps the better known one is the German research university invented in the early 19th century. It prized advanced learning and, as tools of advanced learning, it prized the seminar, laboratory research, and the scholarly monograph. In 1876, Johns Hopkins University, located in a Maryland town called Baltimore, adapted the German research university to the United States. Around the same time, graduate study began at other institutions. My own university, New York University, founded its graduate school of arts and science in 1886.

However, the second parent of graduate education is the American land-grant university. Established by the United State Congress in 1862 with the Morrill Act. It prized serviceable knowledge. Symbolically, in 1926, the largest graduate fellowship at Rutgers University, where I once worked, was $2000, was for the study of sewage disposal. The graduate school you have inherited moves between these legacies, both vital. You may emphasize one or the other. You may say, "Basic research," or you may say, "Applied research. Apply theory to practice." Either choice is honorable. The stupidity is to ignore the necessity of both, and the interactivity between them. A scholar/researcher is a citizen of the republic of learning. She or he is also a citizen of the

world, and must be able to say how learning benefits it.

After World War II, the American research university grew enormously until it became the multiversity and the megauniversity we know today. In 1944, the operating budget of Columbia University was $11 million. Fifty years later, it was $1.1 billion. The expansion of the research university was but one sign of the explosion of all of American higher education. Over 50% of all colleges and universities today were established after World War II. Perhaps the most novel of them are the community colleges, in which some of you will serve, but the size and number of graduate schools also grew dramatically.

. The ecology of the graduate school today must combine the stones of tradition and the winds of change. Or, to put the matter another way, and far less metaphorically, a great graduate school perpetually balances stability and renewal. One of your most delicate acts will be to do this balancing act. Stone and wind need each other. Stones anchor us; winds move us. Of course, from time to time, we in graduate education might sound like windbags, but only from time to time.

The great stones of tradition for the graduate school --- its cornerstones more accurately --- are its mission. Unfortunately, modern bureaucracies have corroded the word mission. It now means little more than what an institution tells the public it wants to do. I have heard administrator after administrator groan and moan, “I guess I’d better write my mission statement soon.” In modern bureaucratic practice, a mission statement then begets a strategic plan and a strategic plan then begets an operational plan, etc., etc., etc. However, help me reclaim the word “mission.” Possessed of sacramental undertones and overtones, a mission is our deep purpose in life, our reason for being and for doing what we do most nobly. The mission of the graduate school --- its cornerstones --- is three-fold.

First, the graduate school is the place where the most promising and lively minds of several generations come together to work on the central problems of the time and of the disciplines---the humanities, the social sciences, and the sciences. The central problems of the time include the problem of history, what we believe our histories to be, what historical narratives we write. Faculty, staff, and graduate students forge an active partnership for the creation and

nourishment of ideas and knowledge. . Like a space ship breaking through the restraining bonds of gravity, a graduate school breaks through the restraining bonds of conventional wisdom. So doing, it continually re-invents history, literary criticism, anthropology, philosophy, linguistics, economics, politics, toxicology, organic chemistry, astrophysics and cosmology. It helps to invent African-American studies, gender studies and women's studies, genomics, nanotechnology.

The second cornerstone is this: the graduate school is the place where we educate you, the next generation of scholars and educators: of thinkers, researchers, intellectuals, writers, artists, and teachers. The laboratories of the future, the libraries and data bases of the future, the classrooms of the future ---- all these depend on the education that a graduate school provides. You should learn about all the classrooms of the future: small, large, inside of colleges and universities, outside of colleges and universities, the blackboards on which you scrape chalk and the on-line Blackboard for which you use keyboard strokes. The new technologies of learning --- as technologies --- will be a snap for you. You will know more than many of your teachers about them. Indeed, your problem may be in getting your teachers to use them adequately.

No, the issue will not be the technologies of learning themselves, though you will continue to develop them. It will be, unless you have a rare natural talent, learning how to teach itself --- how to link technology and pedagogy; how to make complexities coherent, how to connect with your students without being their "chum," how to show passion for your subject --- even as your students regard you blearily and dozily, and how to make teaching important without letting it overwhelm your life. The classroom – with the curriculum that must be constantly renewed, with the students of all ages who must be constantly nurtured--- can permit you to lose sight of yourself. And if you do that, you may evade the difficulties of the self. Paradoxically, educating others can permit us to avoid self-education. And when this is the case, graduate education produces personalities that seem immature.

There are, of course, two great cliches about being a teacher. The first is from George Bernard Shaw, "Those who can, do; those who can't, teach." I hate this cliché. First, because it is

trotted out to demean teaching, to put teaching down. Second, and far more important, because it is false. Teaching is an activity, hard, exhilarating. The truth of the matter is "Those who can, teach." The second cliché is this, "Teaching is an art and a craft." I like this cliché. because it is true. Teaching is an art and a craft, as demanding as any art or any craft.

The third cornerstone of your graduate school is that it can embody an ideal of a community of advanced inquiry. Don't be a dope about the way this community works. Don't shrink from figuring it out. Know the difference between a doctoral degree, a master's degree, and a certificate. If you didn't do student government earlier, learn what committees are, how tenure and promotion functions. If you don't initiate yourself into faculty governance now, you will be less skilled at it in the future, and if faculty governance atrophies, so will the integrity of colleges and universities. As a dean, I deal too often with a lack of knowledge on the part of students about the department and the institution. Oh, there is rumor, flying and floating about, but the lack of knowledge often seems like willful indifference, an attitude of let administrators do that stuff, and then we can criticize them for it. Both rumor and indifference destroy a clear-eyed understanding of the world in which you find yourself. Intellectual clarity does not destroy idealism. It
simply tests it. And if your community falls shorts of the ideal, protest, but protest with understanding.

All ideal communities need a common language. Quite appropriately, graduate education takes one deeper and deeper into a discipline or, in some cases, into a self-conscious amalgam of related disciplines, that is, an interdisciplinary program. At my graduate school today, we are combining mathematics, biology, neuroscience, and chemistry to create a doctorate in Computational Biology (known colloquially as COB).
The strength of specialization is obvious. It creates better questions about a field and answers to these questions. A danger of specialization is equally obvious. It can create scholars and researchers who cannot communicate across the university, who can do only their "Discipline Speak." I am now an advocate for what I call "General Education for Graduate Education," for

common courses across a graduate school about the nature of a community of inquiry and about the disciplines. These courses will help to forge a common language.[3]

All ideal communities also need a common set of values. And what are they? A great graduate school, I believe, shows how scholars of several ages can teach and learn together. This community of advanced inquiry is cosmopolitan and international. It transcends parochial and national boundaries --- despite the efforts of United States visa policies to cramp its internationalism. Indeed, the new technologies of learning make internationalism a vivid, everyday fact. You will be able to invent a set of global partnerships in a global network of research universities. Whatever the globality of your community of advanced inquiry, it ought to be transparent, fair, and just. Practicing a morality of mutual respect, its values a person – not for his or her race, or gender, or nationality, or sexual preference --- but for that person's ability as a citizen of a community of advanced inquiry. This community believes in freedom---freedom of thought, freedom of speech, freedom of inquiry itself. It abhors intellectual totalitarianism.

Finally, your ideal community should be suspicious , but may not be, of an increasingly corporate rhetoric that refers to higher education "an industry" --- as if administrators were only corporate executives, faculty only a work force, knowledge only a product called content, and students nothing but consumers. Avoid this rhetoric. Be realistic about the financial nature of higher education. There is no free lunch anywhere except in our fantasies. However, we are not simply an industry---mature or otherwise. You belong to a graduate school, a community of advanced inquiry. The Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching, in its project on doctoral education, speaks of graduate education as creating "stewards of the disciplines." The important word here is stewardship. You should be a steward, but not only of a discipline, but also of an ideal of community.

Now for the winds of change: The winds of change are as necessary as the cornerstones of tradition. Without them we suffer from stagnation, inertia, ennui, irrelevance, boredom. Since World War II, graduate schools have engineered great windmills of thought that have generated stream after stream of new ideas, discoveries, and applied knowledge. Do, however, look

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[3] See my essay, "General Essay for Graduate Education," Chronicle of Higher Education

skeptically at my word “engineer.” These streams of new ideas can arise from great social movements, from research institutions outside of the university, and from sheer serendipity. The research university is our primary source of new ideas, but not our exclusive source. Our intellectual universe in 2003 is radically different from that of 1945. The substance of a doctorate in English or Zoology today is not what it was in 1952---and a good thing, too. The tools for achieving a doctorate today are not what they were in 1952---and that is a good thing, too. The computer and the internet --- our wired and wireless world --- have changed graduate education irrevocably.

Moreover, equally great winds of social change have blown through graduate schools. The Information Age has brought us far more students. You are a part of a new flood of people who believe that what they know and how they know it will determine how they live. Since 1998, master’s enrollments are growing at 4% per year nationally. What a B.A. was after World War II, a newly necessary degree, the M.A. is now becoming. 75% of U.S. college students say they want an advanced degree. Happily, these people of the Information Age are now far more diverse, far less the members of one race, one gender. Talent resides in many different-looking bodies.

Since the 1990s, graduate education has also been in the throes of a healthy, self-conscious reform movement, led by foundations, government agencies, and graduate schools themselves. You will be the beneficiary of that movement. It is changing graduate education in at least five crucial ways: 1) the way in which we prepare future faculty; 2) the way in which we imagine the uses of our graduate degrees; 3) the way in which in which we mentor and nurture very diverse students towards the timely, competent completion of a degree; 4) the way in which we encourage crossing disciplinary borders in the gaining of a degree; and 5) the way in which we regard the graduate student as a person. You are no longer an apprentice to be taught, used, and sadly too often abused. You are a junior colleague with rights as well as responsibilities. Your teachers and advisers ought to know more than you. If they did not, why would you become their student? However, cognitive superiority is no guarantee of moral superiority.

(November 1, 2002): B7-10.

I celebrate this reform movement and its call for a different kind of training for a curious, responsible, intellectually flexible professional. Your job will be to continue it. Unfortunately, realism insists that I also strike two more somber notes in this letter to you. Today, in the United States, 413 universities confer a research doctorate. Graduate schools in these great universities are in some peril ---except for the very richest ones. Much of American higher education may be---and do not think I am being fanciful --- analogous to Detroit when it was the car-manufacturing center of the world, the Detroit of gas-guzzling and befinned cars, the Detroit before Toyotas and Hondas and lots of VWs. This Detroit did not anticipate and still struggles to adapt to new conditions.

Can the American research university and graduate school avoid such a loss of confidence and authority? Since World War II, the US research university has thought of itself as the greatest in the world---and rightly so. However, no great institution is ever free from peril. The winds of change simply howl in with different perils in different times. What now gnaws at the research university with its highly evolved graduate schools? What will gnaw even more at your generation? Let me note but three dangers:

First, graduate education has become very dependent upon international students, especially in the sciences. In 2002, 81% of all humanities doctorates were awarded to U.S. citizens and permanent residents; 55% of all doctorates in the physical sciences; and but 39% in engineering. The five countries that contributed the students to our graduate programs in science and engineering were China; South Korea; India; Taiwan; and Canada. What will happen if international students choose to go elsewhere---to Canada, Australia, or Europe? Or if they stay in their own countries as research universities begin to approximate those of America. I deplore any loss of international students, because of their individual talents and because of my belief in the cosmopolitanism of thought. However, my deplorings cannot stop a stone once it starts to move and roll down a hill. You, my new graduate student, may ask why this is happening. One answer is American visa policies, which can make it uncomfortable to study here, but that is an answer for the immediate present. A deeper answer is American science education and attitude towards science. Many of us deeply fear that pathways to the sciences, beginning in middle

school, are inadequate for bringing United States boys and girls---of all races and ethnicities---into science as profession. If higher education permits the practice of science to be permanently outsourced, the United States will have cut off a central limb of intelligence.

Next, moral zealots are threatening the freedom of research. Federal research policies have now throttled stem cell research in the United States, choking off our ability to explore some of the basic mechanisms of life and to ameliorate ravaging injuries and disease. As a result, stem cell research is being done elsewhere. Pit bull guardians of a narrow set of values patrol the National Institutes of Health and bark and claw if they see funding for projects about sexuality or AIDS. They seem not to care that history is pock-mocked with scandals of such pit bull guardians quenching the truths by which later generations will live. Must one mention Galileo as a cautionary lesson? Again?

Finally, research universities --- again except for the very richest ones --- are tied up in financial knots. They have become very dependent upon an underpaid teaching corps of graduate students and part-timers. What will happen if the underpaid teachers rebel? In some places, graduate assistants have unionized. You may be asked to join a union, and pay your dues or your agency fee. I have lived with both graduate assistant and faculty unions, and am convinced that better ways exist in which to organize academic work lives. But I do know, and you may discover, that when unions arise and thrive, institutions may have given them reason to do so.

Like many students, graduate students have obtained their baccalaureate degrees only by amassing debt. Nationally, American undergraduates are leaving college with burdensome levels of debt, in 2003 an average of $27,000 per student, nearly three and a half times more than a decade ago (in unadjusted dollars). This affects student plans about graduate and professional education. It may have affected yours. When students do enter graduate school, their debt generally increases. This, too, influences their thoughts about graduate and professional education. Debt is a millstone around the neck of our students.

The painful issues of an underpaid part-time teaching corps and student debt are strands in a noose that is around the neck of our research universities, especially those that are less well-

endowed and those that are public institutions. Nationally and internationally, governments are asking more and more of these institutions, and giving them less and less with which to do it. Public funds cover a smaller and smaller percentage of a public university's costs --- despite overwhelming proof that research and education are fundamental to the growth and well-being of a modern society. American history is replete with public officials and private citizens who grasped this truth about research and education and who were willing to put their money where their mouth was. Let me give but one example. After World War II, New York State confronted a toxic combination of a growing need for higher education and a higher education system that was largely private. The State might have thrown up its hands callously and said, "Let all these potential students pay private school tuitions." It chose differently and built in the public square. What A Temporary Commission on the Need for a State University in New York wrote in 1948 is a pertinent lesson for today:

> The increasing complexity of modern life, the rise in standards of living, and the rapid technological advances prompt youth to reach out for higher education as a means for better understanding for the problems of society, enjoyment of the better things of life, and more effective preparation for appropriate trades and professions. It is imperative for an expanding democratic society to make sure their quest is satisfied.[4]

Today, I fear, Americans have a shallow idea of what patriotism means. I have watched ballparks filled with people who weep as they sing "God Bless America" and wave American flags. However, patriotism is much more than weeping and singing and the brandishing of Old Glory. A genuine patriotism demands that we persist in building the public square, and that we are willing to open our purses and pay for the public and civic institutions that we share ---- our courts and assemblies, our hospitals and clinics, our parks and bridges, our schools and universities, and, where necessary, our armies, firemen, and police. A genuine patriotism demands an adequate budget to sustain the sweet land of liberty, including a budget for national and local defense, for homeland security, for health, and for education and inquiry. It will take all

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[4] "General Conclusions of the Temporary Commission on the Need for a State University in New York, 1948," Readings in American Educational History, ed. Edgar W. Knight and Clifton L. Hall. New York: Appleton-Century-Crofts, Inc. 1951, p.. 635-6

of our wisdom, knowledge, street smarts, and mettle to restore a genuine patriotism, and I have no blueprint tonight for doing so.

However, I am ruefully, even bitterly, reminded of a story that can be found globally, the story of the goose that laid the golden egg. According to this fable, a man had the luck to own a goose that turned out to be able to lay eggs of purest gold. However, the man was greedy and stupid. He refused to feed and nurture his goose, and then patiently to gather the eggs as they were laid. Instead, he cut the goose open to get at the gold inside. But the goose had only an ordinary goosey digestive system, and died of its wounds. I hope that the United States citizens of today will be smart enough not to destroy the great complex of higher education that our country has built since the 19th century and that is your legacy. If so, it can continue to produce the gold of its ideas, inventions, and graduates. If, alternatively, higher education is starved, it will shrivel and die, and there will be no more precious metal. The choice is our country's, and we must do our part in the contestatory, quarrelsome, often squalid making of this choice.

In l977, Adrienne Rich finished her poem "Natural Resources," which then appeared in her collection The Dream of a Common Language. At once despairing and hopeful, the poem's last lines are:

> My heart is moved by all I cannot save:
> so much has been destroyed
>
> I have to cast my lot with those
> who age after age, perversely,
>
> with no extraordinary power,
> reconstitute the world. [5]

I do not know if you have cast your lot with those who seek to reconstitute the world. You may even find such a move embarrassing, too P.C. However, you have chosen the world of advanced inquiry, of teaching and learning. Explicitly or implicity, you have made a covenant with it. "Covenant": this is indeed a highly charged word. It has solemn implications and serious

[5] Adrienne Rich, "Natural Resources," The Dream of a Common Language. First edition. New York: Norton, 1978, p. 264.

connotations. Some of these meanings are theological. A covenant refers to God's promises to man and to the promises church members make to each other to defend the church's beliefs. Other meanings are legal. A covenant is a binding agreement among two or more parties. The use alone of such a word in relation to graduate education signifies my belief in higher education's solemnities and dignity. This dignity and these solemnities manage to persist despite our shenanigans and antics.. And what might our covenant with each other be as you join a community of advance inquiry? Surely, it is nothing less than a mutual pledge to protect the cornerstones of the graduate education and to generate and harness the winds of change. And, I caution, do not forget the necessity of --- from time to time--- lying on a beach.