1994 INAUGURAL ADDRESS: **EXCEPT BY DIALOGUE...**

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Let me begin with praise of teaching.

The best teacher I ever had was at a small boarding school called Canterbury. His name was Roderick Clarke. I remember him then, in his mid-thirties, as a little smaller than most of us, who, at fifteen or sixteen, were awkward in our stretched out limbs. He was a portly man, yet muscular in his shoulders and chest. His hair was short, like a monk s, but without the tonsure at the back. He went everywhere on noisy crutches with braces on his legs and shoes that laced up over the ankles. He smiled so much that the sudden seriousness of many of his comments caught me, and others, by surprise. Much of the time his face shone with the look of someone anticipating the last line of a good joke.

At supper, he would tell us, suddenly and without irony, that some remark we had made could be illuminated by a point of scholastic debate from the thirteenth century. He would say that we reminded him–in our adolescent fumbling–of the best of Ockham or perhaps the worst of Aquinas. Out of nowhere would come the counsel to go get Marc Bloch's volumes on medieval France out of our school's small library. A lush print of Holbein s painting of Thomas More as Lord Chancellor looked down intently on our doings as we pulled out books whose authors and methods were new and alien to us. Scholarship was a strange thing to a high school sophomore. I had no sense of the days and the lives out of which such thick books would emerge. I remember still the sense of wonder at the roomy elegance of many of the footnotes in these books, these extra books to which Mr. Clark sent me. They were like the basement apartments in New York: afterthoughts, hidden away where you barely noticed them, below the sidewalks, full of depths, of closets and cellars, each pointing the way to more unnoticed life, cellar beneath cellar in an endless deepening. This to me was the strange world of scholarship, of study crystallized into footnotes and tomes.

I have had many good teachers, more than I remember, I am sure. Mr. Clarke is the most vivid to me still.

I say all this because the best teaching I have ever known was from someone whose love for ideas –for exploration–made him not just a teacher but a scholar. And his invitation to me was an invitation not just to study, do well, and be done with it but an invitation to go on studying, endlessly and playfully, in the way of the scholar.

There is a Creole saying in Haiti: Deye morne, gainyain morne. Behind the mountains, there are more mountains. For Haitians the proverb speaks of politics, where powers lurk behind powers; but I would apply it to learning. The scholar knows that learning never ends: behind its mountains there will always be more mountains.

We gather to celebrate a great tradition of learning. The beginning we make at Amherst today marks, in a small way, the continuing, here and elsewhere, of that tradition. Amherst College, small as it is now, frail as it was for most of its first several decades–Amherst stands for the very best within our tradition of study and teaching. If I may speak not for myself but for Amherst, then Amherst, in turn, must speak not only for itself, but for the liberal arts tradition.

Teaching is where we must begin: in the peculiarly human relation of the teacher and the student, the one who knows and the one who would know, the one who has the discipline that comes of long, concentrated study and the one who seeks it. Often, as we all know, it is the student who teaches the teacher. Ideas are the most volatile of cultural substances, and they move among minds with an almost magical quality of speed and surprise. Our task is to structure that magic, to give it rigor and discipline.

It was in August of 1821 that our first president, Zephaniah Moore, rode down from Williamstown to found this college. His horse had its tail and mane cropped by the angry students and townspeople he left behind. Since then, he and his successors have stated and restated what this College meant to them. For more than a hundred years the meaning was chiefly religious. Put here for the education of indigent young men of piety and talents for the Christian ministry, Amherst was in effect a missionary college. Its purpose, in the words of our motto, terras irradient, was to illuminate the many lands of the globe with an understanding of the one true faith.

We are a long, long way from such certainty about our mission. There was a self-evidence, a sometimes uncritical self-certainty, in who and what we were one hundred and fifty years ago. The religious creed itself, in which our faculty and students labored, was debated, of course. Indeed, the religious controversy made a decisive contribution: Amherst was founded in the dual conviction that Harvard was God-forsaken in its doctrines–and Williams in its location.

We must take care to avoid any arrogance, or even complacency, in our own convictions, our own faiths. Yet we should emulate the passion of our founders, and recognize that we too must ground our work in some faith.

Let me take our story back farther than Amherst itself:

In the beginning, wrote John Locke in the Second Treatise of Government, all the world was America. Locke meant to capture in this sentence the wildness of nature, including human nature, in the condition that preceded civil society. But he caught as well a sense of Europe and America as strangers: encountering one another on the edge of this continent, on the shorelines to the East of us and in the woods that surround us still. This America, the America of strangeness and difference, was to produce many innovations, some wonderful and some horrible: race slavery; the decimation and subjugation of the native peoples we encountered here; the sweatshops of our cities and the bigotry of our laws. All these were horrors. But they do not blot out the wonders: our music with its looseness and force; our poetry with its openness and oddity; our humor, our enterprise, our astounding if only occasional generosity as a people.

One of America's most lasting innovations was a written constitution. We were the first to interpret the written words of a fundamental law as binding on even the most powerful among us. Constitutional law, open to debate and to change, but upheld by judges backed by the might of the government–this was new and even now remains wonderful.

Among our inventions, no less new or wondrous, no less American in Locke s sense, I would place the liberal arts college.

We know that universities grew up in Europe long before Europeans settled here. And we know that the colleges–the special residence halls at Paris and Oxford, at Cambridge and Bologna–developed within the universities along with their great faculties.

The liberal arts college began here as a religious school. In it, the arts of the free citizen–the liberal arts–were subsumed under the religious mission not only of the school but of the society as a whole. Amherst was not much different in this in the 1820s from Harvard in the 1630s or Yale in the 1700s.

Up until the Civil War, the liberal arts college more or less defined higher education in America. Then all the world was Amherst. Harvard and Yale, Princeton and Columbia, Williams and Trinity and Union: all were colleges of roughly similar size and ambition. Some were more secular and some more innovative than others. Some, like Oberlin and Swarthmore and Berea, put women on an equal basis with men. They, along with Amherst, challenged the rest of America to set aside race as a qualification for study. Others, like Mount Holyoke and later Smith and others, pushed the country to honor women's abilities and ambitions.

Then began the great expansion, public and private, that was to remake the landscape in higher education. Suddenly, universities were everywhere, with a variety of faculties, graduate and professional as well as undergraduate, and all with a new sense of mission and a new confidence about their relation to the country's future. The land grant colleges made possible the emergence of large public universities like our own University of Massachusetts. The founding of Johns Hopkins spurred our Ivy League brethren to grow into collections of schools, with the undergraduate colleges prominent but no longer truly dominant.

By the 1880s, a Columbia Professor could write that the colleges were finished, caught between boarding schools and the new universities. It will be largely a waste of capital to maintain them, he declared, and largely a waste of time to attend them.

The universities saved us from a narrow parochial world that threatened to smother what it once had nurtured. Electives, majors, research: all these began in the transatlantic dialogue that transformed higher education. It became a massive engine that could serve the nation and the world as no liberal arts college could hope to. The sheer scale of the enterprise was beyond us. Responding to the massive shift around us, we struggled to retain a sense of purpose. It was not easy; it would never be easy again.

Where once Amherst and schools like it educated the great majority of those Americans who were to lead in government and the professions, in business and the arts, now we educate only a slight fraction of those who study beyond high school. The question of our purpose sharpens: Why should the liberal arts college- -not just Amherst but the family of such colleges–why should the liberal arts college survive and prosper? In the age of the university, what have we to offer our students and the world?

The answer to my questions lies in the conjunction, the radical conjunction, of teaching and learning: we in the liberal arts colleges believe that teacher and student must stand face to face in the many conversations that are the work of both; we believe in teaching as conversation because the best teaching is conversation; except by dialogue we cannot do our work.

The college, unlike the university, takes the dialogue of professor and student as a master principle. Neither graduate students nor teaching assistants can spell us in this central portion of our vocation. Our scale and our intimacy, our flexibility in moving across and among fields, our openness to one another and to our students–these are the strengths of a community built on dialogue. Yes, we are specialists, but we are also generalists: intellectuals first, with a curiosity that does not stop at the boundaries of one discipline but pushes on to ask about the disciplines of our colleagues.

The temptation, from afar, is to say that scholarship in such a setting must be slighted in favor of teaching. But Amherst, with others, holds that these are complementary aspects of one vocation.

One can teach, perhaps, with more or less permanent authority from a fixed store of learning. That sort of teaching holds little interest here. We teach instead what we learn and as we learn–not once and for all but over and again, renewing our knowledge as we test it and push it and extend it. There is an important sense in which, at their very best, teaching and research become one. The best teaching searches out new questions and new insights; and the best research always teaches.

Half a century ago, when Roderick Clarke was a freshman at Amherst, he met Dwight Salmon, with his wit and curiosity; the sterner, dryer Havighurst; Whicher and Packard, both Morgans, Henry Mishkin and many others. I doubt if even Mr. Clarke can remember much of what they said in those hectic days right after the Second World War.

What we recall of our teachers is rarely the lore–the fact of this or that, the rule of physics, the declension of a noun, the acquaintance with a book or poem. We take away something more elusive and more important.

From Mr. Clarke I took a sense of the play of ideas, his joy in them, but also of his insistence on rigor and discipline in embracing them. He once gave me an A on a first draft of a paper on the Spanish Armada. I typed it up more or less as it was for the final submission. I was distraught to learn that the final draft– and the grade–was a B or B+. You didn't take it far, he told me. You didn't take it anywhere.

We are here because we seek a learning we can take somewhere, a learning we can take with us into our lives. It is not a gift but an acquisition, requiring discipline as well as imagination. Mr. Clarke, however joyous, however playful, was the sternest of teachers.

In a difficult time, with many who doubt the uses of colleges such as this, we must be clear about our work:

We gather today around a library on a beautiful hill, in the midst of laboratories and theaters, fields and museums. Ours is an old conversation, but we must make it new for every student and in every classroom. We must make it as open as possible–to ideas, of course, but to people as well, to our differences, to our clashes of conviction, of style, of temperament and background. Ultimately, ours is a conversation about who we are and what we can do in our world. It is about freedom and what we can make of it. It is about reality and how we can understand it. It is about the imagination and how it can draw us towards wisdom– and towards one another.

To all who would study in this tradition, we say: Come to Amherst if you would join us in this work. Never mind whether you are rich or poor. Never mind where or how you live. Say only that you would bring to this conversation all of your curiosity, your intelligence, your passion. Say that you would engage with others in argument and exploration wherever it leads. Say that whatever else you do with your life you would take learning to heart as your calling, the calling of the scholar and teacher.

I am proud to join you in this work and adventure. Thank you.