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CAMPUS LIFE: IN SEARCH OF COMMUNITY

Remarks by
Ernest L. Boyer
President

**The Carnegie Foundation
for the Advancement of Teaching**

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INTRODUCTION

Thank you very much.

I'm delighted to join you at the University of Richmond—a very special institution.

- And I'd like to congratulate the outstanding students being honored here today.**

This morning I've been asked to talk about

- strengthening the spirit of community on campus.

And should like to begin by telling you a story.

I.

In 1972, I was sitting in my office in Albany, New York.

It was a dreary Monday morning in Albany—which is a redundancy I know—and to avoid the pressures of the day

- **I turned instinctively to the stack of third-class mail I kept perched precariously on the corner of my desk**
- **to create the illusion of being very, very busy—it's an old administrative trick.**

On top of the heap was the student newspaper from one of the nation's most distinguished higher learning institutions.

- **The headline announced that the faculty had reintroduced a required course in "Western Civilization," after having abolished all requirements just three years before.**
- **Bear in mind, this was 1972.**

The students, I discovered

- **were mightily offended by the faculty's brash act, and in a front page editorial they declared that a required course was an "illiberal act."**
- **And then the editors concluded with this blockbuster question:**

"How dare they impose 'uniform' standards on 'nonuniform' people?"

Of course were non-uniform,

- turn to your left and right and say a prayer of thanks.

But what these students had failed to recognize is that

- with all of our diversity,
- we are all still deeply dependent on each other.

That while celebrating individuality,

- we must affirm community as well.

And yet, during a recent study of campus life at The Carnegie Foundation,

- we found an alarming breakdown of community in higher education.
- At many institutions in our study, Hispanic, black, and white students often are living in separate enclaves on the campus—emotionally they are worlds apart,
- not even talking to each other.

And we also found a growing intolerance toward women,

- with racist and sexist comments showing up as graffiti
- in toilets,
- on bulletin boards,
- and even printed as "sick humor" on fraternity "T" shirts.

The sad truth is that America is becoming a deeply divided nation—we're splitting up along racial and ethnic lines.

And if in the decade of the 90s we do not find better, more creative ways

- **to challenge prejudice on the campus,**
- **if we can't begin to heal the tragic racial and ethnic divisions in our culture,**

Then I'm convinced that the very future of the nation of imperiled.

- **The problem is we see our differences,**
- **but we fail to discover the connections that bind us all together.**

HUMAN COMMONALITIES

When I was Chancellor of the State University of New York,

- **during the days of Cambodia and Kent State,**

I was often

- **locked in and**
- **locked out of my office,**
- **and frequently shouted down.**

And the students, most of whom I liked very much, would assure me that

- it wasn't personal.
- It's just that I was over 30 and that I was running a corrupt system.

And they were right, of course, on one count.

But what I found most revealing was the fact that

- **the students kept insisting:**
- **"there's nothing that we had in common."**

There we were, sitting in my office,

- **getting hungry,**
- **wanting sleep,**
- **shouting,**
- **laughing,**
- **talking to one another,**
- **angry about the war.**

And yet there was absolutely nothing that we shared,

- **nothing that we had in common.**

TRANSITION

And this brings me to the central theme of my remarks this morning.

It's absolutely essential that we celebrate the God-given differences

- that makes each of us special and unique.

But it's also my conviction that to achieve community

- **we must begin to focus**
- **not just on our differences,**
- **but on those commonalities that bind us all together.**

Is this too sentimental?

Is it true that there is—in fact—very little that we share in common?

Several years ago, in a book called *A Quest for Common Learning*, I suggested that there are, in fact, 7 human experiences that are found

- among all people and all cultures.

And that these experiences provide a core curriculum—at least give us a framework within which community ought to be built.

Let me summarize for you briefly here this morning.

LIFE CYCLE

First, at the most basic level we all share the mystery of birth and growth and death.

And I've often thought that if you really want to get along in another culture,

- take a baby.

Our physical existence binds us all together—life is our most precious gift.

And yet the sad truth is that

- **many go through life,**
- **uninformed about conception,**
- **ignorant about how to sustain wellness,**
- **and rarely reflecting the miracle of their own existence,**
- **and the imperatives of death.**

It's really shocking the way the natural curiosity

- **little children have about life's mysteries is suppressed.**

And how they grow up knowing more about

- **the VCR**
- **than the miracle of their own bodies.**

My wife, Kay, is a certified nurse midwife

- **and delivers babies, including 7 grandchildren of our own.**

And Kay tells of delivering babies from teenaged girls

- **who must be told about the basics of childbirth**
- **in between the labor pains.**
- **And how they fed their unborn babies coke and potato chips.**

I'm suggesting that

- at the most basic level we all share the mystery of birth and growth and death.

And that the school and college curriculum

- should include a study of the life cycle
- and the awesome responsibility of bringing a new life into the world.

LANGUAGE

This leads me to commonality number two.

Beyond birth and growth and death all people on the planet

- use language to communicate their feelings and ideas.

And it's through the use of symbols

- that we are all connected to each other.

Consider the miracle of this very moment.

- I stand here vibrating my vocal cords.
- Molecules are bombarded in your direction.
- They hit your tympanic membrane;
- signals go scurrying up your eighth cranial nerve, and
- there's a response deep in your cerebrum that approximates, I trust, the images in mine. But do you realize the audacity of this act?

When I was growing up in Dayton, Ohio, the cultural center of the free world, we used to say

- sticks and stones will break my bones,
- but names will never hurt me.

What nonsense!

- I'd usually say that with tears running down my cheeks,
- saying all the time
 - hit me with a stick, but stop the words that penetrate so deeply and hurt so long.

Writing recently in the New York Times, Malcolm Bradbury said that

- if we do not master language, language itself will master us.
- We discover life—he said—through language.

I'm suggesting that when all is said and done, words are all we have. We build community through good communication.

And yet today we live in a world where

- language is abused,
- where words are used to conceal more than they reveal.

We live in a world where

- cliches have become substitutes for reason.

And where prejudices are frozen into hurtful slogans,

- even on the college campus.

In response to this challenge,

- I propose that all freshmen complete a course in expository writing—since clear thinking and clear writing are inextricably interlocked.
- I propose that all seniors be asked to write an essay on a consequential topic to test their capacity to think critically and integrate ideas.

- And above all, I propose that all students complete a course on The Ethics of Communication,
- a seminar where the use and abuse of language would be considered,
- where mass media and advertising would be examined,
- where political debates would be critiqued,
- and where the integrity of one's own discourse would be thoughtfully confronted.

Elton Trueblood, former president of Earlham College, wrote recently about the powerful influence a senior professor had on him while he was a student at Johns Hopkins. Trueblood said that,

- "For three years I wrote short essays for my mentor, Professor Arthur O. Lavery.
- And with every essay"—Trueblood said—"I had to face the question—'is it really true?—Is what you've written really true?"

I'm suggesting that building community on campus means helping students

- **become proficient in the written and the spoken word.**

But building community also means helping students discover that

- **language is a sacred trust**
- **and that truth is the obligation we assume when we're empowered in the use of words.**

THE ARTS

This brings me to human commonality number three.

I'm convinced that

- beyond the life cycle and the use of symbols,
- we all respond to the aesthetic,
- which is a universal language, too.

- Dance is a universal language;
- architecture is a universal language;
- music is a universal language;
- painting and sculpture are languages that can be understood all around the world.

And I'm convinced that the quality of any civilization

- is to be measured by the breadth of the symbol system that's used.

Salvadore Dali's painting,

- "The Persistence of Memory" can be understood by everyone haunted by the passage of time.
- And when Picasso confronts the unspeakable agonies of

war,

the dismembered child,

the scream of a bereft mother,

the shattered home,

and puts them on a huge canvas called
"Guernica,"

**he makes a universal statement about destruction that can be
felt in the heart of every human being.**

And when people of all ages and all races join together in singing,

- we shall overcome,
- there's a bonding that's more powerful than words alone.

I'm suggesting

- that for the most intimate,
- most profound,
- most moving experiences,
- we turn to music and dance and the visual arts—that words cannot convey.

And that in building a spirit of community on campus,

- students and faculty simply must examine together—
 - both in the classroom and beyond—
- the moral experience we call art.

The arts integrate the disciplines.

Frank Press, president of the National Academy of Sciences, wrote recently that

- "scientists are, in some respects, like artists."

He went on to say that the magnificent double helix,

- which broke the genetic code,

is not only rational, but beautiful, too.

I thought about how I used to watch the liftoffs at Cape Kennedy.

- When the rocket blasted into orbit, the engineers would say in unison, "Beautiful!"
- They chose an aesthetic term to describe a scientific accomplishment.

And when the physicist Victor Weiskopf was asked what gave him hope in troubled times, he said,

- "Mozart and quantum mechanics."

HISTORY

This brings me to human commonality number four.

Beyond the life cycle,

- language and the arts.

All people on the planet also have the capacity to

- recall the past
- and anticipate the future.

And place themselves in time and space.

T.S. Eliot wrote on one occasion that

- "Time present and time past, are both present in time future.
- **And time future is contained in the past."**

Humans are—so far as we know—the only species that can put itself in time and space.

- **And yet how often we squander this awesome capacity to look in both directions.**

We live only in the present

- **and are often scornful of the traditions of other cultures.**

I'm convinced that—to strengthen community we need a multicultural curriculum—one that focuses

- on both Western and non-Western studies,
- on the role of women—as well as men,
- and on the role minorities have played in shaping our traditions.

**Critics of multiculturalism insist that such a study will lead to
a diminished respect for**

- Western civilization.

But multiculturalism—at its best—is not an attack against anyone's ideals.

- It's a candid recognition that
- in a nation as diverse as ours,
- in a world that is becoming more interdependent every single year,

students simply must know more about

- the literature,
- and art,
- and cultural traditions

that have shaped the lives of others.

To put it as simply as I can, students should study Western civilization

- to understand their past.

They also should study non-Western cultures

- to understand their future.

And I'm convinced that ethnic and women's studies

- will enrich the curriculum, rather than dilute it.

GROUPS AND INSTITUTIONS

This brings me to commonality number five.

In spite of the great diversity from one culture to another,

- the simple truth is that
- we are all born into institutions that consequentially shape our lives.

Nearly 150 years ago, Ralph Waldo Emerson, observed

- "We do not make a world of our own."

Rather, he said,

- "We 'fall into' institutions already made
- and have to accommodate ourselves to them."
 - The family,
 - the neighborhood,
 - the nation,
 - schools,
 - clubs—the dormitory where you live and the list goes on and on.

I'm suggesting that every culture organizes itself and carries on its work

- through groups and institutions, even though structures and procedures
- surely vary from one place to another.

Our son, Craig, lives in a Mayan village in the jungles of Belize

- with his Mayan wife and 3 Mayan children.

And when we visit him each year, though we're separated

- by a thousand miles,
- and a thousand years,

I'm impressed that Mayans and Americans still carry on in very basic ways.

In the Mayan villages they have

- family life,
- village councils,
- elected leaders,
- jails,
- schools,
- places for worship.

When it comes to groups and institutions, we're all different.

- **But we're also very much alike.**

And I'd love to see a student

- **as part of the general education sequence, do a paper comparing**
- **Santa Cruz, California**
- **with Santa Cruz, Belize.**

There are, after all, commonalities at the core.

NATURAL WORLD

This brings me to commonality #6.

The reality is that amidst the differences we share a relationship with nature.

David, my 3-year-old grandson in Belize,

- **understands his "connections" to nature very well;**
- **he chases after birds,**
- **he sees corn pounded for tortillas,**
- **he bathes down in the river.**

But for his urban cousins, in Boston and New Jersey,

- **the ecological connection is far more obscure.**

When I was United States Commissioner of Education, Joan Cooney,

- the brilliant creator of "Sesame Street," came to see me one day.
- She said they wanted to start a new program at Children's Television Workshop
 - on science and technology for junior high school kids,
- so they could understand a little more about their world and what they must understand to live.
- It subsequently was funded and called "3-2-1 Contact."

In doing background work for that project, they surveyed some junior high school kids in New York City, and asked such questions as:

- "Where does water come from?" A disturbing percentage said "the faucet."
- And they asked, "Where does light come from?" They said "the switch."
- And they asked, "Where does garbage go?" "Down the chute."

I'm suggesting that every single one of us

- is inextricably connected to the natural world

and that our very survival on this planet

- increasingly will depend on our ability to
 - respond sensitively
 - to the earth home we share together.

Let's begin to build community on the basis of our connections to nature

- in which we are all embedded as working parts,
- as Lewis Thomas put it.

SEARCH FOR MEANING

Finally, I'm convinced that all of us on the planet,

- **regardless of our unique heritage or tradition,**
- **are searching for a larger purpose.**
- **We seek to give special meaning to our lives.**

Reinhold Niebuhr put it most precisely when he said,

- **"Man cannot behold unless he be committed,**
- **he cannot find himself,**
- **unless he finds a purpose beyond himself."**

During our study of the American high school I became convinced that

- we have not just a school problem,
- but a youth problem in our culture.

Far too many teenagers feel

- unwanted,
- unneeded,
- and disconnected from the larger world.

There's a spirit of anonymity in the school

- and many drop out because no one noticed that they had, in fact, dropped in.

There's an intergenerational separation in society itself.

- **Messiah Village.**

I'm convinced that to build community we simply must acknowledge the search for meaning we all share.

And it's my own conviction that

- at this moment,
- and in this culture.

Life is made most authentic as we engage in service.

In fact, I believe that all college students should engage in a community service program as a requirement for graduation.

Martin Luther King, Jr. said

- **everyone can be great**
- **because everyone can serve.**

And I'm convinced that the young people of this country are

- **ready to be inspired by a larger vision.**

Vachel Lindsay wrote on one occasion

- **It is the world's one crime that**
- **its babes grow dull**
- **Not that they sow**
- **but that they seldom reap,**
- **Not that they serve,**
- **but have no gods to serve,**
- **Not that they die,**
- **but that they die like sheep.**

The tragedy of life is not death.

The tragedy is to die with

- **commitments undefined,**
- **convictions undeclared,**
- **service unfulfilled.**

JUSTICE

This morning I've talked about

- **human commonalities,**
- **and the need to make connections.**

I've suggested that we are all born to live and die.

We all send messages to each other.

We all respond to music and dance and the visual arts.

We all recall the past and anticipate the future.

We all are member of groups and institutions.

We all are an inseparable part of nature.

And we seek to give meaning to our lives.

But I'd also like to underscore the point,

- here at the very end,

that it's absolutely impossible to achieve

- a "true" spirit of community,
- without also achieving human justice,

since the two are inextricably interlocked.

And frankly, I'm enormously troubled by the growing gap

- **between the privileged and the poor.**

I'm troubled that in this,

- **the most affluent nation in the world,**
- **one out of every 4 children under the age of 6**
- **is officially classified as poor.**

I'm troubled that

- hundreds of thousands of little babies in this country
- do not have good nutrition.

And it's a national disgrace that the federal Head Start program,

- which prepares disadvantaged 3- and 4-year-olds for school,
- serves less than half those eligible
- because of lack of money.

Why is it that we can fund

- **space stations,**
- **and bail out the S&Ls,**

and never seem to have money for our children?

Langston Hughes, in his timeless verse, brought the nation's challenge into focus:

- What happens, he wrote, to a dream deferred?
- Does it dry up
- like a raisin in the sun,
- or fester like a sore—
- or crust over?

What happens to a dream deferred?

- Maybe it just sags like a heavy load,
- or does it explode?

I'm suggesting that

- while acknowledging the differences that make each of us distinctive,
- we should celebrate community as well.

And it is my deepest hope that

- David, my 3-year-old grandson in Belize
- and Julie, his 3-year-old cousin in New Jersey,

will grow up firmly believing that—in spite of the distance that divides them—they are deep down inside truly members of the same human family.