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General

**THE HUMAN COMMONALITIES:\***  
**MULTICULTURALISM AND COMMUNITY IN HIGHER EDUCATION**

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**Common Day of Learning**  
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I'm very pleased to be back with you at Azusa Pacific University. And I'm doubly pleased to participate in this day of "common learning." Something very special is happening on campus here today. What we're creating is one big classroom so that all of us--the English majors, the business majors, music majors, and all the rest--can share ideas and convictions with each other.

This is a genuinely exciting experiment. It's a model for the nation. And I congratulate all of you for choosing a college that seeks to relate the teaching of Jesus to the tensions and traumas of our troubled world.

#### INTRODUCTION

The theme of our seminar today is multiculturalism in higher education. The question is this: Can we in the midst of all of our differences overcome our separateness and divisions and find some sense of unity and common purpose? In searching for an answer to that question, I'd like to begin by telling you a story.

More than twenty years ago I was Chancellor of the State University of New York. In those days there were student riots on the campus, and with regularity, I was locked in and locked out of my office and shouted down by students. What I found most revealing and most disturbing during these confrontations was that the students kept insisting that we had nothing 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, according to the students, there was absolutely nothing that we shared together.

This brings me to the central theme of my remarks today. I'm convinced that multiculturalism in higher education surely means celebrating the uniqueness of every culture, affirming the sacredness of every individual, and acknowledging that, according to God's divine plan, each of us is uniquely different from every other person on the planet.

Many years ago my father used to give "illustrated" talks in Sunday school. In one talk, which I remember very well, he presented dramatically enlarged photographs of snowflakes. My father kept expressing in amazement that no two snowflakes are alike. Of the countless numbers that fall gently to the earth, every single one is different. I was deeply impressed by the majesty of the separate patterns. That's the way it is with each one of us. God in his exquisite wisdom gave to each of us our own unique imprint. In our seminar today, let's celebrate the sacredness of every individual.

But there's another side to the equation. While each of us is separate and unique, it's also true that we are all very much alike. In our deeply divided world, a quality education means helping students discover not just our *differences*, but our *similarities* as well. It means celebrating not just our individualism, but our commonality, too.

But where do we begin?

Several years ago, in a book called *Quest for Common Learning*, I suggested that we organize the core curriculum at the

nation's colleges and schools not on the basis of "disciplines" or departments, but on the basis of what I called the "human commonalities," those universal experiences that are found in all cultures and among all peoples on the planet. I proposed that there are at least eight commonalities that bind us all together.

### I. THE LIFE CYCLE

First, at the most basic level, we all share the universal human experiences of birth and growth and death. The life cycle binds us all together. And yet the sad truth is that most of us go through life without reflecting on the mystery of our own existence, not understanding the miracle of birth, not considering the sacredness of our own bodies, not learning about how to sustain wellness, and not pondering the imperative of death.

Isn't it strange that young men in this country grow up knowing more about the carburetor of a car than we do about the characteristics of their bodies? And isn't it sad that they often are more concerned about the quality of gas they put in the tank than they are about the quality of food they put inside themselves.

My wife is a certified nurse-midwife and has delivered many babies, including seven grandchildren of our own. Kay tells of delivering the babies of teenage girls. These are children having children. For nine months they have fed their unborn infants on Coke and potato chips. They have exposed them to

alcohol and harmful drugs, often leaving these children tragically deficient before their first breath of life.

I'm suggesting that with all of our differences, it's the sacredness of life itself that binds us all together. Clearly, our first responsibility as Christians is to treat our own bodies as a temple of the living God and to extend this same reverence of life to all others.

The fifth commandment reads: "Thou shall not kill." Stated positively this commandment might assert: "Thou shall acknowledge the sanctity of life." And I'd like to see every student in every school complete a study of the life cycle, beginning in the early grades.

## II. LANGUAGE

In addition to the life cycle, all people on the planet share the miracle of language, which begins in utero as the unborn infant monitors the mother's voice. First comes life, then language. It's no accident that the three middle-ear bones--the hammer, the anvil, and the stirrup--are the only bones that are fully formed at birth.

After birth, language exponentially explodes. Now that I'm a grandpa and can observe the process unencumbered by dirty diapers and burpings late at night, I'm absolutely dazzled by the way two- and three-year-olds use language not only for affection but also as weapons of assault. When I was a boy in Dayton, Ohio, we used to say, "Sticks and stones may break my bones, but words will never hurt me." What nonsense! I'd say that with

tears running down my cheeks, thinking all the time, hit me with a stick, but stop the words that penetrate so deeply and hurt so long.

I'm suggesting that our sophisticated use of language sets human beings apart from all other forms of life, and that it's through the majesty of words 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? I'm encouraged that you're looking in my direction, but I've been a teacher far too long to confuse visual contact with cerebral interaction.

I'm suggesting that language, which is universal, defines our humanity. It's the glue that holds us all together. And if we hope to get along in a multicultural world, it's imperative not only to speak with sensitivity, but listen sensitively as well.

In a Christian college especially, we must learn to communicate honestly and openly with each other and be committed to listening carefully as well.

### III. THE ARTS

This brings me to a third commonality that defines the humanity we share. *Beyond* the life cycle, and *beyond* the use of

symbols, all people on the planet respond to the aesthetic, since art is a universal language, too. Music is a universal language. Painting is a universal language. Architecture is a universal language. And sculpture is a language that can be understood all around the world.

I'm suggesting that for the most intimate, most profound, most moving experiences, we turn to art to express feelings that words cannot convey. This is true for all people on the planet.

#### IV. HISTORY

The fourth human commonality is the sense of time. Even though we're all different, each of us has the miraculous, God-given capacity to recall the past and anticipate the future. We are, in fact, the only species on the planet that can place itself in time and space. This ability to discover where we've been and reflect on where we're going gives perspective and meaning to our lives.

Looking back, I'm impressed that one of the most influential people in my own life was my Grandpa Boyer, who lived to be one hundred. When Grandpa was forty years old, he moved his little family into the inner city of Dayton, and for another forty years, he ran a city mission that brought compassion and God's message to the poor. My memories of that time continue to be profoundly influential. Because of this perspective, my life and the lives of my children have been immeasurably enriched.

Today, as we talk about multiculturalism, let's reflect on our own heritage, and let's also seek to understand the heritage

of other cultures, too. But the larger point is that all of us, regardless of our roots, have in common the capacity to recall the past and anticipate the future.

#### V. GROUPS AND INSTITUTIONS

In addition to the life cycle, the use of symbols, the response to the aesthetic, and a sense of time, all of us hold membership in groups and institutions that consequentially shape our lives. This is the fifth human commonality.

We have a missionary son who lives in a Mayan village in the jungles of Belize with his Mayan wife and four children. When we visit Craig each year, I'm impressed that, at one level, Mayans and Americans, separated by a thousand miles and a thousand years, live in two separate worlds, but that at a deeper level life in the two worlds is carried on in similar ways.

The Mayans, just like all of us, have family units. They have in their culture elected leaders, village councils, and law enforcement people. They have jails, and schools, and places where they worship. On the surface it's all very strange and different, but below the surface, it's very much the same.

I'm suggesting that multiculturalism in higher education means learning how social relationships vary from one culture to another, but it also means understanding that all of us hold membership in groups and institutions.



## VI. PRODUCTION AND CONSUMPTION

The sixth commonality relates to work. All people on the planet produce and consume. Work is universal; it's something we all do. And students must understand that if they're consumers, they also need to be producers. It's not enough to take; you also must learn to give back.

Perhaps the most offensive place in the United States for an impatient grandfather is a toy store. The cornucopia of junk goes from the floor to the stars. There are aisles upon aisles of objects, and children don't know how they were made. The connection between producing and consuming has been broken.

"What work do mommy and daddy do?" is hardly a relevant question to many children in our world. I remember when our son was six and he went with me to a little cabin we had near Albany, New York. I spent all day trying to build a dock, and he sat at the edge of the water, absolutely mesmerized by this event. He saw me do things that I'd never done. On the way back to the cabin that evening, he was rather silent and pensive. Then he broke the silence and said, "Daddy, I wish you'd have grown up to be a carpenter instead of you-know-what." He didn't have the foggiest idea of what "you-know-what" was, but he was impressed that somehow I had engaged at least passingly in something that he understood.

Children need to learn very early the universal experiences of production and consumption. And in the years ahead, it will become increasingly important for students, especially those in the United States, to learn not only about producing and

consuming, but about conservation, too. This will be a challenge for all people on the planet, but especially for those who live in countries that are affluent.

## VII. NATURAL WORLD

It's true that we are all different, but it's also true that we share a sixth human commonality: every single one of us is connected to the ecology of planet Earth in which we are all "embedded as working parts," as Lewis Thomas put it.

David, my five-year-old grandson in Belize, understands his "connectedness to nature" very well. He chases birds, he bathes down in the river, and he watches corn being picked and pounded into tortillas. But my other grandchildren, who are growing up in Boston and in Princeton with appliances and asphalt and precooked foods, find it much more difficult to discover their connections to the natural world.

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 students. It subsequently was funded and called "3-2-1 Contact." In researching that project, they surveyed some junior high school students 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?" The students said, "The switch." And they asked, "Where does garbage go?" "Down the chute."

I'm suggesting that despite our differences, we are all inextricably connected to the natural world. Multiculturalism in higher education should include teaching and learning and that beneath our differences, our very survival on this planet increasingly will depend on recognizing our connections to nature and responding sensitively to the "earth home" we share together. Above all, it means sharing with the psalmist a reverence for God's creation. David wrote: "When I behold the moon, the stars, the handwork of the Creator, O Lord, Our Lord, how wonderful is thy name for all the Earth."

We are all connected to the ecology of God's creation.

#### VIII. SEARCH FOR MEANING

This leads finally to the universal experience that is most crucial. The simple truth is that all of us, regardless of our unique heritage or tradition, are searching for a larger purpose. We all seek to give meaning to our lives.

Reinhold Niebuhr wrote that man cannot be whole unless he be committed, that he cannot find himself unless he find a purpose beyond himself. And this is true for all people on the planet. We can suppress this hunger to know what life is all about. We can find endless distractions from the serious reflection required by the human search for meaning. But deep down inside we still feel this need to know who we are and where we fit.

What is the meaning of our existence? What is the Divine Plan for my life?

The poet Vachel Lindsay wrote: "It is the world's one crime 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, with convictions undeclared, and with service unfulfilled. All of us want to feel that life has a larger purpose. And it's my own conviction that the search for meaning will lead us first to God, and then lead us to a life of service, as we reach out to others.

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.

#### CONCLUSION

Each of us is different. We all have our own unique aptitudes and interests. And we should celebrate the diversity of God's creation. But at a deeper level we are all very much alike.

- We are all born and live and die.
- We all send messages to each other.
- We all respond to the aesthetic.
- We all can recall the past and anticipate the future.
- We all are producers and consumers.
- We all are members of groups and institutions.

- We all are an inseparable part of nature.
- And we all seek to give meaning and larger purpose to our lives.

While we celebrate the riches of our separate cultures and traditions, let's also recognize that beyond the diversities there are, in fact, human commonalities that bind us all together. And I'm convinced that the Christian college has a special opportunity and obligation to bring healing and understanding to a deeply divided world.

On a personal level, it's my own prayer that David, my 5-year-old grandson in Belize, and Julie, his 5-year-old cousin in New Jersey, who speak different languages and have different colored skins, still will grow up knowing deep down inside that they are truly members of the same human family.

Thank you for inviting me to join you on this special day. And I do hope that throughout the day you will feel God's spirit, as we discuss together not just our differences but our commonalities, as well.