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Individualism and Community
ADDRESS

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for the Advancement of Teaching

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Thank you for your warm and generous remarks. I am very grateful to President Peterson and to the members of the board of trustees ~~who are here.~~

I have been here for perhaps only an hour or so, but I have a wonderful sense of celebration and reunion. I feel that this is an authentic place, that all of the talk about the importance of the undergraduate experience is being struggled with and lived out in this community in the making. ^{Communities are always in the making.} They are something we discover and rediscover, build and rebuild, every single day. ^{And} Franklin Pierce has discovered the reality of building community—that it lies in the nature of its communication. When all is said and done, community is really communication at its best. The two are essentially one.

Franklin Pierce is one of America's most distinctive and distinguished institutions. I am genuinely amazed that in a very short period of time—thirty years, which in the history of higher learning is but a flicker—it has established a sense of itself and is rapidly distinguishing itself in the national agenda because of its distinct mission, its superb faculty, its climate for learning, and the bold, creative effort to define in an authentic way the nature of liberal learning on this campus.

I have been interested in general education for forty years, starting when I first became dean of a small college in California in 1956. Coming from another discipline, I hadn't had one course in education. I started to read course catalogs, and the more I read, the more distressed I became that we seemed to have developed a system of cutting and pasting from other catalogs, of living within the framework of our individual disciplines, but not finding ways of establishing integration and discourse that represented larger purposes and objectives.

And so for four decades, I've been engaged in this fascinating question of what is an educated person. ^{The answer lies in making essential connections.} The work of Barbara McClintock, the Nobel laureate,

and what ~~are~~ is a liberal education.

^{for example}
illustrates that everything is one, that there is no way to draw a line between things. Her research establishes the absolute dependence and relationship of variables. And when the world-renowned physicist Victor Weisskopf was asked on one occasion, "What gives you hope in troubled times?" he said, "Mozart and quantum mechanics." But where in the college curriculum do we begin to discover such connections and make integrations that cut across disciplines? I celebrate the various individual disciplines, but I believe they cannot stand alone.

^{So} what you have created ^{here}, it seems to me, is an essential conversation. Let me hurriedly add in these introductory thoughts about the new core curriculum at Franklin Pierce that there is no single way by which integration must occur. There are literally dozens of models that I think would stir vital inquiry within the academy. You have chosen one. To me it is an exciting, dramatic strategy, which I will comment on more fully in a moment. Let me say, however, that I finally concluded that while there is no single way for colleges to resolve the general education question, what I fear most is that we might stop debating it. Because in the end the greatest value of debating general education is not in the certainty of the outcome, but in the quality of the discourse. And so you have boldly defined one strategy, but I hope you continue the debate, understanding that the virtue is in the continued search for larger meanings. That to me represents a true community of learning at its very best and becomes a model for the students.

I have been asked to talk about individualism and community, which I think goes to the heart of this distinguished institution. And the questions I should like to pose are these: Is it possible in the midst of all our diversity to achieve some sense of cultural cohesion? Can we, with all of our individualism and separateness, also promote community concerns? And I should like to begin by telling you a story.

In 1972 I was sitting in my office in Albany, New York. It was a dreary Monday morning, and to avoid the pressures of the day, I turned instinctively to the stack of

third-class mail that 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, I discovered a student newspaper from Stanford University, and the headlines captured my attention. The Stanford faculty had reintroduced a required course in Western Civilization after having abolished ~~all requirements~~^{this} just three years before. Bear in mind this was 1972.

The students, I discovered, were greatly offended by the faculty's brash act. I knew they were offended because the student editorial board had put an editorial about it on the front page, not on the inside of the newspaper, and they had even bordered it in black, suggesting the depth of mourning they felt. I read with care the editorial, which among other things said, "A required course at Stanford is an illiberal act." The editors concluded their attack with this blockbuster question: "How dare they impose uniform standards on nonuniform people?"

I was first amused and then somewhat depressed by that comment. I was troubled that some of America's most gifted students, after fourteen or more years of formal learning, still had not learned the simple truth that while we are "nonuniform," we still have many things in common. These students had not discovered the fundamental fact that while we are autonomous human beings, with our own aptitudes and interests, we are still deeply dependent on each other. And this brings me to the central theme of my remarks this afternoon.

I am convinced that ~~education surely means affirming~~^{good} the sacredness of every individual. It ~~means celebrating~~^{resg} the uniqueness of every culture. It ~~means, as the Stanford students put it,~~^{as} acknowledging the nonuniformity that separates us from each other. That's why we have electives, and that's why we have majors, to allow students to find their way into the interior of academic life following their own interests. We must celebrate individualism in education from kindergarten to

graduate school, encouraging the sacredness and dignity and uniquely inquiring mind of every students. But I think that there is another side of the equation.

I believe that education means discovering that while we are all alone, we are also all together, and the goal must be to celebrate not only our individualism, but to reaffirm our community as well. That to me is the essence of your struggle with the issue of common learning here at Franklin Pierce. But where do we begin?

Several years ago in a book called *Quest for Common Learning*, I suggested that we might organize the core curriculum not on the basis of the disciplines and departments, although they are absolutely crucial, but rather on what I call the "human commonalities," those universal experiences that are found in all cultures and among all people on the planet. I concluded that there are in fact seven commonalities that bind us all together.

First, ~~my beginning point is so obvious that it's frankly been forgotten.~~ At the most basic level, we all share the universal human experience of birth and growth and death. Have you noticed that the best way to make connections when visiting another country is to take a baby? The life cycle binds us all together, and yet the sad truth is that so many people go through life without reflecting on the mystery of their own existence, not understanding conception, not considering the sacredness of their own body, not learning about how to sustain wellness, and not pondering the imperative of death.

My wife, Kay, is a certified nurse-midwife and delivers babies, including seven of our own grandchildren. For years she worked with adolescent pregnant girls in Washington, D.C. She'd come home at night and talk about these children having children, who for nine months had fed their unborn infant Coke and potato chips, and who learned about birth and life in between the labor pains. These were mothers who did not know the process of creation. Such ignorance is abominable. We have in this

culture young people who know more about VCRs and the interior of an automobile than about the functionings of the human body.

I am suggesting that we all share the mystery of birth and growth and death, and I believe that quality education means helping students understand the most basic human experiences, ^{these experiences} and ^{also} discover how ~~they~~ vary from one culture to another.

This leads ~~me~~ ^{to} to the second commonality. In addition to the life cycle, which is so obvious and yet so neglected, all people on the planet use symbols to express feelings and ideas. The simple truth is that our sophisticated use of language sets human beings apart from all other forms of life. It's through words that we're all connected to each other. 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 human bones that are fully formed at birth. ^{The formation of} ~~We begin to form language~~ ^{begins} ~~in utero as we monitor~~ ^{is monitored.} the mother's voice. And following birth, language exponentially expands.

Language is absolutely essential in defining who we are and where we fit. ~~And~~ ^{it's} essential in making connections with each other. We are bonded in community through the use of language. Consider the miracle of this moment. I come here, ~~I~~ ^{and} start vibrating my vocal folds. Molecules are bombarded in your direction and hit your tympanic membrane. Signals go scurrying up your eighth cranial nerve, and there is a response deep in your cerebrum that matches in some respect the images in mine. But do you realize the audacity of this act? ~~I have no way to know that these guttural utterances are doing anything except irritating your tympanic membrane. 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.~~

~~In any event,~~ I'm suggesting that our exquisite use of symbols, which we take for granted just like breathing, makes us truly human, and in education, students

should not just study the parts of speech, but should learn how language profoundly shapes our lives.

Culture is shaped by symbols. Malcolm Bradbury, writing in *The New York Times*, said, "It is an old truth that if we do not have mastery over language, language itself will master us." Today we live in a world where cliches have become substitutes for reason, where prejudice is frozen into hurtful slogans, even on a college campus. And have you noticed how fleetingly we engage with one another? How little time is devoted to authentic interaction, and how much of it is casual, occasionally ceremonial, and frequently defensive? But how much time is actually devoted to listening as well as speaking? Not very much.

In response to this challenge, I propose that all students complete a course in expository writing. The discipline of writing should be required in every class. Good writing and good thinking are inextricably interlocked. I also propose that every senior be asked to write an essay on a consequential topic. That's the ultimate test of the outcome of the collegiate education. Can you think and can you use symbols and interrelate the symbols toward a consequential end?

but let me make one other ~~really audacious~~ ^{in which} suggestion. I'd like to see students—here at Franklin Pierce perhaps as a part of the "individualism and community" program—engage in a course or seminar called "The Ethics of Communication," a seminar ~~where~~ ^{in which} the uses and abuses of languages would be considered, where political debates would be carefully critiqued, and where the integrity of one's own discourse would be thoughtfully considered. In fact, I know of no better topic of study for binding individuals into a community than to inquire into the nature of our own communication. I am suggesting that educating students means teaching them that language is a sacred trust, and that truth is the obligation we assume when we are empowered in the use of words.

binding humanity together, is
~~This brings me to the third human commonality.~~ *is that* Beyond the life cycle and the use of symbols, all people on the planet respond to the aesthetic. Art 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.

Consider how Salvador Dali's painting "The Persistence of Memory" can profoundly touch any person haunted by the relentless passage of time. And consider how the old hymn "Amazing Grace" can stir bonds among people whether they are from Appalachia or Manhattan.

A friend told me that last year she was in Czechoslovakia on New Year's Eve. No one was speaking English, and she just stood and smiled a lot. But she said at twelve o'clock, someone started to sing "Amazing Grace," in English, and everyone joined hands. She said there was not a dry eye in the house, ~~because~~ they had communicated at a deeper level. This is the universal language of music. Consider also how "We Shall Overcome," sung in slow and solemn cadence, can stir powerful feelings regardless of race or economic status.

I'm suggesting that for the most intimate and most profound and most moving experiences, we turn to music and to dance and the visual arts, which express feelings in ways words cannot convey, and this is true for all people on the planet. I suggested earlier that if you want to connect with people in another culture, take a baby. Well, if you don't have a baby, I suggest you take a flute.

This brings us to the fourth human commonality. Even though we're all "nonuniform," as the Stanford students observed, all people on the planet have the ability to recall the past and to anticipate the future. We are, so far as I know, the only species on the planet that can place itself in time and space. Isn't that amazing? We orient ourselves as no other creatures can. *spanning.* ~~that's a miraculous human experience~~ that educators should celebrate and ~~reaffirm.~~

T. S. Eliot wrote, "Time present and time past / Are both perhaps present in time future, / And time future contained in time past." We are dealing with the seamless web of time. And yet how often we squander this capacity to look in both directions. We live only in the present. We don't recall our heritage or spend time discovering our own roots. Would it be too sentimental to suggest that during class discussion we might occasionally get autobiographical and share with others the uniqueness of our own family histories? Let me ask you, how much do you really know about your fellow students? Is there any friend of yours on this campus who has revealed his or her heritage so that you could thoughtfully discuss what has brought you together?

I think in a larger sense, educators need to stress Western civilization so that students in this country can understand our past, and we need to stress non-Western cultures to understand our future. I am convinced that ethnic and women's studies will enrich the curriculum as well.

The fifth commonality has a great deal to do with the individual and community. In addition to the life cycle, the use of symbols, and our response to the aesthetic, and our shared sense of time, all people on the planet are also members of groups and institutions that consequentially shape their lives.

We have a son who lives in a Mayan village in the jungles of Belize with his Mayan wife and four children. And when we visit Craig each year, I'm impressed that the Mayans, separated from us by a thousand miles and a thousand years, still carry on their work in ways that are very much the same. When I first went down there, I thought that the jungles of Manhattan and the jungles of Belize had nothing, absolutely nothing, in common. I was distracted by the superficial differences between the two cultures. But over time I discovered that the Mayans, just like us, have their family units, elected leaders, village councils, and law enforcement people. They have jails and schools. They have places to worship. At one level it is all very different, but

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at another level it is all very much the same. We are all caught in a web of institutions, regardless of the culture.

Students should be asked to make cross-cultural comparisons, to see, for example, how life and group behavior in Santa Cruz, California, compares with life and group behavior in Santa Cruz, Belize.

The sixth human commonality has to do with our connectedness to nature.

It's true that we are all different, but it's also true that we're all connected to the ecology of the planet Earth, in which we are all "embedded," 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 in the river, he watches corn being picked and pounded into tortillas. He ^{knows} he's connected to the ecology of the planet. ~~I have to tell you that~~ my grandchildren who live in Boston and in Princeton have a ^{much} ~~profoundly~~ more difficult time discovering this connection, surrounded as they are by appliances and precooked foods and asphalt. How can they feel their connection to the natural world?

When I was Commissioner of Education, Joan Cooney, the brilliant creator of *Sesame Street*, came to see me one day, and she said they wanted to start a new program on science and technology for junior high school ^{students} ~~children~~. This program came to be called *3-2-1 Contact*. In doing background work, Joan told me that they surveyed some junior high school students in New York City. They asked ^{the} students, "Where does water come from?" Students said, "The faucet." They asked, "Where does light come from?" Students ⁹ said, "The switch." and "Where does garbage go?" Students said, "Down the chute." These ^{young people} ~~children~~, through no fault of their own, had a connectedness to nature that went about as far as the TV, the refrigerator, and the light switch on the wall. A disconnectedness from the ecology of the planet.

I'm suggesting that with all of our differences, every single one of us is inextricably connected to the natural world, and I believe our very survival on this

planet increasingly will depend on our ability to respond sensibly to the earth home we share together.

The seventh human commonality has to do with the individual and the ultimate community. All people on the planet, regardless of their unique heritage or tradition, are searching for larger purpose. Reinhold Niebuhr put it most precisely when he said, "Man cannot be whole unless he be committed. He cannot find himself unless he find a purpose beyond himself." I do think people have this yearning desire to place their lives in larger context.

Searching for meaning, I know, varies greatly from one culture to another, and I celebrate that fact. It varies greatly from one philosophical point of view to another, and from one religion to another, and I celebrate that fact. My own conviction, however, is that at this moment in our culture, life is made authentic for most of us as we engage in service. There is something validating about the capacity not only to receive, but in turn to give. And that provides some degree of validation as to the nature of life itself.

Martin Luther King, Jr., said that everyone can be great, because everyone can serve. And I do believe that the young people of this nation are ready to be inspired by a larger vision. As some of you may know, in the Carnegie books, *High School* and *College*, we propose that service become an integral part of both school and college education, to help students see a connection between what they learn and how they live, and to view the campus not as an isolated island, but as a staging ground for action.

As Donald Schön, of MIT, observed, this is not simply doing good, it's in fact rooted in scholarship itself. As students move from theory to practice and from practice back to theory, they have a better understanding about the nature of knowledge and its implications. And that's true in medicine and law and business and industry and education and all the rest. Theory and practice are, in fact, in my

judgment intellectually intertwined. And above all, it is a matter of purposefulness. 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 ~~dies~~ but that they die like sheep." The tragedy of life is not death. The tragedy is to die with commitments undefined, convictions undeclared, and service unfulfilled.

I've suggested ~~here~~ that while we're all different, we are at the same time very much alike. We are all born and live and die. We all send messages to each other. We all respond to music and dance and the visual arts. We all can recall the past and anticipate the future. We are all members of groups and institutions. We are all inseparably part of nature. And we all seek to give meaning to our lives. With all of the divisions among people, these commonalities provide the social glue that holds us together.

In closing, I must underscore the point that an authentic community can be achieved only when it's bathed in human justice, and frankly I am enormously troubled by the growing gap in America today between the privileged and the poor. I'm troubled that in this, the most affluent nation in the world, one out of every four children under the age ~~six~~ ^{of} is officially classified as poor. I'm troubled that hundreds of thousands of babies in this country do not have good nutrition. And I consider it a national disgrace that the Head Start program, which prepares disadvantaged children for school, serves less than half the eligible children because of lack of money. Why is it we can fund space shuttles and bail out the S&Ls and never seem to have enough money for our children?

Langston Hughes brought the challenge into focus when he wrote: "What happens to a dream deferred? / Does it dry up / Like a raisin in the sun? / Or fester like a sore— / And then run? / Does it stink like rotten meat? / Or crust and sugar

over— / Like a syrupy sweet? / Maybe it just sags / Like a heavy load. / *Or does it explode?*

Let's celebrate diversity. Let's celebrate the uniqueness of every individual. Let's be grateful that we are all different. But let's reaffirm community and strengthen our connections. Let's also acknowledge that terrible injustices still exist and pledge to build a better world for all of us, and most especially for our children. I do not expect miracles overnight, and yet it is my deepest wish that David, my five-year-old grandson in Belize, and Julie, his five-year-old cousin in New Jersey, who speak different languages and have different colored skin, will grow up knowing deep down inside that they are truly members of the same human family. To me this is what ^{education and} community ^{are} ~~is~~ all about.