

the
PRESIDENTIAL INSTALLATION CEREMONY
of
SEAMUS CAREY

PRESIDENTIAL ADDRESS



TRANSYLVANIA UNIVERSITY
Lexington, Kentucky
October 9, 2015

THE DOOR, THE LIGHT, AND THE LIBERAL ARTS

I.

Distinguished Guests, Faculty, Staff, Students, Alumni, Delegates, Neighbors, Friends, thank you for being here today. Your presence here brings me honor, but more importantly, it honors Transylvania University and I am grateful for that.

Regardless of how hard we tried to streamline this occasion, getting here today involved a lot of work by a lot of people. I want to thank the inauguration committee, led by our vice president for communications, Michele Sparks and our academic vice president, Laura Bryan. I want to thank Rachel Millard, my executive assistant, who has been essential in keeping me on track this past year, and I want to thank everyone across the campus who helped to put this all together.

I want to also thank our board chair, Mr. Bill Young, for all of the support he has provided to the school for many years and to me over this past year. He leads a dedicated Board of Trustees whose support and generosity make it possible for Transylvania to provide the education we do.

I want especially to thank my family for their support and encouragement especially over the past 15 months. Transylvania has come a great distance this past year. But I would estimate that the amount we have accomplished is proportionate to the amount that my family has sacrificed by me being here. Please join me in showing appreciation for my family: Noreen, Caitriona, Anna, and James.

II.

When I was growing up, my brothers and I had the privilege of learning carpentry from my father and a few of his friends. To evaluate the skill of another carpenter, they often asked a simple question: Could he hang a door properly?

Seems like a small thing, I know. We go in and out of doors all the time, and like so many things we use regularly, we don't often take time to reflect on the art and skill of hanging doors until they stick, or squeak, or just won't open.

Then when we are forced to pay attention, we realize that there is much to appreciate about a properly hung door—especially one that worked flawlessly for decades, and about the carpenters who did the work.

A tool that was integral to hanging a door back then was the plumb bob. I've come to admire the plumb bob as a tool, but starting out it was a source of anxiety for me. For those of you who don't know, a plumb bob is a weight usually in the shape of a cone suspended from a piece of twine. It's used to create a vertical reference line. Now we all just fire lasers everywhere.

I was usually assigned to the bottom end where the plumb bob hovered over the floor spinning on its twine and swinging like a small pendulum when it was first lowered from above. My job was to steady the plumb bob so that a pencil mark could be recorded. It took time to develop the knack of bringing the plumb bob to stillness while the person above, usually my father, waited impatiently holding the line over his head.

Over time, I learned to steady the tool quickly by taking firm hold of it before it began to swing. It took longer to learn that if I wanted it to be perfectly still, I had to be still, and then a gentle release would leave only gravity to hold the bob in place.

As you might imagine, used properly, the plumb bob's clean vertical line ensures a precise geometry of square corners and symmetric openings. This is especially useful in old buildings where beams sag, floors slope, and headers are out of level.

When a door is finally hung, an apprentice might use a tape measure to check the right angles. An experienced eye takes another measure however. Master carpenters check for level by slowly closing the door to watch a line of light diminish through the shrinking opening.

The properly hung door swings freely without notice and when closed the door and the jamb create a parallelogram of perfectly vertical and horizontal lines. It is a moment of pure beauty.

III.

I want to suggest today that the craft of liberal education we ply shares a lot in common with the master craftsmen I worked with all those years ago. Yes, there is the obvious and somewhat clichéd sentiment that we open many doors for our students.

But there is the equally powerful sentiment that we too are craftsmen and women, that we use the tools at hand—the texts, microscopes, software programs, musical instruments, arguments, dialogues, to help students understand the world and the natural and cultural laws that govern our existence, that we encourage them to joyfully use that knowledge to make beautiful and valuable things.

Indeed, Transylvania has been doing just that for 235 years. As the first and oldest college west of the Allegheny Mountains, we began opening doors when buffalo and grey wolves still roamed Kentucky. We taught our first classes in the shadow of the American Revolution. Early Transylvania graduates walked out our doors and shaped the fabric of our country: 101 as members of the House of Representatives; 50 as United States senators; three became House speakers; 34 became United States ambassadors; 36 were state governors; two became Supreme Court justices and two more served as vice presidents of the United States.

For a good part of the 19th century, our legal and medical colleges supplied most of the doctors and lawyers who practiced their professions in the “west.” And of course, at the beginning of last century, as Kentucky University, we helped nurture the birth of a small business on the other side of town...‘what’s its name’, oh yeah, yeah, the University of Kentucky.

Most importantly, we continue to open doors for our students today, through an innovative curriculum in which our students not only master classic texts but also conduct cutting edge research to address the serious issues of our age.

We encourage them to pursue their passion for literature, or science, or economics, or the arts. But we also actively prepare them for professional life by connecting them to alumni mentors through the 100 Doors Mentoring Program.

We are working to build a first class urban campus by preserving our landmark structures and building new state-of-the-art facilities for our students.

We foster their self-confidence by intentionally cultivating a culture of respect and inclusion through Project One.

And we do all of this to support and enhance the work our students do in the classroom.

Over the course of the past year, I had the opportunity to lunch with many of these students. For a while, even though my visits to the dining hall were unplanned, I thought I was being set up and was only being exposed to our best students. But it turned out that all of my conversations remained informed, passionate, and engaging no matter whom I sat with.

These conversations made it clear to me that our students undergo significant intellectual, moral, and emotional development as a result of their Transylvania education.

Towards the end of the academic year, it became clear to me why. I asked a table of juniors and seniors what their favorite class was. There was a long pause.

Then all the students emphasized that they had several favorite classes and teachers. At that point, I knew I was at the right school because that lunch table “proved” to me that our commitment to student learning, which is the reason we exist, is also our greatest strength.

IV.

Still for all our successes, if you listen to the critics and the pundits, institutions like Transylvania are in serious trouble. You cannot turn on the television or pick up a newspaper or magazine without someone declaring loudly and sometimes shrilly that we cost too much, that we aren’t relevant anymore, that we aren’t practical, and worst that we aren’t needed.

One presidential candidate asks us to consider how many jobs there are for “Greek philosophers.” Another makes fun of “art history majors.” Pundits, on the left and on the right, demand that we pour all our energy into workforce development.

Those same pundits chastise universities and colleges for “coddling students for being too politically correct or not politically correct enough,” and everywhere we turn there is someone yelling “fire” at the top of their lungs while offering shallow solutions to deeply entrenched challenges.

These critics seem to ignore the fact that one-third of fortune 500 company leaders have liberal arts degrees. They ignore technology gurus such as Steve Jobs who famously said, “It’s technology married with the liberal arts, married with the humanities, that yields the results that make our hearts sing.”

Or they are deaf to the call of technology CEOs such as Steve Yi, who credits his liberal arts training for preparing him to see every issue from different angles.

Or David Rose, CEO of a photo analytics company, who credits his undergraduate degree in religious studies for his ability to understand the role of faith in moving human initiatives forward.

V.

Such testimonies do not erase the legitimate critiques of higher education. Nor do they prove that the skills our young people need could not be acquired through different means.

Those of us in higher education cannot ignore the questions that are being asked of us. I am a father with one daughter in college and another beginning her search this fall. I know how much college costs. I know that what we teach has to matter to the future.

We are getting a glimpse into this future already. It reveals driverless cars and eyeglasses that can process the visual images with such volume, precision, and speed, that the blind will actually see.

Compared to such modern technology, my plumb bob is antique. But its lessons are not: steadiness, stillness, concentration, the understanding of gravity, the craft of getting it right and square because right and square is what works.

And that is what we want. We want to cultivate the steadiness, connectedness and confidence our students will need to discover unknown doors, to open doors that are shut, to break down doors that are barred, to walk through doors beside those who need help to take the first step, and, most of all, to build doorways where others seek to build walls.

Our liberal arts education must call forth from our students the courage to act for the common good even when it goes against narrow self-interest. It must ignite in them a curiosity and love of learning that can be quenched only by the bravery needed to follow in the footsteps of Transylvania's legions of Pioneers who do not wait around for someone else to fix problems.

At a time when we watch mothers and children wash up on foreign beaches trying to escape the devastation of war, or watch shores recede under the rising ocean tides, or watch the innocent murdered in our schools, how can we choose to do less?

The world needs us to call this generation to see and say what is revealed in such moments. It needs us to call them to learn the steadiness and conviction demanded to seek justice and even terrible beauty in such moments. It needs us to call them to make something better with the freedom they have been given.

And when we call them to that action, they will not be afraid of the beautiful or the broken, the distant or the familiar, the celebratory or the shameful. They will not be perfect. None of us are. But they will not turn away from the challenge to make a better future for themselves, their families, and the world at large.

VI.

I know that those among you who have come expecting a road map to our future may be disappointed at this point that I have not told you the ten specific things we are going to do.

Others will worry that I have not proposed that we seek after greatness by clawing our way up the ladder of academic rankings. Don't worry. There will be plenty of time for both in the coming years. My aim today, in line with my training, is more philosophical.

I want to emphasize that it is not enough for us to teach our students to enjoy the fleeting freedom and self-satisfaction that comes from personal gain or power. It is not enough to teach them to build new technology, or market it well, or produce artful critiques of its impact. It is not enough to prepare them to meet or even to make a new age of miracles.

Transylvania graduates need to be taught the full freedom that comes only when they align their knowledge and skills with their highest values for the betterment of the world. They need to understand that what is most significant about their education is not that they have acquired knowledge, but that they can use it.

Professor McCarthy taught me that to be free is to be able to take a stand in the world by living in accordance with what one values most. He also showed me that to achieve clarity about what we value most sometimes requires retreating from the noise and bright lights of the world. Sometimes it requires closing the door so that in privacy and stillness we can take our measure.

This world is in sore need. It holds so much promise and is in such agony. We need to dedicate ourselves today to pioneer a new future for Transylvania, one that throws open the doors of the past to careful scrutiny, one that throws open the doors of today and invites the world in,

one that throws open the doors of tomorrow and sends its students out to cherish and change the world.

As Robert Kennedy put it, “The Gross National Product does not include the beauty of our poetry or the intelligence of our public debate. It measures neither our wit nor our courage, neither our wisdom nor our learning, neither our compassion nor our devotion. It measures everything, in short, except that which makes life worthwhile.”

If we do it right, the liberal education Transylvania students receive affords them the composure and steadiness they will need to know who they are and to take a stand in the world.

They will be both engaged and still, and from time to time will feel the gravity of what they are called to do.

They will be familiar with this vast and complex world so that they are not strangers, even in the most foreign lands.

They will be inspired to care for themselves, and their families, and, along the way, to repair the world.

They will be compelled to pass on the light that has been passed on to them by the master craftswomen and men who taught and continue to teach at Transylvania.

Who among us would say that such an education is not valuable? Who would claim it is not useful or practical? Who would say it is not necessary?

We stand in front of a doorway waiting to be built. Let us hang that door together. Let us make it true and square. Let us reach out together, faculty, staff, administration, students, alumni, trustees and friends to grasp and turn the knob.

As we open that door, remember that the beauty of the well-plumbed door is made visible by the light that surrounds it. *In Lumine Illo, Tradimus Lumen.* In that light we pass on the light. It is my privilege to open this door with you. Thank you.

