

And That One Talent Which Is Death to Hide:
The View from a Quarter of a Century as a University President

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*When I consider how my light is spent,
Ere half my days, in this dark world and wide,
And that one Talent which is death to hide
Lodged with me useless, though my Soul more bent
To serve therewith my Maker, and present
My true account, lest he returning chide;
“Doth God exact day-labour, light deny’d?”
I fondly ask. But patience to prevent
That murmur, soon replies, “God doth not need
Either man’s work or his own gifts; who best
Bear his mild yoke, they serve him best. His State
Is Kingly. Thousands at his bidding speed
And post o’re Land and Ocean without rest:
They also serve who only stand and wait.”*

Many of you will recognize Milton’s well-known 19th sonnet. Perhaps you had to memorize it, as I did, for a high school English class. Being part of the baby boom generation, the public schools in Brooklyn were overcrowded, and my high school, with over 7,000 students, was running on three sessions. My session began at about 7:00 a.m., and so it transpired that, in the dark of one cold winter morning, as I rode to Erasmus Hall High School on the Flatbush Avenue bus in Brooklyn, I memorized Milton’s sonnet to the starts and stops and background noises of a city bus. And that sonnet stuck with me. I loved the sound of the language, even while I repudiated what its words seemed to say.

God does not need man’s work? Wrong. I was taught by my immigrant parents that work in the world was the very essence of life. Not to be able to work was the worst thing that could happen to a person, a circumstance from which all bad things ensued – homelessness, hunger, ill health,

bondage, despair. And the greatest good fortune that could befall a person was to be able to do the work one had a passion to do. And, I was taught, education is the pathway to that good fortune.

Who best bears a yoke, serves best? Wrong. I was taught that no person should ever have to bear a yoke. We should be free to live a full and unharnessed life, and we should keep struggling until we are free. And, I was taught, education is necessary to freedom.

They also serve who only stand and wait? Absolutely wrong. I was taught that a person must work hard for what she wants and that only a fool stands and waits to receive what she has not worked for.

So much for Milton. What did he know? I believed my mother, not Milton, and so, starting from a very young age, I worked, and I have kept working ever since to what is now no longer a very young age. I knew, even as a child, that my responsibility was to find within myself that one talent that, if left hidden and unrealized, would be like death. And, moving through the years, I found my talent. I build public universities. It is my talent, and it is my passion.

I started my career as a faculty member at the City University of New York, and that was where I learned how important and how miraculous universities were, and how difficult they were to run. My first full vice presidency was at Rutgers University, as part of a team that transformed a modest state university into a serious research university. My first presidency was at Metropolitan State University in the Twin Cities of Minneapolis and St. Paul. I was only there for five years, but during that time we transformed Metro State from an upper division only, degree completion institution for working adults into a full four year program to reach the Twin Cities younger population as well, designed and built a real campus, planned a university/community library, hired faculty, and created the University's first programs in the sciences. Metro State was right in the middle of the state's largest population center, and it seemed as though nobody had noticed that the majority of the children in the public schools were children of color, who had no real access to higher education. The surprise for everyone in Minnesota was how much we could accomplish, how quickly we could do it, and how much the university had underestimated its potential to serve.

During the twenty years of my second presidency at Montclair State University, I have also led the transformation of an institution. When I came, it served 12,000 students; today it serves over 21,000 highly diverse students. When I came, it granted about 2,200 degrees a year; today it grants over 5,200 degrees each year. We have added new colleges, schools, programs, research institutes and centers. We added doctoral programs. We built hundreds of thousands of square feet of instructional, laboratory, and research space for those many thousands more students, thousands of beds, parking spaces, rebuilt the entire energy infrastructure of the campus, and hired hundreds more faculty and technical and professional staff.

A former governor of New Jersey who was present at the opening of one of our new facilities on campus referred to me as the Master of the Loaves and the Fishes, and asked how on earth I had

managed to make so much from so little. Governor, I said, sweat equity. Sweat equity. We did not stand and wait, in particular, we did not stand and wait for state funding or rational and responsible federal or state higher education policy. We just worked really hard, and we worked really smart.

Being a university president is a very hard job because our product is not making money and it is not making goods or providing services, our product is knowledge and people. We make people, and people, for better or worse, make culture and civilization. I know that sounds a bit as though the university president is some kind of deity, but, no, not so much.

When I get up in the morning to go to work, I am not heading to my throne room; I am heading to the factory floor. I am working on the plumbing and the parking and the payroll and the politics and the policies and, ultimately, I am working on, and banking on, the potential of people. Because my job is to make sure that every nickel that comes from the students and the taxpayers and the donors is being used as effectively as possible to make sure that every student has the best possible opportunity to get the best possible education. And to do that, my job requires me to encourage the thousands of people who work for the University to do their best by helping them to understand why it is important for them to do their best. Presidents need to paint the big vision, but the vision is meaningless unless the work is accomplished to implement it. It's a tough job.

As public college and university presidents, I don't think we have the luxury of accepting lack of success, because success or the lack thereof is not about the institution, nor is it about ourselves. It is about the knowledge a university creates that can be applied in the world and it is about the students. If we are successful, the people have understanding, information, and tools that otherwise they might not have had; if we are successful, we enable the success of our students. If we are not successful, it is not us, but they who will fail to achieve. That is why we must succeed: why we must solve the problem of affordability; why we must solve the problems around retention and completion rates; why we must assure the quality of the faculty and the rigor of the curriculum; why we must be rigorous and intentional in the use of every scarce nickel and dime that we have. We cannot make excuses; excuses simply are not acceptable. We cannot say we're sorry, but the dog ate our homework, that the students were not well-prepared, that the budget is not adequate. Of course the dog is out of control; of course the students have not been brilliantly prepared or motivated; of course we don't have adequate resources. So what? We still have to do the job. We cannot, for example, explain away an unacceptable graduation rate by citing demographics or lack of resources. If we admit students, we must provide them with what they need to succeed.

What I am getting at here is that public college and university presidents are not called upon to be brilliant. I mean it's a lovely thing to behold when they are, but, first and foremost, what we are really called upon to be is competent, competent and indefatigable – able to get the absolute best out of people, able to keep the budget in order and to stretch the resources to their maximum usefulness, fully engaged and willing to invest the time to assure that all the systems are up and running, always problem solving to make sure the enrollments are on track, the curricula are what they should be,

that the personnel decisions are rigorous, that the plumbing works, that the alumni and donors are giving, that the facilities and equipment are being used to best effect, that the students are getting the classes, the advising, and the services that they need for success. Competency is under-rated and under-assessed when it is, in fact, the main thing. And a person knows when he or she is competent; when you are competent, you can feel it, literally, in your bones. When you are not competent, you know that too, you can feel it, literally, in your lymphatic system, and, if you are not fully competent to the task, you should not, for example, be a surgeon or a governor or a teacher or a general or the president of a public college or university, because too much of importance is riding on your ability to get the job done right. Lives are at stake.

And then, while we are competently managing the institution, in the other 100% of our time, public college and university presidents are called upon to be able to articulate convincingly the fundamental values of the institution and its long-term vision, to inspire all our internal and external communities to believe in, and commit to, the vision. In the context of the larger world in which the institution exists, we must be spokespeople for doing good and moral arbiters in the face of complex societal issues. It is the president's voice that keeps reminding the people, beyond our institutions, those in the seats of government and those holding influence and resources, of the importance of what we do. And it is the president's voice that reminds those within our institutions that what we do, we do not do in a vacuum. What we do, we do in the context of the larger world, with reference to the larger world, to serve the larger world, and to prepare the young to serve. And, as a consequence, we must be eloquent and persistent in speaking about that larger context. For example, among the many things we must speak about:

We must speak about the achievement gap in the nation's schools, about the shortage of qualified teachers, about schools that do not feel safe for our children, about schools unable to make academic achievement feel acceptable to African American boys. We must speak so that facts do not get hidden under the rug. Facts, for example, such as the fact that if black students were entering college at the overall national rate, there would be about 85,000 more black college freshmen each year – 85,000 more this year, next year, the year after that, and the fact that the number of black males in our country participating in higher education at the undergraduate level is under one million, while the number of black females is about 1.5 million, and these disproportionate rates continue in graduate and professional programs.¹

We must speak about the fact that, especially in communities stressed by poverty and the social obstacles born of discrimination, by the time they are teenagers and should be preparing for college and their futures, we have lost too many boys to lack of confidence, to hopelessness, to social pressures that drive them away from education and toward destructive patterns of behavior; we have lost too many to drugs, to death, and to prison. For every 100 black girls aged 15 to 19 that die, 310 black boys of the same age die. For every 100 girls across all races under the age of 18 held in

¹ Source of data: *Postsecondary Education Opportunity, The Pell Institute for the Study of Opportunity in Higher Education*, Number 282, 2016-4 and NCES Digest of Education Statistics 2015.

state prisons, 2,532 boys under the age of 18 are held in state prisons.² Girls and women have fought long and hard for equal access to higher education, and they have achieved it. We must speak to continue to encourage our girls to claim their full place in society, in all professions and occupations, but we have to save our boys, and our voices must be heard about that.

We must speak about refugees, about how we would respond as a nation if North Africa were a boat ride away from our shores instead of from Europe, about how we have responded to our own southern border and the thousands of children and other refugees walking across Central America to find safe harbor in our country. As a national higher education community, we have spoken about DACA and our undocumented students, we have asked what it can possibly mean for one human being to document another, and our speaking out is having an impact.

We must speak to our university communities about our role in the face of the tragedies and devastation that nature, aided by man, brings to bear upon us from time to time. I remember speaking about Hurricane Katrina and New Orleans and reminding the University community that the cataclysms of nature are one thing, and the failures of society are quite another thing: the inadequate preparation and the slow and awkward response; people dying of dehydration, crammed into buildings without sanitation or food or water; our own citizens transformed into refugees, families with small children wandering the highways of the south going they knew not where. Katrina revealed yet one more example of the continuing divisions of race and class in our society, as those who had the least, lost the most. In the face of Katrina and the devastation wrought by more recent storms in Texas and Puerto Rico and elsewhere, we must speak to remind our communities about the context for our work: we educate the scientists who understand the hurricanes and the geology; we train the technologists who know how to mitigate the forces of nature; we train the strategic managers who know how to get trucks and buses down the highway and water to survivors; we educate the governmental leaders who, we hope, will be more effective at serving the needs of all of the people entrusted to their care; and, ultimately, we are a fist to break the back of class and racial and gender inequities.

When feelings are running strong, as they were after the most recent presidential election, we must speak to remind the University community, that, more important than the result of any one election, is the democratic process made manifest in the peaceful transfer of leadership even when many may not like the result, and to remind the community that the university is one of the few places where we have the opportunity to teach and to model the principles of democracy before people have to actually go out into the world and try to live it. In restive and contentious times like now, we remind our community that we are enacting models of citizenship; we are exhibiting the difference between critical thinking and the promulgation of ideologies, the difference between informed analysis and rant. And let's face it, we are not always that good at modeling civil debate on our campuses, so the president must speak about that.

² Source of data: *Postsecondary Education Opportunity, The Pell Institute for the Study of Opportunity in Higher Education*, Number 271, January 2015.

And right now, because of the University of Virginia and similar occurrences, we are called upon to speak about the meaning of freedom of expression in our republic and how we model that concept in the university. On many occasions in various forums, I have reminded our university community that we do not prohibit recognized groups of students or employees from holding events or inviting speakers on the basis of content or point of view, even when some of us may find these views deeply offensive or hostile to us as individuals or members of a group. We can discuss our reasons for objecting to the event; we can produce a counter-event of our own; we can stay away from the event and encourage others to do so as well, but we do not shut it down or shout it down, we do not prevent those who would hear from being able to do so. As Rosa Luxemburg said in 1922, “Freedom is always freedom for the one who thinks differently.” In her case, it was the Russian revolution that was on her mind. Closer to home, Justice Oliver Wendell Holmes said essentially the same thing in *United States v. Schwimmer* in 1928: “If there is any principle of the Constitution that more imperatively calls for attachment than any other it is the principle of free thought – not free thought for those who agree with us but freedom for the thought that we hate.”

There are many whose urge and instinct is to stamp out “the thought that we hate,” to shut it down, to shout it down, to annihilate, if not the speaker, then the very idea that anybody should have the right to say or to display or to celebrate or to advocate for a hateful thing. While we can understand that urge, a university cannot accept it, cannot permit it, and cannot condone it – no matter how hateful the object. “Freedom is always freedom for the one who thinks differently.” It is the voice of the president that is called upon to say such things and to understand how to make such ideas come alive in the life of a campus, while protecting that campus and the rights of all members of the campus community.

James Bryant Conant was a very accomplished organic chemist, a serious scientist, and a very activist president of Harvard University for 20 years. He said at one public occasion in the very early years of his presidency that, “He who enters a university walks on hallowed ground.” In making that remark, I believe that Dr. Conant was thinking of the generations of brilliant minds who had trod the grounds of many universities to teach and to study, to uncover and preserve human culture and history and to push forward the boundaries of knowledge. He was thinking, I am sure, about the important societal purposes of the university. And, in using the phrase, “hallowed ground,” I think he meant, not so much holy as venerable, that the university was ground to be respected and to be revered. And I think he was right: we who enter a university walk on hallowed ground. Making public universities, that is, universities for all the people and not the select few, is what we do, and we do it in the context of a treasured and long national and international history that goes back centuries. With a profound commitment and the sweat of our brow, we are called upon to build our colleges and universities to support the fundamental and best principles of American democracy. These principles rest on providing the nation’s people with a level field of educational opportunity, the platform from which all other economic and social opportunities can become attainable. The great Mary McLeod Bethune, founder of Bethune-Cookman College, said, “Education is the great American adventure, the world’s most colossal democratic experiment,” and she was absolutely right. In the 21st century, a higher education is as critically needed as a K-12 education was in the last century, but not a fake education delivered by some predatory money-making business, not a

facsimile, but the real thing, an education that enables students to attain knowledge, develop their skills, and deepen their understanding of their place and their responsibilities in the world and the purposes and uses of learning.

Right now, we are among the caretakers of those institutions, the universities of the nation and the world, that, imperfect though they may be, have, more than any other human institution, been responsible for the unfettered generation of knowledge and for its dissemination to an increasingly broad population, responsible for paving the roadway between education and freedom. And so, it is our job to persevere, to wade straight through the mess of the world and to focus on saving from the mire of extinction the beautiful thing – the language, the history, the science, the art, the potential living in every person. Then, though we will die, it will not be before we have saved something real and passed it on to the next generation, and not before we have taught that next generation how to recognize beauty – whether in the word, or the formula, or the song, or in each other, or in the incredible, exquisite use of something. We will have used our talent. And because we shape and prepare the people who will shape our world, we better be good at our jobs.

When I was girl growing up playing in the streets of Brooklyn, I desperately wanted to be a cowboy. I wanted a horse and a gun and I wanted to ride out and save people from the bad guys. I played those stories in the streets during the day with my treasured second-hand cap pistol and my metal roller skates, and I dreamed those stories at night. Well, as it turned out, I was sad to learn that girls weren't supposed to be cowboys, and I never learned how to ride a horse, and I have never held a real gun in my hand, and I learned pretty quickly that one should never waste time worrying about the bad guys, they're not going anywhere, they'll always be there, and then I learned the most important thing – one cannot save people, one can only help people to save themselves.

During the course of my life, I have envied other people's ability to do great things. I would have liked, for example, to play the piano brilliantly, but it isn't my talent. I build public universities for people who need them. That is my talent. It would have been like death to hide it. We build public universities for people who need them. That is our talent. Everyone else in the world thinks they know what we do and how to do it better, but they really don't. Only we do what we do, and every college and university only has one president. We need to demolish the criticism with competence, and we must keep on speaking both within and beyond our institutions. Our voices matter.

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