

INAUGURAL ADDRESS
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Emory University
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I would like to tell you a story...

A month ago, at the New York Palace Hotel, a young man asked me a tough question. The occasion was an Emory alumni gathering of about 200. I had just finished talking about Emory's vision statement and was in the midst of questions and answers. The young man stood and said: "We seem to be living in a period of so much divisiveness. People are distancing themselves from each other, and wars and political conflicts abound. What is your plan for Emory to fix that?"

"What is your plan for Emory to fix that?" It is amazing how the mind works in the seconds immediately after such a moment. All eyes in the room turn to you awaiting your response. Your mind reels. Is this a serious question? If so, why would anyone assume that Emory has a role to play in reducing and healing divisiveness on a global scale?

How would *you* answer that question?

I sorted quickly through dozens of possible answers, searching for just the right one. This was a challenging question, a vexing one, but a good question deserving a thoughtful answer.

The premise of the question is solid. Evidence of widespread divisiveness and isolation in the world is not hard to find. Our society has become entrenched in the art of criticism, perhaps more highly valued today than the art of creativity.

- In academe, peer review means highlighting flaws and errors in manuscripts more than helping to create solutions;
- In television, sitcom humor usually consists of an insult contest among characters vying to be first with a snide remark or personal put-down;
- In politics, this year's presidential campaign moved in record time into the mud-slinging phase, much earlier in the season than in previous years.

We can see examples of divisiveness and isolation not only in the behavior of individuals, but also among groups and nations:

- It was necessary last year to petition the Supreme Court for permission to value racial differences as important elements of establishing and maintaining a richly diverse campus community;
- President Carter consistently warns of the growing chasm between haves and have-nots among peoples and nations of the world;

- And certainly there is no shortage of war and conflict, of despair and depression.

We have difficulty, it seems, concentrating our thoughts as we ought on those things that are true, noble, just and pure—lovely, of good report, and praiseworthy.

So the first part of the questioner’s premise is plausible—there are strong divisive tendencies that separate and isolate in today’s world.

But what about the second part, that Emory should do something about it? One can imagine a role for governments, diplomats, family, and clergy. But why should EMORY assume responsibility for addressing this fractured state of affairs? Why not simply give the easy answer, the tempting answer: “That’s not our job”?

As much as we might want to dodge this young man’s question, doing so would not relieve that nagging sense of responsibility that presses on those in positions of high privilege, that sense of responsibility that makes demands of both people and institutions. “To whom much has been given, of them much will be required.” The link between privilege and obligation is inescapable and strong.

Is Emory privileged? You bet we are.

- Emory is privileged to be in Atlanta, Georgia;
- Emory is privileged to employ some of the most highly qualified and productive teachers, scholars, and researchers in the world, as well as a cadre of talented and dedicated staff members;
- Emory is privileged to have an impressive student population, a strong endowment, superb facilities, an excellent research base, a capable leadership team, and many valuable partnerships— with the CDC [acknowledge CDC representative], with The Carter Center [nod toward Pres. Carter], with Georgia Tech [note that Wayne Clough is in San Antonio for the basketball championship game], and with our elected officials [nod toward politicians];
- Emory is privileged to claim a long tradition of valuing an education of the heart as well as of the mind. Emory has a sense of moral compass that is extraordinary. That sense of moral compass is especially extraordinary among universities like ours whose values must also include those necessary to succeed in a competitive academic research environment.

Emory is privileged, and this privilege is part of what we celebrate today. We should be pleased and proud of the blessings we enjoy.

But at the same time that we celebrate our blessings, we should feel challenged to use our position of privilege to fulfill our sense of obligation. Knowing that we are privileged, we must not—we cannot—avoid our obligation to address the question: “What can Emory do to help counter the forces of divisiveness and isolation?” What is our responsibility to address the problems of divisiveness and isolation in the world?

I am convinced that at least part of the answer is “higher education.” On the surface, this response might sound utterly predictable. But, remember, higher education means more than just “advanced education.” Indeed, some of the most highly educated people I know do not even have an advanced degree. Universities in general and Emory in particular can combat the forces of divisiveness by re-committing to a genuine form of higher education. Consider for a moment what true higher education is about.

In the world of the university, we believe that higher education should prepare people to pursue truth, to understand the past, and to seek and disseminate knowledge. Universities are rightly seen as environments for this kind of higher education because, at their best, universities are:

- creators of the future (as Frank Rhodes reminds us in his most recent book);
- they are havens for free thought;
- they are discoverers and creators of new knowledge;
- they are pursuers of truth; and
- they are providers of a liberal education.

But, as desirable and important as these ends are, they are only a partial portrait of the goals of genuine higher education.

Let’s take a closer look. Beyond the characteristics just mentioned, higher education should also set us free from our self-centered universe, should enable us to perceive the world from others’ perspectives, and should empower us to make a positive impact on society. Let me repeat. The true purpose of higher education is to lead us out of our self-centered universe to a place where we can perceive the world from others’ perspectives and have a positive effect on the community. Higher education is as much about gaining insight as it is about gaining information; as much about seeking wisdom as it is about seeking knowledge.

In this light, we can begin to see why higher education is part of the answer to our questioner’s concern. Higher education teaches us that our own experiences and personal “data base” are incomplete until we understand the needs, issues, and opportunities of others. Higher education, by strengthening communication and bonds among us, weakens the forces that pull us apart.

Is genuine higher education easy to achieve? No. Being educated in this way goes against our nature. We often prefer to be like infants who have all of their needs met by others with no regard to cost or responsibility. We resist growing up. But higher education will not let us remain self-centered and immature.

Each of us has had some brief taste, at least, of interest, caring, and influence beyond ourselves. This de-centering of self and encounter with others might have happened in many ways. Through the social interaction fostered by true higher education, we bump into each other’s universe and can, for a brief moment, be jostled from our comfortable

centers. We might have enjoyed “mountain top” experiences of social service or weekend retreats that help focus our interest on others. People of faith struggle to place our deity, not ourselves, in the center of our universe. So, if a “decentering” of one’s life is the goal of higher education, it is indeed an education about the higher things and about understanding each other.

Here at Emory, let us commit ourselves that in all that we do to teach and discover, to create, heal, and serve, our focus must be beyond ourselves.

-- In the health sciences, it is probably easiest to remember that the focus is on others. After all, people don’t make a career of public health, nursing, or medicine simply to be healthy themselves. Instead, they understand the critical need to get in touch with the needs of others, to understand them, and to have a positive effect on another person’s universe of discomfort or disease.

-- In the practice of law, the focus is not on the attorney, but on the needs of the client.

-- In the study of business, the primary goal must not be about personal wealth, but instead about generating wealth and the proper stewardship of that wealth throughout the world. Our key purpose must be to prepare principled business leaders.

-- In the study of theology, the quest should not be toward personal piety alone, but toward discovering ways to lead others to seek eternal truths.

-- In the study of the sciences, the aim must not be to generate knowledge only for personal benefit, but instead to add to the grand body of knowledge for the betterment of others.

-- And in the arts and letters, in the humanities, our obligation is not simply to entertain through writing, art, music, and dance, but also to offer unselfishly to the world tangible expressions of the mind, heart, and soul—to open up communication with others outside of our private worlds.

At Emory, we must trust that personal satisfaction comes as an added blessing when we offer and pursue genuine higher education. At Emory, when our commitment to see the world through others’ eyes is strong, when we hunger and thirst to transcend our self-centered worlds, we will be drawn together and the world will be drawn to us. Doing so will make Emory a destination university. We will be an internationally recognized scholarly community. We will be inquiry driven, ethically-engaged, and diverse. We will work collaboratively for positive transformation in the world through courageous leadership in teaching, scholarship, research, health care, and social action.

Happily and in many ways, Emory is well on the way to being in true community, to reaching beyond our self-centered universes, to countering divisiveness and isolation, to true higher education.

Today, on April 2, 2004, Emory awakened—

- to a continuing discussion on racial tension, but not to form up opposing forces in opposite corners of some battleground. Emory awoke, as I said, to continue the discussion and to take uniting action.
- to headlines in Tuesday's issue of our student newspaper that announced the coming presence of controversial speakers to our campus, but not to spray-painted messages on campus walls or to secret meetings for groups driven by divisiveness or hate. Emory awoke to engage in and be engaged by a deeper understanding of these controversies.
- to news of a tragic death in our student community, but not to hopelessness. Emory awoke instead with a deep sense of loss and sympathy that will push us even harder to work against isolation, to provide comfort and healing, and to be resolved to reduce suffering and loneliness.
- to the planned celebration of a rich history and an eagerness for the future of our university in the traditional celebration of the inauguration of a new president. But certainly not to an exercise of self-congratulation and proud elitism and privilege. Instead, Emory awoke to a sense of obligation and hope for its future and the future of genuine higher education.

And so, what was my answer to that young alumnus who asked what his university's plans were for ending divisiveness and isolation in the world? He got the short version of my answer, the seed that has grown into my reflection today. I told him: "I don't know for sure, but...I believe that higher education is part of the answer."

Mr. Chairman and all members of the Emory University community, I do believe that, when privilege and responsibility are held together, genuine higher education is a compelling answer to divisiveness and isolation in the world. Allow me in your presence and in the presence of all gathered here to acknowledge the rich privilege that you have extended to me to serve as Emory's 19th president. And out of that great privilege, I enthusiastically respond to the attendant obligations and responsibilities.

- I pledge to serve Emory to the best of my ability.
- I pledge to use whatever wisdom is granted to me to challenge our scholarly community with empowering vision-and noble goals.
- I pledge to the best of my ability to exercise sound counsel and good judgment, and to do all in my power to enable our University community to grow in excellence through careful stewardship of our existing resources and by securing new resources.

Together, at Emory University, we will practice true higher education. And by doing so we will enjoy the satisfaction, the power—and yes, the fun—of pursuing these goals together as a community.