

A Time for Courageous Universities

James W. Wagner
Emory University

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Good morning to all of you, and thank you for joining us on this first “Emory Day at the National Press Club.” I must say—not only to the Emory alumni who are present but also to those of you in the Fourth Estate—that my colleagues on the faculty and in the administration who have traveled here to be part of the panel discussions later in the morning are among the most committed, the most passionate, indeed, the most *courageous* scholars and teachers in the country. Whether their vocation is to forge a new and more deeply humane understanding of the many “voices of Islam,” or to extend health care to the millions of uninsured, or to expand the political franchise and rights of minorities and women—these are distinguished scholars whose work will repay your attention. I’m very proud to be able to share this day with them.

Of course all of us come to a discussion of higher education still very much affected by the events of last week in Blacksburg, Virginia. Our prayers and thoughts continue to be with the families of those who died and with the community of Virginia Tech.

If we needed a reminder that the university is not an ivory tower, nothing could have demonstrated that fact more terribly, more horrifically, than those hours on the Virginia Tech campus, when the university as a microcosm of our society was

on display. I want to say more about this in a few minutes. But first let me say something about our purpose for being here.

We have come here, in part, to dispel a myth or two about Emory. A university that does not play Division I basketball or football finds it hard to be noticed in our infotainment culture.

Although Emory is known in many quarters as “Coca-Cola U” – and although we remain indelibly proud of the cola-generated Candler and Woodruff legacies that have been so momentous for us — Emory now competes on a national, and indeed, a global stage for talent and resources. Our admissions program is among the most selective in the country, admitting only one-quarter of all applicants this year, to the celebration and sometimes consternation of many a loyal friend and alumnus; our degree programs rank internationally among the best, elevating the stature of the whole as the parts become stronger and stronger.

Among the aspirations to which we call ourselves in our vision statement is the call for Emory to become a destination university. Supporting that aspiration is that fact that our home city is a flourishing base, a destination itself growing (in the last 6 years) faster than any other metro area in the country, and offering strong partnerships and collaborations with the likes of CARE, the American Cancer Society, and the CDC. All of these things provide benchmarks

by which we can track the progress that Emory has made in the past three decades to find its place among the top twenty universities in America.

In addition to getting the facts straight about Emory, we have come here, in part also, to show off this constellation of stars — just a dozen who will have to stand today for many hundreds of others. We have left behind wonderful scholars who have made great impact — people like Dennis Liotta who is committed to drug discovery and was the co-inventor (along with his colleague Ray Schinazi) of the most widely-prescribed retroviral drug to control the ravages of HIV/AIDS. And people like Frans de Waal, who, owing to his work on non-primate behavior, Time Magazine has just identified as one of America's top 100 interesting people. Or people like Harriet Robinson, who is leading human trials of a potential HIV vaccine. Or people like Natasha Trethewey who just last week was awarded a Pulitzer prize for her poetry. But the faculty that are here will give you a good flavor of the caliber of engaged scholarship that is so evident on Emory's campus.

As a research university we work at the usual things that all American universities are up to—expanding the frontiers of knowledge, slaying ignorance, discovering cures for disease, and, of course, finding places for people to park. With the exception of finding parking space, perhaps, all of these other things, related to academic achievement, are in some ways the easiest things we do.

But although academic enrichment is a very important part of the work of a leading university, our world needs universities that can play a still more critical role. That role is to provide a forum where people who disagree violently can do so without actually resorting to violence. That role is one that requires courage, because the more fully we embrace it, the more profoundly we are opened to internal dissension and external criticism. It is a role not being played adequately by any other institution in our increasingly fractious society. And it is about that role – that risky role that requires such courage - that I wish to commit the remainder of my remarks.

You here today don't need me to tell you what kind of world we live in. Those of you in the media report on it every day. And the rest of us—who rely on you professionals to give us fuller insight into our world—also know first-hand that American civic life has grown harsh. It's not quite the Hobbesian state of nature, where life is "solitary, poor, nasty, brutish, and short." But we may sometimes fear that we're devolving to that. We probably can't (and mustn't) blame it on the Internet, television, talk radio. No, most of these are, in the truest sense, mere media – conduits – for ideas and movements that would find other means of expression even if electronic communications did not exist. It's simply that we live in a contentious and often polarized world. Many who work as researchers and teachers in universities are prone to vilification or worse, from true believers of the left and right – from those who oppose the use of animals to test new drugs or vaccines, no matter how many years of human life they might

redeem from pain or death; from those who oppose research-driven state policies requiring the use of seatbelts or the use of vaccines to prevent diseases in children; or for that matter, from those who contest the teaching of evolutionary theory, a foundation stone of the modern life sciences. The list could go on and on in considerable detail, reminding us all of the unexpected way, at this late date in the history of the West, that science and reason themselves have become subjects of controversy. If you have former friends who now keep a distance because of political disagreement, changes in religious belief or practice, or contention over the way to raise children—well, you can count yourselves part of what seems to be a growing club.

All of us are familiar with the famous line attributed to F. Scott Fitzgerald, that “the test of a first-rate intelligence is the ability to hold two opposing ideas in mind at the same time and still retain the ability to function.” Less famously, Conor Cruise O’Brien (contributing editor to *The Atlantic* magazine) described an intellectual as “someone who is prepared to admit when another has made a point in a debate.”

On both counts it’s fair to wonder whether our society has lost some of its capacity for instilling—or at least requiring—this kind of intellectual capaciousness, this (perhaps uniquely human but too often underemployed) ability to experience or understand life from another person’s perspective. Can you imagine the talking heads on some of the cable TV channels and AM radio

stations pausing in the middle of their heated exchanges and saying, “You know, Bill, or you know Sean, or you know, Tim – I think you have a point there.” It doesn’t happen, or at least it doesn’t happen often. We are a society increasingly trained to hold on like bulldogs to a narrow way of viewing things. Perhaps it is in our sense of surety, founded or unfounded, that we find comfort.

Here’s an illustration of what I mean. Passing through an airport I noticed in a shop a miniature glass globe, a biosphere, containing a half-dozen live red shrimp and a stalk of an underwater plant. This air-tight, water-filled container creates a perfect, self-contained environment: the seaweed produces oxygen for the shrimp, which in turn produce carbon-dioxide for the plant and “groom” it by eating microalgae off it. These biospheres require nothing further—no need to add water, air, food, plants, or anything else. You can put it on your desk and forget about it.

Most of us have encountered persons or communities who would like to exist in a similar kind of “bubble.” Sure, they go about life in the real world of work and play, but they would prefer not to have to upset the perfectly comfortable balance of thought in their mental framework. They would prefer that no new ideas enter their self-consistent belief system, and that no new mental (or moral) energy be required of them. Presumably, this is the “foolish consistency” about which Emerson warned us.

In more modern parlance, people who exercise such foolish consistency could be described as “fundamentalists,” (exercising comfortable self-consistent fundamentalism) except that that term tends to have a particularly religious connotation for many of us these days. But fundamentalisms come in various stripes.

Consider the political fundamentalist. A study published by Emory Professor of Psychology Drew Westen, who will talk on one of the panels here today, demonstrates that after voters make up their mind about a political candidate, rational activity stops. The brain processes new information in a way that reinforces positive emotions toward a preferred candidate, while tuning out information that threatens this positive response. In other words, we resist being disturbed by facts from outside our bubbles. “My mind is made up—don’t confuse me with the facts.”

Indeed, the characteristics we normally find in religious fundamentalism—rigidity of belief, intolerance of alternative practices, and personal derogation of those who are different—some would say apply to American political life as well. A fundamentalist mindset leads to the dangers of excluding and even demonizing those who disagree with us. I could name examples on either end of the political spectrum and in almost all areas of intellectual endeavor (science, philosophy, law, business, even health and healing, but you know them as well as I do.

Universities have sometimes been accused of practicing our own form of fundamentalism. They have not always offered a welcome place for wrestling with religious faith, for example. On the one extreme - At some colleges and universities, faculty and students must toe a certain line defined by dogma—so that scholarship is not so much informed by faith as determined by it. At the other extreme - At most research universities, I'm afraid, faith is set aside as a charming anachronism, and religion is viewed through the lens of dispassionate objectivity, if it is permitted to be discussed at all.

Both of these models ignore the capacity of human intelligence to believe one thing while passionately examining its opposite. Both also diminish the vital need for persons of differing perspectives to understand each other's intellectual constructs.

Given our human tendencies to grasp tenaciously to our opinions and to seek the comfort of foolish consistency, one begins to appreciate more clearly the essential and distinctive role of the university to create habitats where we are safe, but where it is also impossible for us merely to exist like shrimp in a bubble, instead of truly living where it is impossible merely to exist without being challenged also to live. The business of a university is to set us free from our self-centered universe, to enable us to perceive the world from others' perspectives, and to empower us to make a positive impact on society. Let me repeat. The true purpose of the university is to lead us out of our self-centered

universes to a place where we can gain insight, not merely information; The university mission is as much about gaining wisdom as about gaining knowledge.

But how does the exercise of that mission get carried on a university campus? Well, for Emory, consider what Booker Prize-winning novelist Salman Rushdie, the Dalai Lama, and former President Jimmy Carter have in common—besides, as you may have heard, their acceptance of faculty appointments to teach Emory students. Beside their Emory connections, the other thing they share is a commitment to precipitating and engaging in what some have called impossible conversations. By “impossible conversations” I mean those conversations people tend NOT to engage in because of the discomfort caused by political differences, religious dogmatism, or the deep-seated prejudices that attach to race, gender, and sexuality, because such conversations risk scratching the glass bubbles of our self-contained, self-consistent belief systems. It’s easier to cut off conversation than to cut through the knottiness of some issues. It’s certainly easier to walk away than to walk beside someone whose views we violently oppose.

The lasting contribution of the university tradition lies in its dedication to fostering – indeed, to *requiring* -- such “impossible conversations.” - a requirement along with the thirst for intellectual diversity that allows us to view the world from other’s perspectives. Now, engaging in impossible conversations does not mean that we have to find resolution to every problem; but it does mean

that we do have to engage. Such engagement rarely happens outside of universities. As we have discussed already, it cannot happen on certain TV programs and AM radio shows. It does not happen, except by accident, in the well of the U.S. House or Senate, or in the halls of the United Nations, or in any other political venue where rhetoric is employed instrumentally, for political ends, and where what passes for debate is not genuine debate, and when the rules often are invoked to stop debate rather than enhance it. It often does not happen in our religious communities, which more frequently take the path of schism than resolution. Such impossible conversations sometimes do not even happen among some married couples or in some families.

Only the university is required by its mission to take pains to set the stage and define the rules for fair and honest engagement over issues of great moment. Only at a university can discussion be moderated so that all sides have an opportunity to be heard. Perhaps it is owing to this reputation and expectation for inquiry and objectivity that our presidential debates in America are held on university campuses. Universities also insist on non-violence - that those who wish to speak leave aside hate speech and ad hominem attacks, and couch their ideas in language that assures that people will want to listen - that even deeply offensive ideas can be discussed without offending people.

This sounds like a noble aim and it is at the root of the distinction between academic freedom and freedom of speech, but the process can be messy and

unpleasant. And sometimes it opens universities to public scorn. Think of the barrage of protest launched at universities in the 1980s and 1990s when they tried to establish codes by which to define civil discourse. Hate speech, carefully defined, was to be avoided; threats against persons on the basis of race, gender, ethnicity, or religion were ruled out of bounds. The aim was to promote the kind of community where people could trust that they could in fact articulate outrageous ideas without suggesting that their opponents should die, and could in fact be protected from such threats themselves.

Critics of both the left and the right came down hard on these universities, denouncing as “PC” the kind of self-definition that these communities attempted. What these critics missed was that universities are in fact engaged in a worthy kind of PC – not the “political correctness” that has been the bogeyman of so many commentators, but rather, PC as a kind of “passionate civility.” Universities must have the courage to EN-courage their faculty members and students to engage passionately with the ideas that excite them, but to do so civilly—with respect for the persons who espouse those ideas.

One of the prouder, recent moments at Emory occurred in February, when the University community gathered in our Glenn Auditorium to talk about *Palestine Peace Not Apartheid*, President Jimmy Carter’s controversial book. (For those of you who may not be aware of or have read the former president’s book, it presents an argument – as an attorney might – assembling and

connecting facts and events, which conclude that the principal barrier to the peace process between the Israelis and Palestinians lies with the policies and practices of the Israeli state. As you can imagine, this conclusion has been offensive to some.) President Carter's talk, however, was an exercise in passionate civility and a commitment to begin holding one of those impossible conversations. Some members of the Emory community felt the need to hold one of their own community members accountable. Carter, in turn, wanted to explain his position more fully within the University family. The intense but civil and courteous discourse that ensued was a model for what our universities and indeed our civilization should seek. The audience of students, faculty, and staff members—many of whom disagreed violently with Carter's perspective—did what a university (and perhaps only a university) does best: it practiced a passionate but nonviolent way of engaging respectfully, honestly, and purposefully while trying to understand complex truth.

I do not know whether anyone's opinions were changed on that day by President Carter's words. But I do believe that some minds were changed by participating in the process. They were made stronger, more open, more nimble, more capable of understanding, through the practice of impossible conversations. And that particular conversation continues at Emory, bringing into the conversation voices from on-campus and off with various perspectives.

And here is another example, made all the more current and necessary by the recent flap over Don Imus. For the past two years, and for the next three

years as well, Emory is engaged in something we call the Transforming Community Project—an effort to engage everyone in our university community, from faculty and students to administrative assistants and groundskeepers and alumni and lab technicians, in probing conversations about race in our institution. Like every other university founded in the South before the Civil War, Emory has slavery in its past. Like every other institution in America, Emory is made up of people who often have a difficult time talking frankly with each other about race, especially across racial lines. Emory is one of only several dozen colleges and universities in the country—out of more than 700 that applied—to be awarded grants by the Ford Foundation through its Difficult Dialogues program to carry out this project. In fact we at Emory believe so much in the necessity and likely positive outcome of the project, that we are investing more than \$2 million of our own funds in seeing it through. We want to transform our community, and in the process we hope to model the way for other American communities to be transformed. We want this so much that we are willing to risk failure in the attempt. And risk, after all, is the necessary dark side of courage.

This particular notion of institutional courage can be deepened and extended, though. There's a special courage required to continue as a university "family," so-called. Although the bonds of the biological family don't exist, the courageous university community adopts the practices of healthy families – at least in the following way. The faculty members who vehemently dispute each other's arguments—as several of Emory's professors have disputed President

Carter's—are willing to engage passionately in the debate while remaining in community with each other. Just as Emory will not sever its ties with the Carter Center, as some have urged, neither will Carter's fiercest faculty critics sever their own ties with Emory - aggrieved as they may be. To me this is the special quality of universities, and the particular reason why we can and must have courage. We must give harbor to the unpopular but well-argued, the marginal but potentially fruitful believing that in the fullness of time, some of those unlikely or unwelcome ideas, just one or two of those uncomfortable critics, may be the very ones in whom we find new meaning and hope.

Now I can hear your skepticism: Sure, you say, this is easy in a university “family” After all, tenured professors can to go at each other hammer-and-tongs in the safety of their cloistered campuses, where nothing much is at stake, and where the work of Classics scholars, lab-rat feeders, and sentence diagrammers in freshman English courses has little or no impact on the lives of long-haul truckers, low-income single mothers, Wall Streeters, or our fellow human beings who suffer misery, war, and environmental degradation in places like Darfur, Afghanistan, and Nigeria. Come on, I hear you say, what courage is necessary when your job is guaranteed except in the event of proven malfeasance, moral turpitude, or failure to show up?

It may be that our image of the academy is still informed too much by stereotypic images of the sixties: long-haired philosophers in bell-bottoms and denim vests seeking to appear relevant to their young charges in the SDS.

Let me offer another image a counter-image, a real image, in fact: It is the image of a middle-aged historian in a business suit, lecturing to a packed hall of 250 with the Internet transmitting his every syllable to a dozen other campuses around the country, recounting with considerable detail and passion why he has broken with a former U.S. President, a friend and colleague of a quarter-century's standing, over the critical differences in their shared devotion to the achievement of peace in the Middle East. That image, of course, is of Professor of History Ken Stein, earlier this month at Emory, continuing the riveting "impossible conversation" that has engaged so many on our campus since President Carter's publication of his controversial book. This is courage – to continue the conversation, to stay involved, to talk but also to listen, to respond.

The Great Seal of the State of Georgia, which Emory of course calls home, displays the state's motto: "Wisdom, Justice, Moderation." Interestingly, these are three of the four cardinal virtues identified by Aristotle, three of the four great virtues on which all the rest of moral life depends. What's the fourth virtue, the one missing from the seal? Well actually, it is the one that Aristotle identified as the first and it is a virtue to which we have referred several times: Courage. Aristotle, in some ways the "Father of Ethics," points out that "Courage is the first

of human qualities because it is the quality that guarantees the others.” Wisdom and justice—even the discipline of moderation necessary to avoid the extremes of passion—will not last without courage. As you observe the progress and achievements of Emory, and other research universities, we do of course want you to be cognizant of our achievements – our Nobels and Pulitzers and Rhodes scholarships, our grants and contracts, our patents and cures. But also look at us through the frame of PC – of passionate civility. *Are we passionate* – do we care? Do we care deeply and profoundly about the antagonisms and needs of our world? And do we care *civilly* – with respect for persons, with nonviolent debate at a time of violent disagreement? Are we hosting and even insisting upon impossible conversation over such matters a Palestinian - Israeli conflict, about race and difference, about campus security, about stem cell research, about religions and the human spirit, about shifting political tectonics, about the future and affordability of health care. If so, that is the PC test – the test that shows whether we have not only *passionate civility* but the *practical courage* - that you have every right to expect of Emory, and of every university worthy of the name.

Thank you very much.