“No part of the status quo”

175th anniversary convocation address, December 7, 2011

Good morning, and it is my pleasure to add my own warm welcome to all of you. And a special welcome to those of our 175 Emory history makers who have been able to join us today, along with their families and friends. In some cases we are joined by descendants of history makers who have passed on. To all of you, on behalf of my faculty and administrative colleagues, as well as the staff and students of Emory, we are honored and delighted by your presence. For the many ways that our history makers remind us of Emory’s work for positive transformation in the world, we are very grateful.

Several of our speakers this morning already have sounded a note about the future, and that’s appropriate. A good anniversary is both backward looking and forward looking. So this may be an opportune moment to recognize the end of a particular era at Emory and the dawning of a new one. Many of you will note that the old, gigantic blue plywood lectern that has been used for decades at Emory—affectionately referred to as Big Blue—has been retired as of today. This ceremony is in fact the inaugural voyage of this new lectern that we are using this morning. It was designed by Michael Kloss, Chief of Protocol and Executive Director of the Office of University Events at Emory, and hand crafted by Jack Scheu, who has been a master carpenter at Emory for more than a quarter of a century. We will look forward to using this elegant and high-tech-laden lectern for many years to come. Thank you, Michael and Jack.

This morning is a rare occasion in American history, the celebration of an institution that has achieved the ripe old age of a hundred and seventy-five. Not many colleges or universities in the United States are older—fewer than a hundred, in fact. When you consider that something like four thousand institutions of higher education exist in the United States today, longevity

certainly stands out as one of Emory's distinguishing characteristics.

But we would be using our time this morning unwisely if all we wanted to celebrate was endurance, and the survival of an institution through the vicissitudes of the last two centuries. So let's use this occasion to get to the heart of the matter, to learn what we can about Emory's soul. The truth is that there is a kind of tension discernible there. It can be seen in Emory's history, a tension that also pervades our present and is likely to shape Emory's future.

Now tension is not necessarily a bad thing. In fact, it is an essential element of progress: the progress of a barge up a river depends on the proper tension in the cable that links it to the tugboat ahead. Drag and the massive inertia of the barge's cargo resist progress. The direction of the tugboat and its mighty engines impart change. But with too little tension, no progress is made, or with too abrupt an acceleration, the cable may snap and progress is lost. Genuine progress comes in the necessary tension between change and continuity—or, let's say, between aspiration and the status quo.

Emory has claimed for itself an intention to live by exaltedly noble ideals and the highest of aspirations, believing that education is one of the most powerful forces for good in the world. On the other hand, those of us who live and work here, and who believe deeply in those ideals and aspirations, are also daily aware of the limits of our capacity to achieve them. So there will always be tension. Emory will never be perfect. Its progress will never be complete. But we can say with pride that Emory is a quite different institution than the one that opened its doors in the 1830s, just as America is in many ways a quite different country than the one in which Emory was founded. But we are still in many respects a lot like our forebears, and the tension with which we live, between our aspirations and the status quo, is in many respects a lot like theirs.

Let me give an illustration. Looking through Henry Bullock's history of Emory, published in 1936, you come across some old-sounding language used by the founders to

describe why they were starting a college. It is easy to be distracted by their quaint diction and possibly antiquated notions. Our Emory founders were not what we would think of as modern educators. 0

Here, for instance, is Ignatius Few, Emory's founding president, reflecting on the aims of the college shortly after the end of its first semester:

> [Emory's] pupils will . . . receive the doctrines of [Christian] revelation with the simplicity of little children, [but] they will [also] learn that the most recondite science, and the most perfect polish of . . . the human mind . . . are compatible with the humility and . . . faith of the disciples. . . . The intellectual Titan . . . who shall wield the armor . . .of science, will war not *with* but *for* heaven.

This may sound to us like the beginning of a Sunday school lesson, with its references to revelation and discipleship and heaven. But it is actually a somewhat bold declaration for a community in which education had barely gained a toehold, and where piety outweighed book-learning at the time. Recall that in Georgia in the 1830s, agriculture was the dominant economy, and illiteracy was twenty times higher in Georgia than in Massachusetts. Even towns as large as Macon lacked a single schoolteacher. And even though the University of Georgia was formally incorporated in 1785, it took another sixteen years before the first students enrolled at Athens. So education was not exactly a high-profile enterprise or a priority when fifteen students began classes in Oxford, two years after Emory received its charter.

Yet here is President Few, calling for intellectual titans who will gird themselves with the armor of science as well as the virtues of faith. In the words of Charles Wesley that Bishop Watson quoted earlier, it's a vision to unite knowledge and piety. It is really a daring call, a summons to add the power of intellect to the driving force of faith, to bring the same rigor and discipline to bear on the mind that Methodists for decades had applied to their hearts. For many

of those Methodists, and for others of that society in that day, the liberating potential of education and the refinement of intellect posed a threat to Christian discipleship and to the status quo. And here is President Few saying, it's okay—our people need what a liberal education can give to its young men: a broader understanding, a deeper wisdom, a more agile judgment. These things will strengthen and free them as individuals and thereby, potentially, strengthen and free us all.

Of course we must not lose sight of the frail humanity of the founders either. We at Emory began this anniversary year with a statement of regret by the trustees for Emory's entwinement with the institution of slavery during the college's early years. The access to strength and freedom available through a liberal education was limited at Emory to white males. For young women, the Methodists in 1836 established a separate college, in Macon—Wesleyan College—and for African Americans it would be another three decades before formal education would even be possible in Georgia.

So what we find in retrospect is that Emory's founders embodied the tension inherent in the human condition. On the one hand, they could see the good and aspire to it; on the other hand, their entanglement in the complex bonds of history, society, and human folly created a drag on motion resisting progress toward the very good that they envisioned. That predicament is what the great theologian Reinhold Niebuhr often referred to, when he said that our humanity makes us capable of conceiving of our own perfection, but it also makes us incapable of achieving it.

Our forebears could conceive of a kind of education that would produce builders and leaders of a better society, yet that better society was always somewhere over the horizon. If we are truthful, we know that we have inherited their legacy fully, for we also find ourselves as individuals, as a university, and as a society, in the same predicament. We believe that education

empowers people, yet we struggle as a society to make it more available. We know that research has led to better lives for millions, yet we debate whether public resources should be used for research that could (not tomorrow, but sometime down the road) enlarge the public good. We see the need for more physicians and other healthcare professionals but are caught in a budget bind that threatens support for educating them. In so many ways, we embrace the nobility of our historic aspirations while sensing that the fulfillment of those aspirations is always around the corner from tomorrow.

One of the glories of the kind of liberal education that Emory has tried to foster for the past 175 years is that it opens our eyes to this predicament, reframes it as an exciting challenge, and gives us the skills to try to move beyond it. Study in the humanities awakens our appreciation of the human comedy as well as human tragedy. Study in the arts nurtures our own inclination, however feeble, to give expression to our deepest longings and hopes and aspirations. Study in the sciences encourages discovery and experimentation that insists on testing hypotheses, examining possibilities, and conducting the necessary trial and error that lead to knowledge and progress.

If we need any justification for this kind of liberal education, this kind of freeing of the mind, all we need to do is open the booklets we received on entering the auditorium today. When we look over the list of our 175 Emory Historymakers, we see the names and faces of men and women who have manifested the virtues of a liberal education through their achievements— men and women who have exercised keen analysis, critical thinking, moral judgment, and the capacity to transform life through the power of minds and hearts fully engaged. They also inspire us to acquire, like them, a working set of virtues. And they teach us that the deep commitment to these virtues over time helps one to form an authentic character and to pursue a calling with integrity.

Think of them. Think, for instance, of C. Vann Woodward, who grew up in a tiny town in Arkansas in the 1910s and 20s, but was shaped intellectually by a book-loving mother, a teacher-father who had graduated from Emory College, and a beloved uncle who also had graduated from Emory and became the college's dean. Vann Woodward would grow up to become one of the great and influential American historians of the 20th century, despite the fact that he found his history courses at Emory College dull and the books he read in graduate school poorly written and full of implausible premises. By questioning the received history of the South, by examining that history with a fresh perspective, and by exercising a prose style that made history bracing rather than boring, he broadened our understanding of not just this region but America, and not just America but humanity. His aspirations overturned the status quo.

Or think of James Dombrowski, John Griffin, and Jamie Mackey—three white men from three different states in the Deep South, who graduated in three consecutive decades between World War I and World War II, when the Jim Crow system of apartheid appeared to be a firmly settled way of life in the American South. One was a minister and an artist; one was a sociologist and an educator; one was a lawyer and a conservationist as well as a politician. In different ways, they exhibited the remarkable aspiration and capacity of human beings to grow beyond the conventions (beyond the status quo) in which they have been raised. They also worked in their separate arenas to undermine a pernicious status quo, by creating opportunities in education, public service, and community building for anyone who felt the call to follow those paths.

Or think of Henry Bowden, who in 1961 said to a group of alumni, “Emory should want no part of the status quo.” Unwilling to abide by a status quo that would doom his alma mater to remaining a second-tier university, he helped guide Emory and the state of Georgia out of the path that would have led to a segregated mediocrity, and onto a path leading to an excellence that reflected the full scope of human potential.

Or think of Eléonore Raoul and Lettie Pate Whitehead Evans and Evangeline Papageorge and others, who, without fanfare or fuss, but with great effectiveness, paved the way for generations of women to succeed at Emory and beyond. We might note in passing the degree of cleverness honed in Eléonore Raoul by the liberal arts tradition at the University of Chicago. It was there that she found the aspiration, imagination, and temerity to seize the day in 1917 by enrolling in the Emory School of Law while the chancellor who opposed coeducation was out of town. What a way to move beyond the status quo!

Or think of Asa Yancey, the first African American doctor to become an attending physician at Grady Hospital, which had been built in the form of an H, specifically to separate the care for whites from the care for blacks. Can we exercise our own imaginations and draw on our own human experience to reflect on what that pioneering work must have been like for Dr. Yancey in the late 1950s and early 1960s? We honor that aspiration that helped to reshape the status quo.

We celebrate these men and women, these 175 Emory Historymakers, because they have incarnated, have brought to manifest reality in their own flesh-and-blood lives, the qualities that we hope to impart, or to strengthen, by education in a liberal arts university. We celebrate them also because they have imbued their own spirits into this university, giving back what they have received, and strengthening the institution’s character and resolve to be a force for positive transformation in the world through the power of education, research, and service. As a

university community, we accept the baton, taking from them the determination to follow the light of learning down whatever path it leads us to, the courage to speak a hard-won truth as we see our way along that path, and the hope and faith that in the end, our path will lead to a brighter horizon for those who come after us on this journey.

In the final minutes of my time this morning, it's those who will follow us that I would like us to think about. Looking forward to the next 25 years, as we tear a page from the calendar of Emory's life, it's fair to ask how posterity will judge our own faithfulness in living out the virtues of a liberal education for its own sake and also as underpinning our distinguished programs of professional education. Will those who follow us see aspirations that challenged the status quo and, through the tension of that challenge, led to progress? Will they be able to thank us for exercising keenness of thought, breadth of imagination, and capacity for moral judgment? Will they see an effort to transform life through minds and hearts fully engaged?

Despite the realism of Reinhold Niebuhr's observation about human imperfection, we can be grateful for what we have seen of Emory's past, and we can be encouraged by what we know of some of our current colleagues and community members.

Just last month, for instance, the renowned German theologian Jurgen Moltmann, a former Woodruff Visiting Professor in the Candler school of theology, joined in conferring the certificate of theological studies on nine women at the Lee Arrendale State Prison northeast of Atlanta. This program grew out of the work of Candler alumna Susan Bishop and Candler ethics professor Liz Bounds in ministering to women in prison. As one observer noted, the program's emphasis on critical thinking skills helps students see their own experiences in broader social and theological contexts—and thereby gives them the foundation for transformation. This sounds like a kind of challenge to the status quo.

Our faculty also continue to experiment with adapting the traditional liberal arts

curriculum here on campus in order to meet the needs of our society for critical thinkers, perceptive analysts, and effective communicators—for men and women who can bring creative and nimble minds to address some of our most pressing issues with integrity and courage. The Piedmont Project, now ten years old, has taught faculty members who are themselves superb teachers how to weave the topic of sustainability into their courses, and effort complemented by the recent adoption of Emory's Climate Action Plan to reduce by 50% per square foot Emory's emissions of greenhouse gases in time for our bicentennial in 2036. These faculty members are awakening and sharpening students' capacities in a world whose resources are growing more constrained. This sounds like a challenge to the status quo.

Similarly, our James Weldon Johnson Institute for the Study of Race and Difference, founded by our late faculty colleague Professor Rudolph Byrd, continues much of the work of our successful five-year effort through the Transforming Community Project to facilitate honest, even risky, conversation about race. This is one way to take steps toward a more whole society. This sounds like a challenge to the status quo.

Or think of the work being done by our health sciences researchers to improve the lives of millions around the world, whether through path-breaking work to develop new preventives, diagnostics, and therapies, such as Don Stein's work in treating traumatic brain injury with progesterone, or the work of Lynn Sibley in transforming the way whole communities in Ethiopia practice maternal and newborn health care. These are more bold challenges to the status quo.

We should be heartened by these examples. We cannot and should not avoid the need to address the great and grave disruptions that our society is now experiencing. But we can celebrate the recognition that liberal learning, offered in Emory's distinctive way, in the context

of a research university and underpinning powerful graduate and professional programs, still has the power to educate people who work for positive transformation in the world, to change the status quo.

As we turn a page and begin a new quarter-century that will take us to our bicentennial, let us take heart from the examples of those history makers whom we honor today; let us renew our determination to see clearly the circumstances in which we find ourselves; and let us draw ever more completely on the powers bequeathed to us in the Emory legacy of liberal learning. In doing so, let us remain committed to the fundamental elements of the original vision of Ignatius Few, reinforced by leaders throughout the decades, to provide an education of the heart and mind; to perceive and answer the call to courage emboldened by faith, hope, and compassion; to be empowered by the discipline of the intellect; and to strive to be increasingly the university described in the aspiration of our current vision: “a destination university, internationally recognized as an inquiry-driven, ethically engaged, and diverse community whose members work collaboratively for positive transformation in the world through courageous leadership in teaching, research, scholarship, health care, and social action.”

While we know that perfection lies always out of reach, and that the pursuit of perfection will always be in tension with the status quo, the responsible stewardship of our legacy lies in our willingness, nevertheless, to strive for it. With appreciation for the past and for your presence here to help us celebrate that past today; and with excitement for Emory’s future, thank you.