9-19-1979

Convocation Address, delivered on September 19, 1979

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For many of us the serious study of the novel began in high school with the reading and analysis of Charles Dickens, "The Tale of Two Cities." The opening lines of that novel are fixed in the minds of generations of Americans. They are, "It was the best of times, it was the worst of times." The story, of course, was set during the period of the French Revolution when perceptions of life were changing for the common man, and old institutions were being replaced by new. I recalled those Dickensian lines when I was thinking of a context for my remarks today.

There is a feeling abroad that life is in the process of fundamental change. That feeling is accompanied by anxiety, uncertainty, depression, but also a sense of expectation and opportunity. It may be generated by several elementary factors of the human condition. To suggest a few: There are new forces emerging that alter the world economy. People perceive correctly that there are finite limits on the sources of fuel that energize the modern world. There are questions and disagreements about the limits of the consumption of material goods. Aspirations of people who consider themselves economically underprivileged in the world have erupted in new demands for a greater share without the concomitant systems and technology to provide it. Distribution of wealth is an old problem, but the forces at work today give
it a new dimension. Are the economic systems with their accompanying political systems that are in place today able to coexist, or more important, are they able to provide reasonable economic justice and personal freedom that will allow the human species to live in peace and with purpose? Perhaps new energy resources, and new methods of communication and exchange will bring new ways of preserving human incentive, distributing the wealth acceptably, and providing for freedom of expression and movement. It is interesting to speculate on these things, but it is a little frightening too.

What is happening to the enclaves of religious and philosophical thought that provided human beings with a circumference for their lives, that contained within it all that was needed for belief, purpose, and preparation for death. I am sure that the immigrant Scandinavian Lutherans of Minnesota in the 19th century had little commerce with religious thoughts and ideas that interfered with their beliefs. Even in cities, ghettos of ethnic and religious heritage had nearly impenetrable, invisible barriers of belief and culture. Today we still have strong institutions to perpetuate values and belief. They are always part of a civilization. They are not to be belittled, but, in most cases, supported and preserved. Yet, life moves on. Modern communication and transportation allow people to flow from their traditional space to other
people's traditional spaces. Learning tends to give different light to old belief. As a result there is always a new chemistry of belief at work.

The highly educated and the elite of the world societies can inter-mingle, and their interaction may portend an evolution in the field of belief and values. When perceptions begin to change in the ranks of the living, then the planet or parts of it are in the midst of an evolution that leads to a new condition for the human species.

There are few people in the time of their lives who have the insight to accurately depict the significance of their own era. But to try to do so in my estimation is not a futile exercise. For those who are only comfortable with proofs, of course it is. To those of us who are speculators we cannot keep from it, and must accept the disdain from people who accuse us of time wasting, self indulgent games.

I believe we are living at a time when political and economic ideas that have been floating around for awhile, shaping some societies, are penetrating to a degree (perhaps in altered form) the minds and understanding of vast numbers of people. Technology in communication and exchange is making billions of people aware of each other as they never have been before. At the same time the aspirations of people are increasing, the world is confronted with a new awareness of the measurable, finite resources that fuel human life
on the planet. Confronted with change, particularly the aberrations of a period of change, a society will swing towards the conservative. This is happening to a degree in America today, in politics, in religion, in social reform. But I believe the factors at work that I have mentioned will so affect the perceptions of billions of individuals that their understanding of themselves, the nature of life, and their concept of God will have new dimensions; that within a century or two man's consciousness will be different from that known in the 20th century. Naturally not all levels of consciousness or life are the same for all people on earth at the same time, nor is it likely to be. The future, though, may bring more commonality of perception and understanding.

Whether or not you agree with my theory, you can understand why I thought about Charles Dickens' opening line in "The Tale of Two Cities."

These are the worst of times because the uncertainties seem to bring out our least attractive qualities. We tend to take what we can get for ourselves. As economic changes bring dislocation we fight, may even kill, to find what measure of security we can. We have come out of a period since World War II when for the majority of Americans at least, we lived on an upward curve - more money, more things, more leisure time, better jobs. Now we are not so sure, and the unknown is more frightening to us than to those who have not
had so much and so much relative security. The Viet Nam War and now 
inflation have and are undermining our view of what life is.

These are the best of times, too. There is excitement in knowing that 
we live in momentous times. The stakes are high. Will habits change and 
new sources of energy be harnessed? If they are, we may be propelled into 
a new era of creativity - one that presents an opportunity both to improve 
technology and transcend its shackles at the same time. If not, there may 
be a dark age. To set out on a quest for human understanding that will 
bring people closer together in spirit, and able to psychologically cope with 
that closeness, to make the world relatively safe from a holocaust, is more 
than noble. It is essential, but is not sure. Some people in the past 
who had dreams should have lived in our time for this is the best of times 
for dreams of the future.

On this occasion I have an obligation to dismount from the theoretical 
horse I have been riding, and relate what I have said to an agenda for 
Grand Valley. We have had some good times, a good report from the North 
Central Association with extended accreditation for 10 years, some significant 
faculty publications and some in progress, student achievements in many 
fields with notable success in graduate test scores in nursing, business. 
and accounting, many athletic championships, generous donors, and substantial
federal grants. The worst of our times see inflation reducing our opportunities, and creating the ill will that always comes with money problems. We have in process the closing of one of our colleges with the unfortunate accompanying dislocations. One of our facilities has been closed for a year and the State of Michigan has no process that can deal quickly with such an emergency. Yet, here we are at the beginning of a new academic year, and I am optimistic because we have more than our share of intelligent, dedicated, aware, and creative people around here. I am not Pollyana. There are always some of the other kind too. But we are a strong academic institution, and becoming stronger. There is reason for optimism because learning, improvement, perception, understanding are sparked by positive, non self-serving interaction between and among individuals. We want to improve our facilities, our equipment, our library and visual aids, but no matter what we do about them, our minds and our attitudes really set the tone and level of our academic discourse. They do not have to be affected seriously by inflation, buildings, legislative relations, town-gown relations, the media and other important factors that are not central to our central purpose - learning in an academic setting. There are the people here with the minds and attitudes to keep this institution on course. The
Chinese name their years, the year of the duck, or the year of the rabbit, etc. At Grand Valley this year and every year should be the year of the mind.

Most of us agree that our most important function is to participate in the development of the mind, our own and that of others, through reading, listening, experimenting, participating, and discussing. To what end we do that may bring several different responses. I think education for the sake of good future employment is not ignoble. If that, however, turns out to be the ultimate purpose of our enterprise I will be disappointed.

Earlier I referred to new levels of consciousness. I believe they will be necessary for survival. I am not sure what they will be. If I were I would be there already. Consciousness is an individual characteristic. It takes place in the mind. The term group consciousness is, I believe, a misnomer. Perhaps each person in a group may perceive similarly so that they all think alike about an issue or a value, but there is no single mind of a group. Each individual is conscious of himself.

I agree with Princeton psychologist Julian Jaynes that consciousness is an evolved human characteristic and that consciousness itself continues to evolve. Consciousness and the human perceptions that flow out of it will continue to determine to a significant extent what human life will be -- whether it will be able to survive at all. One of the ways society has established to mold and improve
the mind, giving the species a better chance for survival, is formal education. We have inherited that tradition. From it has come the use of reason and the language and methods of science. Through them life has been transformed, and we can continue to expand and build on those basic concepts. What lies beyond? That is for the future, but we are part of the process. It is fortunate for humans that plugging into the process has such rewards. The little or temporary insights we have are satisfying in themselves. We really don't know how profound our most profound thoughts are. Yet, if we let our imaginations fly we realize that what we are doing now may be a useful small exercise in the buildup of knowledge and understanding that will lead generations far in the future to a new and somehow more advanced destiny.

As we contemplate our work for this year, as we try to refine and improve our part of the process that brings greater understanding to the mind, I want to offer four axioms, and explain what they can mean for us.

First: An essential component in the process of man's new knowledge and perception is a broad understanding of human experience in the past. I realize this is a simplistic axiom, perhaps most axioms are. Nonetheless it needs to be stated from time to time. In an age of specialization, which in itself is not bad, we can easily be caught up in the details of technology
and/or technique. Our task is not to shun the modern demands on education for specialization but to make sure that the intellectual life on this campus requires people to have historical and philosophical perspective, an acquaintance with the literature of their culture and others as well, some knowledge of the languages of science, and the methods of science, the beginning of a world view, and increased awareness of the motivation of human behavior.

I have said many times and I reiterate. We should not have professional education versus the liberal arts. There must be both. A synthesis is called for, and it is our great challenge. One objective I suggest for Grand Valley this year that will assist us in fulfilling the first axiom and working towards a synthesis of liberal arts and professional education is to define a general education program for all our students. Its objectives should be well defined, the courses for meeting the objectives clearly stated and described, and the right of the student to meet the requirements in one or more than one college accepted by all colleges.

The second axiom: There must be a constructive balance between harmony and tension on a college or university campus. In my estimation the best colleges I have observed, best in the quality of education the students are receiving not necessarily in reputation, have been those in which there is no
hesitation to challenge or disagree with an idea or theory, but there are no lasting signs of disrespect or alienation. There are even symbolic occasions or gestures that bring disagreeing parties together voluntarily to demonstrate that the institution, though diverse, is whole, committed to the life of the mind.

In our federated system no one can claim that this campus lacks the tension necessary for intellectual discourse. Our failure is that there has been too little counterbalancing harmony. The North Central Association examiners left this campus with a high regard for faculty, students and staff. They were favorably impressed by academic quality. They were not favorably impressed by the arrangements for cooperation and contact we have among our colleges. There is too much competition. At a time when competition from outside is increasing we must confront this internal problem. Our original idea of distinct colleges, open to all students, even though a student is declared in one college, is one worthy of our continued efforts. I believe we should try to make our newly reorganized federation work. To do so requires balance between harmony and tension among our colleges, setting aside prejudices, yet insisting on high academic quality. Let us set ourselves to that task this year.
Axiom number three: The educated person will have a growing respect for the environment in which he or she works and lives. I am not prepared to launch into a discourse on major environmental issues today. I want to talk about our campus. As an aside I want to tell you I was amused at myself yesterday. After thinking and writing about such lofty terms as human consciousness and human aspirations, I went to the campus center for lunch. There I had to plow through cigarette butts on the floor wherever I went in the building. It so irritated and disappointed me that I could not help being amused by the irony of the situation, that within five minutes my mental experience went from the pleasure of thinking theoretically about the human condition to a minor point like cigarette butts that aroused in me an equal but less pleasurable emotion.

Enough on that subject. Many of us recognize that we have an unusual natural environment at Grand Valley. Biologists, geologists, and several others have been intensely interested in it. It may be time now for all of us to increase our awareness of the environment and what we can do with it. It is an academic resource, a recreational one, and one in which a person can replenish the soul in close proximity to the life of plants, birds and other animals.
This has been a building campus, and we are not finished. Yet there will not be so much building in the rest of the century as there has been in the past 16 years. We should concentrate now on the natural setting around us, protecting the ravines and their wildlife, developing an arboretum that is the best in the state, making the formal part of the campus a garden of trees, plants and shrubs, and an outdoor art gallery. Our goal in the next decade should be to create a campus that is an environmental masterpiece. We have the land, the ravines, beautiful buildings and the river. The natural resources are here.

Axiom four: The success of an educational enterprise depends ultimately on the responsibility each individual involved assumes for his or her intellectual growth and personal happiness. I said something like this to a group of faculty and administrators a few days ago, and though what I say may be repetitious to them, I want to elaborate. When it is the best of times and it is the worst of times, the threat to security makes people run for cover. As serfs surrendered their individual rights to the feudal lord, so do people in all times of uncertainty tend to give up something for protection. We are facing uncertainties in higher education for awhile. Note how people at different institutions react to those uncertainties. Do they always really
act in their own self interest? What appears to be self interest upon examination often times is not. Certainly, there is strength in group action, protection from injustice, a formula for survival. My caution to all of us students, faculty, and staff, is to keep personal control of our mental process, of our right to speak openly and freely, and of our ability to be our own person psychologically no matter what group we join and endorse. To look entirely outside the self for purpose, esteem, protection, and security will ultimately lead to disappointment. Free thinking, strong individuals, each committed to his or her task within the academic community makes for the kind of institution I think we want Grand Valley to be.

Come with me my friends. For a time each day leave your disappointments behind, overcome jealousy and mistrust, forget odious comparisons, and dream dreams, dreams of a campus where ideas delight the mind, where discourse stimulates good competition, and where you take pleasure in knowing each other as colleagues and friends.