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"PLAYING BY THE RULES"

MATRICULATION CONVOCATION ADDRESS

RICHARD WARCH

SEPTEMBER 23, 1993

In a number of these matriculation convocation addresses in recent years, I have sought to address various aspects of our common life at Lawrence and to celebrate and encourage those qualities of mind and endeavor that best fulfill the promise of liberal education. If I had any illusions that those speeches would have addressed these issues for all time--or if any of the returning members of the community thought they had heard the last of these exhortations--all of us are about to be disabused of the fantasy. So some of what I would like to share with you today will have a familiar ring to some of you, but I must confess that I return to the themes and concerns that engage us a bit older, perhaps a tad wiser, and certainly a great deal more troubled. For it seems to me that we have come to a point in American higher education that is a critical and potentially defining moment. All of which may sound portentous, if not pretentious, and perhaps a bit alarmist.

But the charming feature of what I'm about to say is that if you find it disagreeable, I invite you to disagree. If you find anything I'm about to say arguable, I urge you to argue. If any of my assessments or solutions are debatable, I welcome the debate. My only stipulation is that in disagreeing, arguing, debating, you've got to play by the rules. Indeed, playing by the rules is the theme of what I want to share with you this morning.

We all have experience with playing by the rules and of understanding the consequences or penalties that we incur if we do not. And the simpler and more straightforward the rules, the better we are at abiding by them. We are probably most familiar with rules in terms of games--three strikes and you're out, four attempts to gain ten yards and a first down, that sort of thing. Here's one, from the 55th edition of the Official Rules of Card Games, regarding a game familiar to generations of Lawrentians, Sheepshead: "For purposes of determining game....the total points in the pack is 120, and the player wins game if he takes 61 or more in tricks won in play. If he gathers 91 points or more, he wins schneider, and if he takes all the tricks he wins schwarz." Professor Azzi will be pleased to explain the finer points of the game to any and all interested parties.

Some rules prescribe the proper conduct of parliamentary debate and procedure, to wit: "The motion to divide a question can be applied only to main motions and to amendments. It takes precedence of nothing but the motion to postpone indefinitely, and yields to all privileged, incidental, and subsidiary motions except to amend and to postpone

indefinitely. It may be amended but can have no other subsidiary motion applied to it. It is undebatable." To violate that rule is to run the risk of being called out of order, though I suspect that this rule is probably recognized as much in the breach as in actual practice; it is not a rule, as best I can tell, that has interfered with either LUCG or faculty meetings, but it is a rule according to Robert's.

Other rules govern our common life at Lawrence, in terms of setting forth the norms of behavior and the procedures relating to such matters as parties and parking. "Sexual harassment by any member of the University community is prohibited" is one such rule. "Failing to distinguish carefully between one's own work and material from any other source" constitutes plagiarism and violates the Honor Code is another. Breaking these rules can result in sanctions that affect one's standing as a member of the community.

Rules may be found in the academic disciplines and courses in the curriculum as well. There are, for example, rules of proper English usage: "A participle or participial phrase used as an adjective must modify a definite noun or pronoun within the sentence." "Verbs must agree with their subjects." If you violate those rules, you are not using the language correctly and will be graded accordingly. In philosophy, students in logic confront the rules of natural deduction, such as the modus ponens: "If p implies q and if p is true, then q must be true." If you violate that rule, then you are being illogical. "In arithmetic, you cannot take the square root of a negative number." If you change that rule, you are no longer doing arithmetic, but the algebra of complex numbers. From music, we find the following rules: in tonal choral homophony, "Avoid parallel octaves and fifths" and "Never double the leading tone." As students in the conservatory know, to violate either of those rules in music theory brings with it the loss of a letter grade. And in the sciences a cardinal rule states that "To be considered valid, an experimental finding must be able to be replicated by other scientists using the same agents, instruments, and techniques." Failing to meet that test, one could submit one's findings to The Journal of Irreproducible Results (I'm told by Professor Lokensgard that there really was such a publication) but nowhere else.

Hence, if you want to play the game of sheephead or parliamentary procedure or English or philosophy or mathematics or music or science, you've got to play by those rules. In not all cases are the rules inviolate, especially in languages and the arts. And we all know about exceptions that prove the rule, house rules, rules meant to be broken, and the like. So we know that rules aren't always iron-clad. But in the main and for the most part, the rules I've cited are pretty unambiguous. You can ignore them or violate them if you want, but not without consequences. We are, then, used to playing by the rules and by rules of all sorts. They give an order and regularity to activity, physical or mental, that is comforting and stabilizing. But contrast rules of that sort--clear and codified--with the rules, say, governing the conduct of intellectual inquiry at an undergraduate college. What rules obtain in that circumstance?

It is not an idle or irrelevant question. As we read all too frequently of the

controversies on this topic flaring up throughout American higher education and as we have experienced versions of these difficulties ourselves, there is a real and serious issue confronting us in colleges and universities today. And the resolution of that issue, or at least the capacity of academic communities to come to terms with that issue, will have a significant bearing on how we conduct our business in the years ahead.

Let me try to frame the issue by citing several passages from "The Freshman Studies Book," which Professor Dintenfass wrote several years ago and which is distributed each year to incoming students. It is a commendable and useful book in many ways, but the parts I want to draw attention to here are the ones that deal with argument. "The history of thought," Mr. Dintenfass writes, "is a history of disputes." "To be educated, then," he goes on later, "is to join in the ancient and still unsettled arguments that have created [certain] works and our world." Hence, "class discussion in Freshman Studies is meant to serve as an introduction to the great arguments of intellectual life. That is, it will introduce you to the issues that are being disputed and the accepted rules for conducting the dispute," the first of which is to learn what the argument is about.

Several pages later, he returns to this theme with a short section entitled "The Virtues of Argument," which I think worth citing here in its entirety:

"In everyday life, polite people tend to avoid arguments. Arguing for its own sake, parents tell their children, is a bad thing. Argument, after all, is conflict, and the smooth working of everyday life depends to some extent on the suppression of conflicts through a kind of polite dishonesty. People who constantly challenge the ordinary statements of other people, who are always trying to prove themselves right and others wrong, are considered belligerent, rude, perhaps even neurotic. Even if someone says something we think is foolish, we often overlook the foolishness in order to avoid confrontation.

"In intellectual life, however, the situation is quite the opposite. As we've already asserted, intellectual life is itself a kind of vast, progressive argument in which people offer up their own ideas and theories to be tested by the scrupulous, relentless criticism of others. In intellectual life, a kind of healthy skepticism rules. Scientists repeat the experiments of other scientists to confirm their results and discover their errors; philosophers exercise their powers of logic by seeking out the illogic of other philosophers; and artists create new works, often, by rejecting the methods and accomplishments of their predecessors. Thus, progress in these fields is often the result of vigorous intellectual conflict, and, in conflict of that sort, a rude honesty will shed a lot more light than polite dishonesty.

"Freshman Studies may be seen as an introduction to the intellectual life and its conflicts. In class discussion, then--and in the many discussions we expect you to have with your instructors and other students outside of the classroom--don't let the rules of everyday politeness stop you from arguing, and arguing vigorously, from your own knowledge and for your own point of view. So long as you can support your arguments reasonably, and are listening carefully to the other side's point of view (are, that is, even while arguing, keeping

your mind open to a re-evaluation of your own point of view), then no matter how heated or discomforting the discussion becomes, you will be operating according to the proper principles of intellectual politeness."

There are, of course, many intellectual arguments in which we may participate, some still unsettled after centuries of debate: faith versus reason, nature versus nurture, liberalism versus conservatism, and realism versus idealism are in this class. And those arguments have been and continue to be contentious, not always conducted with decorum. More recently, there are arguments in science over the interpretation of quantum mechanics, and over punctuated equilibrium; there are arguments in the humanities over objectivity in history, and over literary theory and the canon; in the social sciences, there are arguments about free markets versus command economies and about how we reason and know. None of these arguments is settled and each provokes lively and sometimes acrimonious debates.

We might not go so far as to adopt Professor Gerald Graff's proposition that higher education ought to restructure the curriculum in order to "teach the conflicts," but we certainly can appreciate his concern that students too often are only "exposed to the results of their professors' conflicts but not to the process of discussion and debate they need to see in order to become something more than passive spectators to their education.... When teachers in rival camps do not engage one another in their classrooms [that is, do not engage in argument], all sides get comfortable preaching to the already converted." It is not the "lack of agreement" that vexes higher education, he notes, but the absence of that "respectful disagreement that supposedly is the strength of democracies and educational institutions."

Graff's position here reflects that of Ralph Waldo Emerson in The American Scholar in the last century: "Men grow up in libraries believing it's their duty to accept the views which Cicero, Locke, and Bacon have given, forgetful that Cicero, Locke and Bacon were only young men in libraries when they wrote those books. Hence, instead of man thinking, we have the bookworm.... I had better never see a book than to be warped by its attraction clear out of my own orbit and made a satellite instead of a system." In other words, we must join the arguments, participate in the debates, engage the disagreements.

I have dwelt on the theme of argument--of respectful disagreement--as central to intellectual life and to education because today it is argument that, rather than being the cohesive principle of the academy, seems to be the divisive one. The notion that the robust exchange of ideas is at the center of the educational process is being challenged in various and sundry ways. In short and to be blunt, today we find people making the case that some arguments or points of view are unacceptable, that certain ideas are anathema and their proponents to be punished, or that certain arguments, ideas, and topics can only be understood, studied, and analyzed by members of certain groups. And so we get rules--or at least proposed rules and prescriptions that look like rules: rules prohibiting certain kinds of speech, rules proscribing the expression of certain ideas, rules about who can teach what to whom, about who is qualified to speak about what. As a subset of these behaviors, we

experience as well the cavalier dismissal or denigration of ideas, theories, methodologies, even whole disciplines by persons who are less interested in the give and take of public criticism than in showing off their own presumed intellectual superiority and wit.

In one sense, it all sounds suspiciously familiar, a bit Platonic, as it were. Plato's Republic, as the upperclassmen know and the freshmen are soon to find out, grapples with the issue of the just society and seeks to establish the principles on which it should be based. Dealing with matters of epistemology as well as political theory, Plato arrives at the conclusion that the just society is one in which those who know truth exercise authority and in that exercise they control or suppress ideas that violate that truth. Faced with a world very much like our own, in which diversity of opinion reigned, Plato tries to posit a stable society in which all decisions are based on correct information and truthful principles, knowledge that only the philosopher-rulers are able to attain. Hence, he argues for a kind of thought control imposed from above, advocates "a censorship over our story-makers," prohibits certain kinds of music, and regulates acceptable speech and thought. His solution to the social problem of the cacophonous competition of diverse beliefs is an authoritarian one.

In his recent book Kindly Inquisitors: The New Attacks on Free Thought, Jonathan Rauch contrasts this kind of authoritarian fundamentalist approach--one that in his view links Plato with the Ayatollah Khomeini--with the consequences of the skeptical revolution promoted by Descartes, Hume, and Locke, which he styles liberal science. Rauch locates the spirit of this intellectual style in the motto adopted by The Royal Society of London in 1660: Nullius in Verba, meaning "No man's word shall be final." This conviction was repeated in this century by the physicist Freeman Dyson: "We do not in principle allow any statement whatever to be immune from doubt." The skepticism inherent here is not "the doctrine that we have no reason to believe anything and so should believe nothing," or a kind of sappy relativism, but one that renounces certainty and that leads to a simple proposition: "we must all take seriously the idea that any and all of us might, at any time, be wrong"--which sounds very much like Dintenfass's admonition to "keep your mind open to a re-evaluation of your own point of view." That intellectual style, attitude, or ethic, Rauch argues, leads to the "principle of public criticism," which goes like this:

"When people accept the notion that none of us is completely immune from error, they also implicitly accept that no person, no matter who he [or she] is or how strongly he [or she] believes, is above possible correction. If at any moment I can be wrong and you can be wrong and so can everybody else, all without being aware of it, then none of us can claim to have finally settled any dispute about the state of the external world. No one, therefore, is above critical scrutiny, nor is any belief.

"The result is this: A society which has accepted skeptical principles will accept that sincere criticism is always legitimate. In other words, if any belief may be wrong, then no one can legitimately claim to have ended any discussion--ever."

These observations lead Rauch to posit the rules that "are the basis of liberal inquiry and of science." First: "No one gets the final say: you may claim that a statement is

established as knowledge only if it can be debunked, in principle, and only insofar as it withstands attempts to debunk it." And second: "No one has personal authority: you may claim that a statement has been established as knowledge only insofar as the method used to check it gives the same result regardless of the identity of the checker, and regardless of the source of the statement."

These rules establish, in Rauch's terms, "a game," which in terms of dealing with conflicting opinion goes something like this: "First, each school of thought places its opinion before the group. Second, friends and enemies of the ideas begin testing and criticizing, poking and prodding, checking and cross-checking. To check, players can do all kinds of things. Their tests can include real experiment, thought experiment, plausibility, simplicity, generality, utility, logical consistency, beauty--always understanding, however, that whatever test they use has to be a test that I or anyone else can also use, at least in principle....Third, everyone is entitled to modify one of the original ideas or suggest a new one. Fourth, the opinion which emerges as the survivor is the winner--only, however, for as long as it continues to survive.... Thus, the liberal game of science." Thus too, I might add, the business of the university. Universities are places, Rauch states, "whose moral charter is to seek knowledge through criticism, not to instill correct opinions."

By this reading, then, liberal inquiry and liberal science are anti-Platonic. They deal not with universal truths, but prevailing truths. Einstein's dictum "We must never stop questioning" clearly exemplifies this idea. While science may offer the clearest examples of how this mode of intellectual discourse works, the rules apply to the humanities and social sciences and arts as well. Here, however, the situation is not as pristine as Rauch would have it. The argument in these disciplines and creative endeavors is not to develop some "winning" view of external reality, but to arrive at interpretations and expressions of human experience and its artifacts, past and present, that are often at theoretical or methodological odds with one another and which are influenced to some extent by the circumstances of time and place. Feminist, Marxist, New Critical, Reader Response and Deconstructionist interpretations offer different optics on common texts. Pristine positivistic truth may not be achievable in such cases, but these modes of discourse must still operate by the rules: every claim, every theory, every interpretation is subject to criticism and no claim, theory, or interpretation has validity because of the status of its proponent.

These rules play out in the game of liberal education in several important ways. First, the skeptical rule keeps ideas, statements, and opinions in play as knowledge as long as they can be subject to verification or falsification, can either be affirmed or dismissed, modified or corrected. Hence, the open mind, the acknowledgment of the possibility that one could be wrong, the entertainment of the idea that we just don't know. Physicist Richard Feynman put it this way, referring to claims that we are close to unraveling the ultimate secrets of nature: "I've had a lifetime of people who believe that the answer is just around the corner....But again and again it's been a failure. Eddington, who thought that with the theory of electrons and quantum mechanics everything was going to be simple.... Einstein,

who thought that he had a unified theory just around the corner but didn't know anything about nuclei and was unable of course to guess it.... People think they're very close to the answer, but I don't think so.... Whether or not nature has an ultimate, simple, unified, beautiful form is an open question, and I don't want to say either way." And if science is rife with open questions, one can only imagine the case in the humanities and social sciences, where competing interpretations derived from radically different perspectives often obtain and usually must coexist.

But there is an important corollary to the skeptical rule as it applies to liberal inquiry. And that is the principle embedded in it, namely, that to be considered knowledge, ideas, statements, and interpretations must be subject to the rules of checking and debate. Here is where the matter gets dicey. In the first place, some people hold opinions, and hold them strongly, but do not subject them to scrutiny. My belief, say, that the world was created in six days may be a deeply felt conviction, but to the extent that I do not admit the possibility of its error, then I cannot bring that idea in play in terms of liberal inquiry. Further, liberal science has convincingly demonstrated that that idea, as knowledge, doesn't count; it is, in terms of the game, a loser as an idea. Consequently, it has no place in the public debate about ideas regarding the origins of the universe or of species on two grounds: first, I refuse to acknowledge that it might be wrong; and second, it has failed to meet the test of withstanding attempts to debunk it.

Let me give another example: Say I hold to the view that Danes or Swedes are inherently more musically creative than, say, Germans or Italians. That may be a perfectly ditsy idea, and all sorts of evidence may be adduced to prove that the view is silly, if not pernicious. Indeed, it may be that evidence can be marshalled to prove that this idea not only has no merit, but is palpably false. It is a bad and wrong-headed idea and most people don't buy it. It may even be an idea that offends Germans and Italians, who take umbrage at the fact that I believe Danes and Swedes to be their superior when it comes to musical creativity. The result of all of this will be that as far as public knowledge is concerned--that is, knowledge that has been tested and has stood the test--my idea is deemed demonstrably wrong and misguided. Then what? Well, you might try to persuade me that my idea is without merit. But what if I'm not persuaded, what if I am a fanatic--that is, someone who won't change his mind and won't change the subject. Well, in that case, you can certainly ignore me when I hold this dumb idea. And you assuredly can proceed on the assumption that this idea is, after all, just my idea--dumb, wrongheaded, and perverse as it may be--and carry on conversations about musical creativity without me. The rules of the game do not say that just because I hold those views that they therefore deserve to be accepted or accounted for in public dialogue. In fact, the rules say I can be ignored, but do they go further? Do the rules say that I should be punished for holding that idea? Do the rules stipulate that I be made to recant that idea and apologize to Germans and Italians? Or do the rules simply state that I be told that the community and its public knowledge fail to find any merit in my idea and so is going to carry on without reference to it?

The answer, I believe, is the latter. As an individual, I am free to hold any bizarre idea I want: the earth was created in six days; man was created before all other creatures; the sun revolves around the earth; the earth is flat; the Holocaust--the extermination of millions of Jews by the Nazis--never happened; sexual orientation is a matter of personal preference; astrology accurately predicts events; the writings of Danielle Steele are as meritorious as those of Virginia Woolf; men are particularly gifted in science; Western civilization is superior in all respects to Eastern civilization; Asians are genetically talented to excel in math; well, you get the idea. Each of those ideas may give offense to someone in the audience. Scientists will find my ideas about the origins of the universe, evolution, astronomy, and geography to be outrageous. Jews will object to my views on the Nazis. Homosexuals will find my views on sexuality offensive. And Any English major worthy of the name would find my approbations of Ms. Steele to be unworthy of comment. And so on.

And now what? What standing ought my hypothetical set of idiosyncratic ideas have in the broader community of, let's say, the college? None. Each of them happens to express positions that have been thoroughly debunked, or at least are ideas whose veracity is highly suspect. We know that creationism, for instance, is a false theory. And the notion that we ought to teach it for the sake of "balance" (whatever that means) alongside evolution is nonsense. But what if I personally believe the Biblical account of man's origins and not Darwin's? I may be an intellectual buffoon, but of what am I guilty? Holding a view that is false? OK. Try to persuade me of the folly of my position. But if that doesn't work, take no account of my position when trying to ascertain the origin of species. But after that, let me be. Hear my foolish theories, and having heard and dismissed them, then ignore me. But for heaven's sake, don't forbid me from speaking and don't decide to punish me for what I've said. Don't send me to some Gulag for holding wrong opinion.

An interesting case study of this aspect of the issue may be found in the controversies surrounding how professors and students should respond to arguments denying the existence of the Holocaust. A few months ago, in an opinion piece in The Chronicle of Higher Education, Deborah Lipstadt argued that the academy should not legitimize denials of the Holocaust by refuting them. For by giving those arguments the standing of opinion worthy of criticism and refutation, scholars presumably give them a kind of cachet or standing that they do not deserve. Holocaust denial is not an idea but a prejudice, she argues, and by debating the prejudice one facilitates its claim to be an idea worth taking seriously. Lipstadt's point of view here is interesting: she is a scholar, a professor of Modern Jewish and Holocaust Studies, and author of a book entitled Denying the Holocaust: the Growing Assault on Truth and Memory. She is someone who has studied the subject and who thus knows--and rightly so--that Holocaust denial is a fabrication; she has debunked that claim by the rules of liberal inquiry.

Having done so, however, she then sets herself up as a philosopher-ruler, if you will, and seeks to suppress all expressions of this debunked idea in the academy, and for what seem plausible reasons. Her concern is that when students were faced with Holocaust

deniers, they "found it impossible to recognize when a movement had no scholarly validity. They found it difficult to say 'This has nothing to do with ideas. This is nonsense.'" Not trusting students and others to detect the nonsense, she seeks to protect students from having to confront it. But because this claim is a prejudice, or nonsense, does that mean that someone's right to voice it should be suppressed and students' right to hear it ought be denied? Ought not students and others be trusted to detect the fallacies of the idea and to see it for the sham that it is? And if we are prepared to suppress that bad idea, what about creationism? Suppress that too?

Or do we rather play by the rules of liberal inquiry and determine, through public criticism and debate, that these claims have been debunked and thus have no place as part of our knowledge? They are not knowledge, but prejudice, what Plato called opinion. But unlike Plato, liberal science does not invoke an authoritarian suppression of the idea but the intellectual dismissal of the idea--and that difference is a large and important one. For the rules are rules, after all, and when their terms are not met, adverse consequences ensue, in these cases, the consequences of being determined wrong, of having one's ideas deemed to be outside the pale of knowledge.

Finally, liberal inquiry abides by the rule of no personal authority. For us, that rule plays out in the fact that just because an idea or thesis is propounded by a senior member of the faculty gives that idea no more weight than if it was propounded by a first-term freshman. Seniority, title, or rank convey no validity to an idea, and the absence of seniority, title, or rank results in no invalidity to an idea. In other words, liberal learning, insofar as it involves the stating and testing of ideas, is radically democratic, not authoritarian. Saying that, however, does not lead to the silly notion that freshmen know as much as faculty or to the improbable case that a faculty member will not pass judgment on a student's idea, often adverse. Remember, however, that in order to participate in an argument, you have to know what the argument is about. Faculty are likely to have a leg up in that respect and part of their responsibility is to help others understand the argument. But once you know the argument, you can weigh in with your interpretations and points of view. Once you express your point of view, it is eligible for correction or challenge on its merits. In both instances, who you are has nothing to do with it.

And that rule has a further application as well, which is something of a corollary to the principle of no personal authority. If ideas, interpretations, and statements about truth are independent of the person who articulates them, it follows that in liberal inquiry we debate ideas, not individuals, we argue about principles, not their proponents. Ad hominem attacks have no place in argument. Specifically, we must abide by this codicil to the rules of liberal inquiry: just as we should find repugnant the suppression of a person's ideas, so too should we find reprehensible the expressions of prejudice against persons. Allowing the Holocaust denier to voice an idea is not to be equated with indifference to personal attacks on Jews. License to decimate the idea of creationism is not license to harass fundamentalist Christians. What we must seek, as Linda Salamon put it, is to draw "on the academy's long tradition of

civility in discourse, one that makes possible potent disagreements on matters of great moment." And that civility can take many familiar forms: Graff's "respectful disagreement," Feynman's "I don't want to say either way," Dintenfass's "re-evaluation of your own point of view," Rauch's taking "seriously the idea that [we] might be wrong."

In the end, the aim of liberal inquiry and liberal science remain constant and paramount: to learn the arguments, cosmic and particular, large and small, in order to become part of the conversation, part of the discussion, contributors to the search for truths. That is what liberal inquiry and science involve. As long as we play by the rules.