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Our Account of Ourselves: Conversations and the Lawrence Community

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"OUR ACCOUNT OF OURSELVES"
CONVERSATIONS AND
THE LAWRENCE COMMUNITY

LAWRENCE UNIVERSITY

MATRICULATION CONVOCATION

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In last year's convocation address, I shared some thoughts about discourse in the academy and the principles that ought to govern it. This morning I want to take up a variation on that theme, albeit in a somewhat oxymoronic mode. Many of us have probably heard lectures on the problems with lectures, speeches that typically illustrate the point they are attempting to make. Similarly, I suppose, a monologue about dialogue flies in the face of the argument, but since this occasion is something of a tradition, I'll plow ahead, though I want you to know that I understand the limitations of the genre given the purposes of my remarks.

What interests me as we launch the 1994-95 academic year at Lawrence is something I hope will engage all of us here in the coming year and beyond, namely, a greater hospitality to and more extensive participation in conversations. For those of you interested, as I was when I fixed on this topic, the Mudd Library has a mother lode of analyses and studies on conversation, from its role in seventeenth-century France to the pronouncements of eighteenth-century Englishmen to current sociolinguistic articles and monographs. Thus, you can delve into the aphorisms of Samuel Johnson--"That is the happiest conversation where there is no competition, no vanity, but only a calm, quiet interchange of sentiment"--or examine such investigations as "Toward a Grammar for Dyadic Conversation" and (one that might hold some promise for many in the audience) "Community and Contest: Midwestern Men and Women Creating Their Worlds in Conversational Storytelling."

But my interest in the issue is not conversation as a problem for historical and scholarly analysis. It is conversation as a possibility for lively and broad participation; not conversation as a difficult pursuit, but conversation as a desirable practice. Particularly, I'm interested in conversation not as a distracting activity, but as a deliberate act. At first blush, the possibility of conversation as a desirable practice and deliberate act seems unexceptionable and hardly worth a discourse to convince anyone of the point. After all, we spend much of our time engaged in conversations at all levels, many of which give us enjoyment and garner us insights.

At times, I'm sure, some of those conversations may be best described as idle chats

or gossip, following in those instances the motto embroidered on a pillow in Alice Roosevelt Longworth's living room: "If you haven't anything nice to say about anyone, come sit by me"--and reflecting as well the roadside sign in Connecticut that reads: "If you must run down people, please do so in conversation in your own living room." More typically, I imagine, many of those conversations might more properly be styled bull sessions, a term that has been in vogue in the collegiate culture of the United States since the 1920s. *The Dictionary of American Slang* defines the bull session as "an informal and often lengthy conversation or series of discussions, frequently idle or boastful, on a variety of topical or personal subjects, especially among a group of male students." Males might have originated and dominated this mode of discourse, though time and progress have by now made bull sessions happily gender neutral in definition and practice, if not in language. And I applaud the bull session, which is a form of interaction best nurtured and most commonly practiced at college. Granted, at times this form of discourse involves slinging the bull, throwing the bull, and occasionally wanders into that realm we might delicately describe as *mierda del toro*. But that's all right. Let there be bull sessions, best engaged, I might add, spontaneously and in what are often stolen moments, that is, at moments when there may plausibly be something else commanding your attention.

Last spring, at a fireside chat in Trever, someone opined that the faculty ought to design the academic calendar in such a way as to provide time for such activities as bull sessions. I was pleased with the almost unanimous dismissal of that proposition by Lawrentians: they knew that bull sessions aren't bull sessions if you program them. Indeed, I was even more pleased to hear from those students that these bull sessions were often elevated to the level of conversation and discourse, that is, that they engaged the participants in dialogue and debate about matters confronted in the course of study, or in the news of the day, or in the issues of the hour.

So nothing I will be proposing this morning should be taken as a dismissal of the bull session, the involvement in which represents some of my most vivid experiences and memories from my own college years. Rather, I take my clue for my proposal from the words of Ralph Waldo Emerson: "Wise, cultivated, genial conversation," he wrote, "is the last flower of civilization.... Conversation is our account of ourselves."

Conversation is our account of ourselves. Let's consider that proposition in two broad areas: first as it relates to our identities as Americans, indeed as citizens of the world, and second as it relates to our life and work together at Lawrence. One of the principal problems we face in the United States these days--a problem even more dramatically and drastically evident in many parts of the world--is our seeming inability to live amicably in a pluralistic society. We are all aware of the most brutal and bloody expressions of this problem, in Rwanda and Bosnia, for example, where group identities and longstanding animosities have led to ethnic cleansing and widespread massacres. On the domestic front, the situation is less volatile, but the tensions among and between groups persist nonetheless and find expression in debates over bilingualism and Afro-centric curricula in the public

schools, affirmative action, immigration policy, and throughout the broad arena of multiculturalism. And the tensions, though perhaps suppressed, exist on more private levels as well, where we seem to exhibit suspicion and hostility toward others on the basis of their race, ethnicity, gender, and sexual orientation, attitudes typically the product of stereotype and ignorance and our failure to commit to and participate in honest and open dialogue with those others.

Last fall, Sheldon Hackney, the new chairman of the National Endowment for the Humanities, announced in a speech at the National Press Club that NEH would initiate a national conversation on the nature of American pluralism, a dialogue "about what we share as common American values in a nation comprised of so many divergent groups and beliefs." In the ten months since he first proposed the idea, Hackney has expounded on it in speeches, editorials, and interviews.

What troubles Hackney and many Americans these days is familiar enough. He sees the problem in both global and national terms: "Around the globe," he said, "we see conflict and violence sowing misery along the fault lines of race, religion, language and ethnicity--just the sorts of divisions being brought to our attention [in the United States] by the politics of difference and by the increasing cultural diversity of our population.... Small wonder," he went on, "that reasonable voices have lately been saying that we have been paying too much attention to our differences and not enough attention to the things that hold us together. From the other direction, however, we continue to hear assertions of what Charles Taylor refers to as 'the politics of recognition,' the notion that there are still disadvantaged groups in America whose members will never feel equal or really part of America until their group is recognized in some way as being legitimate and equal. There is truth in both of these positions."

The difficulty, however, is that we have allowed the debate about group rights versus individual rights to become acrimonious and divisive. Hackney knows this first-hand from his experiences as president of the University of Pennsylvania, but he sees the problem as transcending institutions of higher education. Basically, he argues, "current public debate [on these topics] is little more than posturing. Bombarded by slogans and epithets, points and counterpoints, our thoughts are polarized in the rapid-fire exchange of sound-bites. In this kind of argument, one is either right or wrong, for them or against them, a winner or a loser. Real answers are the casualties of such drive-by debates. In this kind of discussion, there is no room for complexity and ambiguity. There is no room in the middle. Only the opposite poles are given voice." Hackney wishes to resolve that problem through the national conversation.

The national conversation to be promoted by the NEH is not yet clearly defined either as to its structures or its venues. The kinds of questions posed thus far are fairly general, but I think nonetheless powerful and salient for that. Here are a few that Hackney has proposed: "What does it mean to be an American in a nation of people from diverse

inequality? What, hold us together? What do we value? What is the future? It is possible that to be part of the 21st century? What picture of an ideal America is going to inform our struggles with current problems? What notion of shared commitment, mutual obligations, civic virtues, will help us come together to solve common problems?"

In an interview on the MacNeil-Lehrer News Hour, Hackney affirmed that "the heart of the conversation, basically," relates to so-called hyphenated Americans--African-Americans, Irish-Americans, Asian-Americans, even, in his case, southern-white-male-Americans--a statement that suggests that our multiple identities will necessarily be part of the discourse. Hackney concedes that he has no answers, only questions. He claims he does not know where these conversations will lead; for now, he is mainly concerned that they occur.

He acknowledges--and other commentators have noted--that such conversations are not going to be easy and in fact may be somewhat risky, that talking about our situation may make it worse. Perhaps the most salient observations about the NEH proposal came from Catherine Stimpson, director of the Fellows Program at the MacArthur Foundation, in an opinion piece in *The Chronicle of Higher Education* last March. She argues that while critics from left and right have wanted to squelch the national conversation, we must engage it. As she puts it, "I retain a pluralist's stubborn, utopian hope that people can talk about, through, across, and around their differences and that these exchanges will help us live together justly." But conversations of this sort, she confesses, are hard work, "made harder by our frequent ignorance of one another."

Although conversation has, in some academic circles, been elevated to the status that mingles cult and cant, has become a mantra of pop psychology, promising to solve all problems and heal all wounds, and while some folks use the word conversation and dialogue as though they were, in Stimpson's marvelous phrase, "the bright Lego blocks of community building," there is hope that conversations may be efficacious. Indeed, John Dewey's observation may provide a useful way of approaching them: "The heart and strength of the democratic way of living," he wrote, "are the processes of effective give-and-take communication, of conference, of consultation, of exchange and pooling of experience,--of free conversation, if you will." As James Madison advised Thomas Jefferson, the best way to accommodate majority and minority engagement in a democracy is to extend the sphere of public discourse "so as to take in a greater variety of parties and interest groups--diversity of opinion and interests."

A college is a particularly apt setting for such conversations and discourse, and I propose that the Lawrence community commit itself to conducting them in the course of the coming year. We have been in touch with NEH about this project and will certainly want to avail ourselves of whatever protocols, formats, and suggestions the Endowment might have, materials that are supposed to be available for distribution in November. I am not proposing our engagement here as a grantsmanship ploy but rather as an initiative deserving of our

attention on its merits. Rather than leave this overture as a vague exhortation, I propose that the residence halls, fraternities, and small houses be the locus for these conversations and that faculty associates, residence hall directors, and faculty advisors devise the means to convene and conduct them.

Further, I propose that we include all members of the community--students, faculty, and staff--in these discussions. Although Sheldon Hackney sees these gatherings as conversations among Americans, we at Lawrence have the opportunity to be more inclusive. With over ten percent of our students coming from over 40 countries other than the U.S., we can broaden the conversation in ways that might help us address the questions posed. Finally, we should also explore ways to involve citizens from the larger Fox Cities communities, which include a sizable number of Hmong and Native Americans as well as growing numbers of blacks and other peoples of color.

It is worth noting that the college has already begun to explore such involvements. Since last January, we have been at work with the local corporate community in developing a cooperative program to attract and retain young people from minority groups to Lawrence, the Fox Cities, and local businesses. With encouragement from Kimberly-Clark and other companies, we launched an internship and employment program for such students this summer that over the long term promises to enhance diversity in the community and on the campus. And that bodes well for our conversations, for, as Catherine Stimpson has put it, "the more voices that enter into a conversation and the greater their diversity, the more helpful the discussion is."

It is perhaps worth noting that while this proposal for conversation may be novel from NEH's perspective, it was anticipated at Lawrence several years ago by a group of students and faculty who met together to consider ways of making the college a more hospitable and welcoming community for persons from diverse racial and ethnic backgrounds. As we noted then, and as Catherine Stimpson noted last March, it is our ignorance of one another that contributes mightily to our distance from one another. While in that case the idea centered on promoting such discussions through the curriculum, in this case the same idea is not tied inextricably to the course of study--though one hopes that there will be ways in which the conversations and the curriculum can bolster and advance one another. Rather, it becomes a part of the larger educational objectives of the college, objectives that can be met in settings beyond the classroom, studio, and laboratory. As for myself, I look forward to participating in these conversations in the course of the year.

So much, then, for the first part of my interest in conversation. The second part in some ways follows from the first and invites us to converse with one another about the conduct and content of Lawrence's teaching and learning mission--to have an account of ourselves as members of this academic community. As I wrote to the faculty last month, it seems to me that we need more frequent, deliberate, and purposeful conversations with one another about our shared participation in the life of the college. Such conversations can and

should take several forms, but at the heart of each of them should be the determination to effect and promote the goals of the college and conservatory. Indeed, the long-range planning groups--including faculty, staff, students, alumni, and trustees--that have been meeting last year and this have already begun many such conversations and promise to help all of us talk with one another about Lawrence and its future more frequently and fruitfully.

One form of such conversations follows from our participation in the national conversation, namely, to discuss and deliberate the ways in which the curriculum of various departments and programs might provide more occasions to consider those aspects of pluralism, nationally and internationally, that describe our country and world as we approach the new millennium. Much of this kind of study already occurs, not always in ways fully acknowledged or appreciated, but conversations on that topic should help us become more aware and deliberate in considering such curricular matters. As a forum designed and led by interested students last spring revealed, there is widespread student interest in such conversations--as they relate to Freshman Studies in the first instance--and we will be advantaged as a community if we encourage them.

A second expression of such conversations transcends that particular set of issues and focuses more directly on the curriculum of our academic departments and programs. Over the past several years, we have been engaged in a series of departmental reviews, involving faculty members from other colleges and universities who have come to campus to confer with faculty and students about the curriculum of particular disciplines. While these reviews have not always been uniformly embraced or unexceptionably effective, they have provided occasions for us to talk with one another and with outsiders about what we do, why we do it, and why we don't do something else. Somewhat like the prospect of being hanged, the reviews have clarified the mind on these points, and that has been useful.

But such conversations ought not be predicated on the periodic occasions of an outside review; they should become a normal and regular aspect of our common life. They will provide students with the opportunity to consider their educational programs within a given major or interdisciplinary area in thoughtful and forward-looking terms, and should give faculty the chance to hear from students and each other in a more systematic fashion about how the course of study is conceived and constructed, the aims and objectives it serves, and the benefits and results it professes to deliver.

In order to provide structure and substance to the desire to have such conversations, I will ask the faculty of each academic program--departments and interdisciplinary areas--to create and convene student clubs or associations by the end of the fall term. A number of such organizations already exist, but they should be in place in all departments and programs. These groups will typically consist of majors and of students who have taken courses in the area and should serve as vehicles for conversations of several sorts: first, they should provide opportunities to consider the traditions, state, and future direction of the subject, much the way the Sir Isaac Newton Society now does in physics, or the psychology

students association and the philosophy club do in those departments. Second, they should afford faculty and students the opportunity to discuss the curriculum, the logic of the course offerings, and the desired or likely modifications thereof that might be anticipated in the coming years; the Dean's Advisory Committee in the conservatory performs something like this function today.

Third, they should permit students and faculty to talk about the post-graduate opportunities enabled by that program of study, whether in graduate and professional school or in careers and jobs. While I expect such groups to be constituted formally, they should at the same time conduct their affairs in a flexible fashion, should be open to all students, and should meet at least once a term with members of the faculty. The aim is not to provide a setting for gripe sessions, but a place where we have conversations with one another about what we are doing, how we are doing, and why we are doing it as we are. They should, frankly, be both illuminating and enjoyable. Most of all, they should help students engage their educational pursuits at Lawrence not in terms of this course or that assignment, but as a whole.

Thirdly, and related to the foregoing, we will begin during this academic year to implement teaching evaluations of all faculty at Lawrence, tenured and untenured, as part of and beyond moments of reappointment or promotion. At first blush, this initiative may seem to have no direct bearing on conversations; I believe it bears immediately on them. Former Yale President Bart Giamatti put it well: "A liberal education is at the heart of a civil society and at the heart of a liberal education is the art of teaching." As an institution that places a high premium on first-rate teaching, Lawrence will benefit from more frequent and informed conversations about teaching. And those conversations will be assisted, I believe, by more regular assessments of teaching and the ways that teaching promotes and enables student learning. The point of such reviews is not to find fault, but to encourage improvement and to be constructive instruments toward achieving it. To complement these reviews, I urge members of the faculty to welcome their colleagues into their classrooms so that we all may learn from one another and support one another in the central enterprise of our professional lives.

Just as Sheldon Hackney has voiced the worry that the national conversation will be risky, so too should we acknowledge that there are risks attendant to campus conversations about our business here. There may be those who would wish to squelch these conversations, much as there are those identified by Catherine Stimpson who want to suppress the national conversation. And there is always the danger that the conversations will degenerate in ways that Rebecca West had in mind when she said that there is "no such thing as conversation....There are intersecting monologues, that is all." In all of our discourse, let us avoid that pitfall.

Let us avoid as well behaving as la Rochefoucauld anticipated three hundred years ago. "The reason why so few people are agreeable in conversation," he wrote, "is that each

is thinking more about what he intends to say than about what others are saying, and we never listen when we are eager to speak." Let's not be so eager to speak that we fail to listen. And let us as well adopt the principles that "conversation means being able to disagree and still continue the conversation" and that conversation "consists in building on another [person's] observation, not overturning it." Our purpose here should be learn from and with one another, not score points.

"Conversation is our account of ourselves." I encourage us to account for ourselves with each other in these several conversations in the coming academic year and beyond. We are privileged to be members of an academic community with a long and distinguished history, with an abiding commitment to liberal education, with strong convictions regarding the value of free and open discourse, and with ambitions to project our mission and purposes into the new century and millennium in the most effective and efficacious ways possible. So in our conversations regarding American pluralism and in our conversations about our educational purposes, let us be true to those attributes of our community. Lawrence is certain to be a more lively, engaging, and intellectually stimulating place as we do.