Inaugural Address

Jon Westling

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I am deeply honored to be the eighth president of Boston University. The honor is many-sided: Boston University, the university of Rebecca Lee Dorsey, William Arrowsmith, and Borden Parker Bowne, is the university of magnificent intellectual courage; Boston University, the university of Lemuel Murlin, Howard Thurman, and Martin Luther King, Jr., is the university of abiding social commitment; Boston University, the university of William Fairfield Warren, Daniel Marsh, and John Silber, is the university of educational leaders who both dream and do. And Boston University, the alma mater of more than 200,000 alumni, the university that educates more students from around the world than any other American university, the university that is transforming primary and secondary education in the city of Chelsea, is the university of robust opportunity.

The honor of being Boston University's eighth president is the honor of being entrusted with that splendid legacy. But it is also a task that Joshua would recognize, for the president of Boston University must marshal the spirit of the alumni, the faculty, the students, and every member of the University

community to press beyond our River Jordan. We must face the hard work that lies ahead, because Boston University, endowed with riches of mind, imagination, character, energy, and determination, is still far from rich materially, and thus far from being able to create the environment in which our students and faculty can realize the full greatness that is our goal.

Our most powerful tool, as we seek to fulfill the potential that inheres in Boston University, is that we know we still have far to go, and we refuse the illusory pleasures of self-satisfaction in an academic world dominated by those complacent in their complacency.

We cannot lose sight of our modest beginnings as a seminary started by Methodist laity seeking to repair the reputation of their clergy as semi-literate backwoodsmen; we ought not to forget the chastisements of history, such as the loss of our first financial endowment, Isaac Rich's munificent gift of Boston real estate, during the Great Fire of 1872; we should be lastingly mindful that Boston University was stripped of its riverfront in the 1920s by the state's power of eminent domain, and sliced again by the construction of the Massachusetts Turnpike. Boston University understands itself rightly only if it understands that it has achieved great things in spite of adversity.

To recognize that is not to wallow in self-pity or to nurture resentment, but to enunciate Boston University's

exceptional course. We have made a garden of our campus squeezed between the commercial corridors of the Commonwealth; we have, with fairly modest means, created an academic identity for ourselves that puts to shame many places that have more treasure but less aspiration.

In March, 1869, when the founders of Boston University took turns sitting in that chair--first Lee Claflin, then Isaac Rich, and last Jacob Sleeper--to sign the petition asking the Massachusetts Legislature to grant a charter to Boston University, they understood their position as outsiders to the educational establishment. None of those men was college-educated, and the patrimony of their new university was a simple, small Methodist seminary founded thirty years earlier in rural Vermont.

That seminary, the Newbury Seminary, had itself been created by a handful of people with little connection to the educational establishment. The parishioners of the Bromfield Street Church in Boston had sought to provide the Methodist Church with ministers who could hold their own with the better-educated clergy of the more established denominations. The parishioners raised money to launch the Newbury Seminary, but it became a shoestring venture, relocating twice before those three devout merchants, Rich, Claflin, and Sleeper, decided to make it the institutional cornerstone of a new university.

And what an admirable cornerstone: Not hauled across the ocean in the hold of the *Mayflower*, not hewn out of the continent by the titans of 19th century industrialism, and not bestowed as the largesse of a land-granting government. Thus were laid the cornerstones of many other colleges and universities. Ours, by contrast, is simply one of those granite boulders that hardscrabble New England farmers found strewn in their fields and put to such use as they could in stone walls and foundations.

That antiestablishment beginning defines the character of Boston University. I think of President Warren's insistence, at the University's founding, that it admit both women and men into every one of its departments, and of his similar clarity about admitting students of every race and religion. Because of President Warren's principled stand, Boston University became the first American university to grant a Ph.D. degree to a woman, the first to award a doctorate in medicine to an American Indian, and the first to graduate an African-American psychiatrist.

I think also of Professor Borden Parker Bowne, the University's preeminent scholar during the early years of this century. In 1904, the Methodist bishops who then oversaw the School of Theology's academic programs charged Professor Bowne with contradicting "established doctrinal standards on Sin, Salvation, Repentance, Justification, Regeneration and Assurance." Professor Bowne, with

unwavering support from the University's administration, mounted a principled defense of his work and won a victory that ultimately helped to secure academic freedom throughout American higher education.

And I also think of John Silber himself in 1971, at the beginning of a tumultuous decade in this institution's history, announcing that the nearly bankrupt and thoroughly dispirited University would rescue itself by unrelenting insistence on high academic standards. Like President Warren and like Professor Bowne, Dr. Silber showed that great accomplishment is based on true principle, stoutly and indefatigably defended.

As the eighth president of Boston University, I am entrusted with the legacy of all my predecessors, but I am particularly entrusted with John Silber's legacy. John Silber's unstoppable energy and imaginative brilliance might well have transformed any college or university, but his talents were ideally suited to bring out the enormous potential of *Boston* University. We owe to his presidency a wholly revitalized faculty, the best students in the history of the University, and a vastly improved campus.

Every university may wish to combine the pursuit of excellence in undergraduate teaching with a vigorous research mission, but those two ideals often seem like the repelling ends of two magnets. Concentration on teaching *can* drive out serious research; concentration on research *can* divert a

university from proper attention to the instruction of its students. John Silber found the way for Boston University to turn these magnets around so that they attracted one another.

He did so by fixing the principle that Boston University would focus its undergraduate student recruitment on the promise that every student would have the opportunity to study with faculty members who were leading researchers in their fields. To live up to this promise, faculty members could not be content to concentrate on research or teaching: they would have to excel at both.

As formula, this is easy to recite. The genius was in the day-to-day application: in knowing how hard to push, in knowing when to make an exception for the brilliant researcher who does *not* belong in the classroom, or the incomparable teacher whose best form of scholarship is indeed the seminar or the lecture hall; in knowing that every inch of progress the University made would be contested; and in knowing that advancing the principle of academic excellence is sometimes more important than the momentary results of such contests.

These are among the lessons I have learned from John Silber which will continue to guide me in pursuit of the ideal alignment of those magnetic poles of teaching and research.

That pursuit is not the work of one man, of course: just as John Silber received the assistance of faculty members, administrators, alumni and Trustees who shared his grand

dream, I, too, understand that in order for this University to realize its full promise, the particular talents and resources of *every* member of our community will have to be marshaled. That is difficult work, but it is work which I welcome.

This University's noble and unconventional past is the foundation on which we are given the chance to build a noble and unconventional future. Because we have done it, we know how the University can be galvanized by direct involvement in the broad problems of our society. We already know, for example, that a school of education can do more than train teachers; it can help to transform public schools. A school of medicine can do more than train doctors; it can help to transform urban health care. A school of engineering and the basic science departments can do more than train engineers and scientists; they can help to build a new, basic industry such as photonics.

In each of these and many other cases, the commitment to giving back substantive good to society in return for the academic freedom and support which society gives to us has deeper rewards: it transforms mere training in a profession into genuine education.

When the University's third President, Lemuel Murlin, was inaugurated in 1911, a debate raged in higher education between those who favored a curriculum tailored to the labor market and those who argued that universities were obliged to remain aloof from commercial interests. President Murlin's

distinctive achievement was to find what was right on both sides of this debate and create an enduring synthesis. He invigorated both the liberal arts *and* the professional schools at Boston University, and he called on American higher education to create colleges "with more culture in their spirit, methods, and educational program than a technical school, and more technical [substance] than the average college of liberal arts."

The debate continues to this day: should a college education be primarily an initiation into higher knowledge? Or should it provide an infusion of skills that the individual can put to use in employment or service to society? President Murlin's succinct statement remains Boston University's, and my, ideal: We seek to provide an education that best combines culture and practical reason. We seek to pass along our great intellectual and moral inheritance and to equip students with the savvy to make their way in the hard world that lies ahead.

And we succeed: Boston University brings out in its students the quality of quick-witted independence. Our alumni are doers, and they live up to a reputation as people who quickly figure out how things work and then use this knowledge to get things done. They are skeptical. They see through or see past official explanations. They set themselves tough-to-reach goals and proceed by means of clear-eyed assessments of how to achieve those goals.

These are the qualities of well-tested idealists: Dr. Rebecca Lee Dorsey, in 1894, persuading the father of a dying child to permit her to administer a newly developed diphtheria serum; Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., in 1963 writing his letter from the Birmingham jail; in 1988, Elizabeth M. Glaser, responding to the death of her seven-year old daughter and facing death herself, founding the Pediatric AIDS Foundation.

I do not mean to cast Boston University alumni in a single mold. We are a large and exuberantly diverse community, and we also number among our heroes Tom Burke, who in 1896 won gold medals in the 100-meter and 400-meter races at the first modern Olympic Games; Harry Agganis, the Golden Greek, whose feats in football, basketball, and baseball in the early 1950s have never been equaled; and Travis Roy, whose determination and courage have inspired the nation.

Few communities are as rich as ours in music. We are the university of Sarah Caldwell, Phyllis Curtin, Roman Totenberg, and Bruce MacCombie. Few communities have so enriched the theater. We are the university of Faye Dunaway, Jason Alexander, and Olympia Dukakis. Few communities are as rich in poetry as ours. We are the university of Geoffrey Hill, Derek Walcott, Robert Pinsky, George Starbuck, Anne Sexton, and Robert Lowell.

The recitation of the names of those who have achieved distinction in their fields could, of course, go on and on. Boston University is a university of dazzling inventors: Alexander Graham Bell, Jack Murphy, Theodore Moustakas. We are a university whose faculty is comprised of imaginative and energetic scholars, path-breaking scientists, and practitioners deeply learned in their professions. We are a university unusually well-served by dedicated trustees; cherished by many alumni; and yet, for all this, we remain as we were in the days of Isaac Rich, Lee Claflin, and Jacob Sleeper: outsiders to the educational establishment.

That is our hidden strength, for it is what keeps us alert, poised, and creative. Boston University, in the tradition of Warren, Murlin, and Marsh, under John Silber renewed its commitment to education in the broadest sense: we have demonstrated through the Chelsea Project, through our assistance in the creation of the Boston Medical Center, and through the Center for Photonics Research that higher education *can* address the pressing problems of our society, and that when a university commits itself to that broader educational project, it can also thereby deepen and enrich its academic mission.

As the next president of Boston University, I pledge to continue this commitment. Boston University will foster its heritage of intellectual fortitude: by nurturing the individuality of students, by inspiring abiding social

commitments, by leading educational reforms, and by remaining a community of robust opportunity. We shall marshal the spirit to face whatever adversities we must, knowing that great accomplishments often require great sacrifice.

I know these are not the pieties of contemporary higher education. Boston University does not, for instance, impose a speech code on students and faculty; because we reject speech codes, some say we are insensitive. I say we are free to speak truth, even when it is unpopular. Boston University restricts overnight visitation in residence halls; because we maintain parietal rules, some say we are unrealistic. I say we take our responsibilities as teachers and as adults seriously. Boston University does not indulge academic trends and ideologies; because we resist unreason, some say we are repressive. I say we are a true university, worthy of the name.

We understand the difference between being conformed to this world and standing for principle; we understand that education is partly about character formation. True education is something achieved by dint of intellectual striving, never transmitted by mere proximity to teachers, books, or other students.

We live in a time when the shrine of intellectual freedom is crowded with false supplicants: with believers in no truth or everyone-his-own-truth; with rationalizers of unlawful or immoral behavior; with sophists and ideologues who put the

pursuit of fame or power above the search for understanding and truth. If we fail to recognize these corruptions in the spirit of the academy, we permit them to grow. If we fail to name them, we make peace with them and invite them into our own community.

Boston University's motto, "Learning, Virtue, Piety," contains at least one word which our age finds difficult to take seriously, although it has pieties of its own. Boston University rejects many of these because we aspire to the deeper, enduring piety of striving for truth.

When we look on the universities that have prospered in the twentieth century, we see institutions so favored by financial fortune that they sometimes have come to see themselves as accountable to no deeper purpose than to follow their inclinations. The circumstances that bred that complacency are changing, however, and the great universities of the next century will arise from those that have *not* been complacent; those whose vision of higher education is enobling, not indulgent; those that attempt to build the institutions of society, rather than separate themselves from it in splendid, arid isolation.

Those other universities may burn bright, but their "rash fierce blaze of riot cannot last." Our University, schooled in patience and adversity, founded on native rock, and true to genuine intellectual principle, *will* last and will *thrive*.

If I may take still further liberties with John of Gaunt's great speech from Richard II: This writing chair of Rich, this academic mace, this chain of pageantry, this seat of Marsh, this campus and this university, this thirst for learning, virtue, piety against complacence and indulgent peace, this lucid faculty, this thoughtful world, this scholar's mark set in the book of truth, which serves as uplift and admonition to us all, this sliver of New England stretched along the Charles, this still unfinished university, dear for her reputation through the world, this Boston University will, with your continued dedication, help and support, have a future fully worthy of its arduous past and the glittering promise of its present.