

*Address to Columbia College students elected into Phi Beta Kappa May 18, 2009, by Karl Kroeber, Mellon Professor in the Humanities.*

I begin by apologizing to the parents of today's honorees, because some things I say may distress you. If it helps, I am a parent of three children, so I understand the financial sacrifices you have undergone for the past 4 years. I am also aware that these splendid young adults whose accomplishments we celebrate, you knew just a few years ago as adolescents – and adolescence has been described as extended familial suffering for no discernible reason. Finally, as a teacher I have one overriding commitment: to speak only the truth as I see it to your children -- and I think you deserve the same respect.

To you splendid students I say: bravely done! You richly deserve the honor bestowed on you today. You have achieved more than success – you have met the highest standards of intellectual accomplishment of one of the world's most distinguished universities. You today join in a larger fellowship with women and men of many universities and colleges bound together solely by merit of four years of outstanding intellectual performance that required more than the gift of intelligence --including the courage often to resist the seductive temptation of not doing your very best. You remind us that in any serious work of the mind only excellence is adequate.

When Cathy Popkin invited me to give this talk, she suggested I say something about my work that might interest you – which I interpreted as a challenge: just *try* to make *that* stuff interesting! Well, I have two kinds of work, interlocking, yet distinct: teaching and scholarship. As to the latter, I've published a raft of books and a lot of essays over the years – none of which, except for some about Native Americans, would I suggest you read. They are all out of date. Throughout my career, I've enjoyed going into new fields, and as soon as I get the lay of the land, I start looking for other unmapped territories. A less heroic way to put this might be to say I'm like a cuckoo bird – I lay my eggs in other birds' nests and let them do the hard work of hatching and rearing.

My first book was on narrative at a time when no critic thought storytelling worth talking about, although now everybody babbles narrative theory. Later in the 1960s – long before there were laptops – with a big government grant I investigated the possible effect of the computer on literary analysis. My conclusion, borrowed from the programmers, made nobody happy but remains I believe fundamentally sound: garbage in, garbage out. In the 1970s and 80s, besides my interest in Native American literatures, I focused on parallels and differences between visual and verbal art. This carried me into analyses of representations of the natural world. Apparently I was the first to talk about artistic landscapes in terms of ecology. It certainly is ecology and biology that brought me to my principal research of the past decade and a half – the relation of artistic imagining to neuroscience, investigations into how the brain operates, the physical basis of imagining. This is why I'm specially pleased to speak to you smart people: some of you are humanists and some are scientists – but nobody just by looking can tell which is which.

The explosion of knowledge created by the life sciences of the past 50 years, climaxing the 19<sup>th</sup> century discovery of evolution, practical and ethical significance of which was first envisioned by poets 200 years ago, is the most exciting intellectual event in human history. Neuroscience, for example, has transformed our understanding of how the brain comes into being – through specific historical processes that are unpredictable – the result being that every face I see before me is distinct, different, unique. Not only is each of us in essence absolutely singular, but as we reach physical maturity, the end point of development for all other creatures, imagination, a purely human psychic capacity that starts to develop only after infancy comes into full efflorescence. It is imagination that endows us with the power to go on learning after reaching physical maturity, to go on growing psychically. Imagination even enables us to enhance the physical functioning of our brain as it ages. Consider the factual evidence: all significant art and science has been produced by mature humans, and some of the finest art and science by elderly people. Although I bet nobody's told you this before – what you've been doing here at Columbia is learning in various ways to exercise your imaginative power –

shaping yourselves to go on learning throughout your lives, so that for you -- even in your now far distant old age – both the physical and social worlds will remain fascinating, because ever changing, self-transforming into what is exciting because unpredictable.

You have been learning at Columbia how to keep on learning all your lives. You are fortunate to be young today, because we are just beginning to comprehend how human beings really function and how they have the power to improve themselves and their world. I make a prediction – I won't live to see it fulfilled, but you may perhaps remember it three decades from now when you return for a class reunion. In 2034 I predict the intellectual center of all leading universities will be the cooperative work of scientists and humanists, studying and thinking collaboratively, jointly refining and expanding our understanding of psychosomatic human life – the dynamic interplay of physical body and mental energy -- and thereby opening up new problems and mysteries today undreamed of.

Despite this scholarly enthusiasm, from the time I taught my first course in literary humanities as a graduate student, my primary passion and commitment has been to teaching. This makes for a peculiar life, because the teacher-student relation is a paradoxical one. It is intensely personal – one does not teach classes, one teaches individuals in classes. Yet simultaneously a responsible teacher is required to sustain an austere detachment as he drives each student to confront truths of non-subjective reality, and pressures each to accept the often distressing duty to examine with unrelenting critical severity both his or her deepest ingrained presuppositions and their most exhilarating new insights, most of which turn out to be fallacious. I as teacher can help you to learn only by continually demanding that you challenge yourself – and me as well -- good teachers tend to be compulsive masochists. Yet learning is also a strangely collaborative process, for in successful teaching instructor and pupil mutually learn and grow. Any class in which I have not learned something, I regret as unsuccessful.

There haven't been a lot of such classes for me at Columbia, and I cannot explain how much I owe to you. I come to every class with butterflies in my stomach, because I'm sure that what is going to happen will be fascinating because

unpredictable. I can best express my thanks by using the simple words of Lou Gehrig, a fine Columbian, who, when, wasted by a terrible disease, could say, “I have been a very lucky man.”

Because I owe you young people so much, I must sound a warning about the world we elders are bequeathing to you. No Columbia graduating class has ever faced such a god awful mess as we are handing off to you. I offer a short, nasty, and brutish summary of that mess, in which the economic turmoil created by Baby Boomers’ greed may be the least of your difficulties. More dangerous is an ethical collapse that in the last 30 years has debased primary ideals of our national civic life, and perhaps destroyed some forever.

No impartial historian I believe would dispute that the national administration of the past eight years has been both the most systematically corrupt and the most consistently incompetent in our history. I sympathize with those who despise Bush and Cheney – especially the latter, because I was on the faculty at the University of Wisconsin in the 1960s when he was there as a fake student slimily evading military service. But it is a mistake to blame these-mean-spirited, fear-mongering men for the disasters over which they have presided. They only made apparent the moral failure of their generation. It is not easy to find anything charitable to say about Bernie Madoff, but he would have remained a penny-ante crook if hundreds of affluent and supposedly sophisticated investors had not insisted on giving him their money so he could magically increase it without their doing a lick of work, not even asking for an accounting. The sub-human rapacity of Wall Street’s sub-prime mortgage scams simply makes conspicuous Baby Boomers’ destruction of one of America’s finest traditions – that every family, humble as well as grand, could possess its own home on its own plot of land. That ideal was created here – by Americans who first built their homes with their own hands. That ideal we’ve seen degraded into the concept of home as monetary investment, something that doesn’t require a heap of living, just the quick fix of a securitized credit swap.

But perhaps the most fateful change was the decision made in the late 20<sup>th</sup> century that we would no longer ourselves fight to defend our freedoms. With a mercenary army things are so much easier: patriotism becomes sticking a 50-cent

yellow decal on a 30,000 dollar SUV. And I wonder if it is not a cause for turning our optimistically courageous national temperament into groundless fearfulness.

In the early forties, when I was just a little younger than you people, every American male youth was terrified of one thing – that he would be classified 4-F, physically unfit to be drafted for military service. More than 400,000 of those who served, including relatives and friends of mine, were killed, and to me their sacrifice becomes more impressive when I remember how many of these young men had also peeled potatoes, picked up cigarette butts, scraped rusty decks, cleaned out latrines, and performed dozens of other menial tasks, without feeling themselves diminished, doing their duty on the dirty little jobs just as they did when they gave their lives.

Gave their lives for what? The second World War and its Korean aftermath were fought to defeat Fascists, Nazis, and Korean Communists committed to the ideal of a state that was always right because all powerful, able and eager to do whatever it chose to any individual without redress or remorse. These governments imprisoned innocent citizens on the mere suspicion of subversive thought, often for years, without ever charging them with a specific crime. And they brutally tortured both military and civilian prisoners -- defending these atrocities with the false rationalization that the end justifies the means, a doctrine that destroys the possibility of any coherent ethics. Again I say, however, that it is evasive of us to blame our government for turning us into our enemies. We did that to ourselves. The American people have been indifferent to violations of *habeas corpus*, and remain eager not to condemn but to conceal evidence that we have become vicious torturers. What strikes me as most disturbing about this self-degradation is that it has not been driven by any real necessity, that we have for eight years *chosen* to live fearfully rather than hopefully – uncompelled by any genuine threat – 9/11 shocked, but never has our country or its way of life actually been endangered by terrorism.

Perhaps this is why for me the epitome of our self-chosen shame is popular acquiescence in dishonoring those, mercenary or not, who have died in combat, by concealing the return of their bodies, even to censoring pictures of the

flag-draped coffins, too familiar in my youth, that always evoked the sorrow that properly accompanies the honor of personal sacrifice. I now feel that the term “Ivory Tower” has become absolutely false when applied to a university such as Columbia. In my classroom, and those of my colleagues, we insist on the healthiness of confronting realities, including ethical realities, and I know you students want and deserve nothing less. It is only in the classroom, today that there seems genuine resistance to the popular change in America’s motto from *e pluribus unum* to “Don’t ask, don’t tell.”

I don’t apologize for speaking so harshly on a day that is and should be for you so justifiably happy, because I hope to see you refuse the bequest I have described. I hope to hear you to say, loudly and clearly, we reject fear, we desire to engage with reality, however difficult and uncertain, never to evade it. I say I hope, but in fact I’m confident I will hear you so speak, because most of you have already spoken – you and your age-mates have worked to produce something unprecedented in American history – the first president of the United States who is graduate of Columbia College.

And you were right. Of the 15 presidents in my lifetime, he already seems the best. But even Barack Obama can’t do it all by himself. So the responsibility falls to you to use your impressive intelligence to help him lead our nation back to the realistic idealism that made it a beacon and a haven for all people on this earth who have cherished decency and freedom. A good place to start helping, I suggest, is the place you’ll leave the day after tomorrow.

I’ve been illustrating how I teach – which is not to pass on old prejudices but to press irritating and provocative inquiries so as to raise new questions and unexpected possibilities. I think this helps you to learn, and learning is very different from getting educated, because learning only occurs when the intelligence and emotions are fired up, self-energized to leap forward. My approach originated in my first experience teaching Literary Humanities, and it seems to suit my cheerfully abrasive personality, but from time to time I’ve wondered if it might not be just a little perverse. But now when I am about to retire I discovered confirmation from a surprising source – Gertrude Stein. In 1934 she was invited by

the President of the University of Chicago, Robert Hutchins, to teach one class in a course taught by him and Mortimer Adler who had created the predecessor to our Literary Humanities -- although to say that in Low Library borders on blasphemy. The class Stein taught was on Aristophanes and Epic Poetry, and afterward Hutchins said to her, "You made the students all talk more than we make them talk -- and a number of them talked who never talked before." Stein replied: "You see why they talk to me is that I am like them I do not know the answer, you say you do not know but you do know if you did not know the answer you could not spend your life in teaching but I really do not know, I really do not, I do not even know whether there is a question let alone having answer . . . anything for which there is a solution is not interesting, that is the trouble with governments and Utopias and teaching."

So I urge you to believe if not me Gertrude Stein, and put her view to practical use by improving Columbia College. In two days you will graduate, and that will produce a momentous change in your life. Two days from now Columbia will stop taking money from your parents and start asking you to give money to Columbia. I warn you that this university begging will persist to the end of your life -- and that president Bollinger has the biggest Styrofoam cup you've ever seen. I hope you will be generous, but I also hope you will be skeptical and questioning and concerned not with where the university has been, but where it going. Columbia alumni have a pernicious habit 20 years after graduating: they fall into nostalgic hallucinations about the wonders of the core curriculum, of which in fact they have forgotten almost everything, especially the rigor of its ethical severities. These blurred fantasies probably originate in a vague sense that it was more fun to be twenty than it is to be forty, but they make keeping the core curriculum alive and flourishing very difficult, for they block the innovations, experiments, and explorations that maintain the unique intellectual center of the Columbia's undergraduate experience as a ferment of questioning, challenging, and seeking for the unpredictable and as yet un-attempted. I urge you as alumni to return to the campus, to keep in touch with what is really happening to it in a changing world, but not to open your wallets until you are persuaded that the College is enabling its students to learn in a fashion equivalent how you were trained to learn for

**yourselves -- which means that what is being taught and the way it is being taught *ought* to be upsettingly different from what *you* experienced in your years here. Return, be generous, but ask, ask, ask – and don't stop questioning until you are satisfied that the College continues to flourish because it is continuing to transform itself. Don't forget that in 2008 you voted for change. And you more than anyone else have earned the right to demand that Columbia keep advancing by changing. After all, it is now possible for one of you to develop a new tradition -- by becoming the second Columbia College president of the United States.**

**Give it your best shot!**