

## **“AN ENTIRE HORSE”**

Remarks at Haverford Commencement, “First Bite”  
William G. Bowen, May 18, 2014

Thank you, Professor Preston, for those excessively gracious remarks. And my thanks, too, to President Weiss, his family, and others here at Haverford (dare I mention Allie?) for welcoming me back to a special place for which I feel a close affinity. My sense of being at home here dates, first, to my long friendship with your new president, who is, in my considered judgment, one of a handful of truly outstanding leaders of educational institutions in America today. It dates, too, to my affectionate memories of my college tennis coach, Tris Coffin, a proud Haverford graduate who was a distinguished professor of folklore—and who was more successful in teaching me about Beowulf than he was at fixing my errant forehand. It is hard to believe in this day and age that a coach of a competitive college team could enjoy a reputation as a fine scholar; sad and disturbing. Next, I want to express again my indebtedness to John Whitehead, a famous Haverford graduate if ever there was one, who chaired the board of the Mellon Foundation with such vision when I was its president, and who continues to exemplify, as he has for so many years, the Haverford ideal of engaged citizenship.

As for the institution itself, Haverford has been known for a long time for its rare combination of a commitment to the pursuit of ideas and to the obligations of service. It has, today, I believe, a special opportunity to lead us, nationwide, as we work to avoid “either-or” thinking. We need to examine freshly, for example, such important questions as how we can best use the instruments of digital age to inform learning at all levels, while simultaneously re-emphasizing the values of a residential community that contains both established and aspiring scholars. It is critically important to help students, who will be tomorrow’s leaders, establish productive, constructive mindsets--mindsets that are not overly constrained by comfortable

assumptions and today's orthodoxies but which respect a wide variety of points of view. I hasten to add that these remarks are my "first bite at the apple" today; they were prepared 10 days ago, before the furor about Chancellor Birgeneau erupted. In my second "bite," to come shortly, I will offer some personal comments on this troubling set of events.

Now, in the remaining few minutes allotted to me in this first "bite," I want to be self-indulgent and impose my own odd sense of humor on you. Without in any way demeaning the serious thoughts being offered for our consideration at this ceremony, and without undervaluing, as I do not, the accomplishments of today's graduates, I want to say a word on behalf of a light touch. In particular, and without, I hope, offending my truly distinguished colleagues being honored today, I encourage you to avoid taking many things, including both yourselves and the conferring of honorary degrees, too seriously. (My reference to honorary degree recipients applies, needless to say, to *other* honorees at *other* colleges!)

I tell you a story that is only mildly apocryphal. There was a liberal arts college in a nearby state that was in such dire financial straits that it was about to close its doors. Then, out of nowhere, there emerged a philanthropically-minded individual who said to the president that he would like to make a \$100 million gift to save the college—but he would insist on one condition, related to an honorary degree. The president, flabbergasted and barely able to utter appropriate words of thanks, said: "An honorary degree for such a generous, far-sighted person would be no problem at all." The donor replied, "No, no, it's not for me." The president rejoined: "for your father, then?" "No, the donor responded—for my horse!" The president was, needless to say, taken aback—but he recovered his composure to say: "Well, this is such an unusual proposal that I will have to go back and consult my faculty." The faculty, who were truly desperate, agreed that, odd as it was, the college should comply with the donor's request.

Commencement day came. The president marched to the podium and said: “Today, I have a special, indeed unique, privilege: to present, for the first time in my life, an honorary degree to . . . an ENTIRE horse.”

Putting aside my wry effort to inject a self-deprecating note into today’s festivities, I want to end by wishing all of you graduating today, as our predecessors did in the late Middle Ages: Godspeed!

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### **“ENDURING VALUES: OPENNESS AND MUTUAL RESPECT”**

Remarks at Haverford Commencement, “Second Bite”  
William G. Bowen, May 18, 2014

Here I am again—taking advantage of the privilege of being given at this commencement a “second bite at the apple,” in the wake of the troubling, sad situation created by the conflict between Haverford protestors and Chancellor Birgeneau. I was presumptuous enough to volunteer to speak on this subject, as an outsider, and President Weiss was kind enough—brave enough, not knowing what I would say!—to allow me to offer a personal homily on the enduring values of openness and mutual respect.

Let me be clear at the outset that I am not judging the controversy over Bob Birgeneau’s handling of unrest at Berkeley. I have neither the facts nor the inclination to do so. I would suggest only that people interested in the cross pressures on a chancellor at Berkeley seeking to respond to extraordinarily difficult, testy demands should consult the brilliant memoir of a Quaker-inspired person, Clark Kerr, which recounts the choices he made (with mixed results, as he was the first to insist) in the mid 1960s.

Second, I want to suggest, with all due respect for the venerable right to protest—which I would defend to the end—that it is a serious mistake for a leader of the protest against

Birgeneau's proposed honorary degree to claim that Birgeneau's decision not to come represents a "small victory." It represents nothing of the kind. In keeping with the views of many others in higher education, I regard this outcome as a *defeat*, pure and simple, for Haverford—no victory for anyone who believes, as I think most of us do, in both openness to many points of view and mutual respect.

I am reminded of the experience of Richard Lyman, another graduate of a Quaker-inspired college located somewhere in this vicinity, who was president of Stanford at a time when he felt obligated to call in the police. Conservative alumni, who had been sharp critics of Lyman's liberal tendencies, applauded his action. But Lyman was having none of it. He replied that any time police had to be involved, as he resolutely believed was necessary in the situation he confronted, it was a defeat for the university, not a victory for anyone. There are no winners in such situations—or in overly contentious replays of them.

In this instance, I am disappointed that those who wanted to criticize Birgeneau's handling of events at Berkeley chose to send him such an intemperate list of "demands." In my view, they should have encouraged him to come and engage in a genuine discussion, not to come, tail between his legs, to respond to an indictment that a self-chosen jury had reached without hearing counter-arguments. I think that Birgeneau, in turn, failed to make proper allowance for the immature, and, yes, arrogant inclinations of some protestors. Aggravated as he had every right to be, I think he should be with us today.

The better course of action is illustrated, I think, by two other situations regarding honorary degrees, one of which I participated in as president of Princeton in the 1970s and one of which took place more recently at Notre Dame.

As president of Princeton, I presided over a commencement at which George Shultz, then a member of Nixon's cabinet in Vietnam days in the 1970s, was awarded an honorary degree for a lifetime of service as the quintessential public servant—and for having demonstrated, over and over again, impeccable integrity, as for instance when he told a congressional committee investigating the Iran-contra affair that the day he had to take a lie detector test to convince people that he was speaking the truth as he understood it was the day he would leave government. The Congressmen backed down, and Shultz then proceeded to answer all questions asked of him, personally and with no lawyer by his side to protect him; he didn't feel he needed any such "protection." Still, and not surprisingly, many people, and many students especially, objected to the awarding of an honorary degree to Shultz—even as the University took pains to explain that conferring an honorary degree did not imply agreement by the University, or any component of it, with all of the views and actions of the recipient. That standard would effectively preclude, de facto, recognizing any person active in public life. But the protestors were respectful (mostly), and chose to express their displeasure, by simply standing and turning their backs when the Secretary was recognized. Secretary Shultz, in turn, understood that the protestors had every right to express their opinion in a non-disruptive fashion, and he displayed the courage to come and accept his degree, knowing that many of the faculty and staff (a strong majority, I would guess, this person included) thought that the Nixon conduct of the Vietnam War was a tragic mistake. Princeton emerged from this mini-controversy more committed than ever to honoring both the right to protest in proper ways and the accomplishments of someone with whose views on some issues many disagreed.

My second example is the handling by Notre Dame of the invitation to President Barack Obama to come to campus, speak, and receive an honorary degree. Not surprisingly, many loyal

Notre Dame adherents objected vigorously, on the simple ground that Obama's views on issues such as abortion were at odds with the teachings of the Catholic Church. The hero of this dispute was Father Ted Hesburgh, the legendary president of Notre Dame who had long since retired. Speaking in defense of the invitation to President Obama, Father Hesburgh said that Notre Dame was both a "lighthouse," where the beliefs of the Church could be promulgated without qualification, and a "crossroads" where people of every faith and every belief could come to discuss controversial issues and learn from each other. Obama came and spoke at a university with very different traditions than this one, but that also deservedly takes pride in being a "crossroads" as well as a "lighthouse."

My thanks for allowing me to express these personal thoughts. I am, as you may have deduced, neither as graceful nor as forgiving as President Weiss, who recognizes so well that students, along with all the rest of us, make mistakes and need to learn from them. There are indeed days when we all need to eat humble pie. This is but one reason, among others, why we should be grateful that Dan Weiss is President of Haverford today. It is my hope that this regrettable set of events will prove, under President Weiss' leadership, to be a true "learning moment," and that Haverford will go forward, as I am confident that it will, as a great liberal arts college committed, as always, to both the principle of non-violent protest and to the enduring values of openness and respect for diverse views. Thank you, once again.