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People Who Think Otherwise

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People Who Think Otherwise

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(The following address was delivered October 3, 2008, at Middle Tennessee State University during the inauguration of the Buchanan Fellows Class of 2012. The Buchanan Fellowship program, administered by the University Honors College at MTSU, is limited to twenty students per year and is the highest award given to an entering freshman at Middle Tennessee State University.)

The theme of my address is simple: welcome to a community of *people who think otherwise*. First, recognize that you are a community. That may be hard to see at first sight: you come from a wide range of various backgrounds, from big cities and small country towns, from affluent and financially struggling families, from a variety of races and creeds. However, you have much in common with each other, beginning with the talent and record of achievement that got you here. Possessing intelligence and curiosity about the world, you are also likely at one time or another to feel out of step with your fellow students, not only in the university at large but among your fellow Buchanan scholars as well. You *think otherwise*. And that's a good thing. It does not mean cultivating eccentricity for its own sake (those who advised Malvolio in *Twelfth Night* to put himself into the trick of singularity did not wish him well). No, truly to *think otherwise* is simply to find yourself resisting the herd instinct, to refuse to be satisfied with hand-me-down ideas, trendy truisms, robotic talking points, the pre-chewed meat of the mind. You would not be here this evening if to one degree or another you had not learned to savor the experience of fresh ideas. To one degree or other you have had access to a secret that you share, whether or not you recognize your fellows in this room as secret sharers. Yes, you have discovered a great secret, one that you may have experienced with various degrees of guilt—namely this: *the human brain is an erogenous zone*. The life of the mind is a source of pleasure and passion. Go on and cherish it, savor it, indulge in it.

As Buchanan fellows you are members of a privileged community of learners within the university's larger community of learning. Among the privileges that come with this membership is access to a higher level of discussion both within and outside the walls of your classrooms. If you want to label this *elitism*, so be it. Far too often the word is used in such a way as to flatter commonplace minds and encourage resentment of those we should admire. We recognize and praise superior talent and achievement in athletes, musicians,

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and other performers and artists—why not in the life of the mind? The elite status of the world of learning is not defined by access to money, nor by race, class, or gender. The life of the mind is cosmopolitan. Nor does it translate into moral superiority. It should not make you feel smug and self-satisfied. In fact the experience of inhabiting a community of *people who think otherwise* is likely to make you feel humble rather than arrogant, as well it should. I sincerely believe that the more you know about a subject the more you realize the limitations of your knowledge, how much more there is to learn, how much more other, better informed people know than you do. Membership in your community of *people who think otherwise* should stimulate you to emulate and rise to the level of those fellow students whose intelligence and knowledge you admire. To do so requires discipline and hard work, but the rewards are sweet. Allow yourself to be stimulated. The life of the mind is a source of pleasure and passion.

Respect intelligence, your own as well as others'. You are not bound to follow Ted Williams's famous dictum "If you don't think too good, don't think too much." No, you are here because you are capable of thinking well. So don't be afraid of thinking too much. Think otherwise. Put your talent to work by learning as much as you can while you're here. Acquire that knowledge without which intelligence is stillborn or impotent, knowledge that will allow you to think well. Sometimes it may seem as though to think at all is to *think otherwise* in America today. You are surely aware that there are powerful financial and political interests actively working to short-circuit your thinking and play upon your prejudices. It cannot have escaped your notice that you are constantly barged with messages encouraging mindlessness, whether as consumers or as citizens, whether in your choice of personal hygiene products or your choice of political positions and political candidates who, it seems, are marketed on television and the Internet in much the same way as deodorant and mouthwash. Likewise there are huge industries sustaining the production and marketing to you of inane and stupid cultural products—TV shows, movies, and songs that are pitched at the lowest common denominators of human response. Resist reacting mindlessly. Think otherwise. Respect yourself. And demand respect for intelligence. Anti-intellectualism is a cheap resource for appealing to a mass audience these days. Resist it. I read recently that in Hollywood scripts these days the only people who are articulate are villains. Resist anti-intellectual prejudice. Ignorance is not a badge of authenticity.

For the sake of self-respect, if nothing else, make the most of your time at the university. As Buchanan fellows you are in a position to experience the university at its best, to study with professors who are experts in their field and passionate about the subjects they teach. They, too, are people who think otherwise, and they want nothing more than the opportunity to encounter sharers of the secret that I referred to earlier, sharers of the understanding that the life of the mind is a source of pleasure and passion. Excellent students and excellent teachers mutually inspire one another. It's a beautiful case of symbiosis. Don't

be too cool for school; that's merely an excuse for willful ignorance. Find your passion. Let yourself be intrigued by your chosen field of study. Whether it be the history of attempts to define the meaning of justice and to implement justice in the social and political world; whether it be the intricate processes by which genetic information is coded and transmitted, leading to the continuity and evolution of species in the natural world; whether it be the richly expressive otherness of foreign languages and literatures; whether it be the complex mechanisms operating in the worlds of business and finance and their role in furthering or hindering human development across the globe; or the science and politics of global warming, or the history of American slavery or the Stalinist terror, or the development of musical temperament, or the history of Shakespeare's *Hamlet* in the theater—there is no end to the number of fascinating subjects for you to encounter and explore in the next four years. Find your passion.

You may be skeptical of my emphasis on the pleasure and passion that accompany genuine education as opposed to mere skills training. Fair enough. You have the right to think otherwise. But even if you are temperamentally skeptical (as I confess I am myself), even if you are by nature or by bitter experience inclined to be somewhat cynical, even so, mere self-interest (that last refuge of a cynic) should tell you that it only makes sense to exploit the vast resources that are being made available to you at this university. Certainly mere self-interest should direct you to acquire the skills that will enable you to earn a living for yourselves and your families, especially in the unsettling financial conditions that we're told we can expect in the near future. Yet there is more to be said for mere self-interest as a stimulus for learning, though cynicism may hinder your ability to recognize it. Again I'll appeal to pleasure and personal satisfaction. The fact is this: becoming a better educated person will make the world a more interesting place for you and thereby enrich the quality of your life. As you learn to ask more sophisticated and subtle questions of the world that surrounds us, you'll find that the phenomena of nature and the products of human culture both become far more interesting. In addition, by acquiring an education you will in turn become a more interesting person, especially to other interesting people, even though others may resent or misunderstand you. (After all, you think otherwise.)

Having focused so much on the pleasures and the kinds of personal satisfaction to be derived from a life of learning, I am probably expected in closing to say something about the benefits to society at large from the university's nurturing of a community of thinkers and scholars, of people who think otherwise. Here I feel on less secure ground. Politicians and administrators almost always focus on the economic benefits to the state of an educated workforce, and there will always be hard-headed, bottom-line-oriented citizens inclined to demand that higher education justify its existence in terms of cost/benefit ratios. That case has been made and continues to be made, so, fortunately for me, I can safely ignore it. It is conventional as well to note the ways in which the

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advancement of scientific understanding has improved the quality of human life in countless ways, at least in developed countries, enabling the eradication of diseases and the improvement of material standards of health and welfare, thereby lifting humankind from the life of man in the state of nature as characterized by the seventeenth-century writer Thomas Hobbes: “solitary, poor, nasty, brutish, and short.” Yet we are all aware of the price to be paid for the mastery of nature by science, with human ingenuity producing nuclear and chemical weapons as well as medicines, global warming and environmental degradation as well as economic growth; and technology, we know, has been very useful to murderous political regimes seeking to dominate and oppress their own and other peoples. We may yet destroy ourselves by the uses we make of the enormous power we can wield in the service of our appetites and impulses. The knowledge produced by universities can also be used to degrade rather than enrich society when fear, prejudice, and raw greed are cultivated and exploited in the service of mass politics and consumerism. Yet only educated responses can address the problems created by education. Ignorance is no solution.

In addition (and here, I confess I am appealing to a kind of personal faith rather than verifiable knowledge), I believe that education can lead to human progress by the spread of enlightened ideas. I believe that something like human progress—toward justice as well as material prosperity—is possible, in however halting and meandering a fashion. This is not the same as a naïve faith that history has an underlying logic inevitably leading toward progress. I do not believe in utopia. There is no reason to believe that there is a ghost in the machine of history leading to some ultimate teleological fulfillment. I do believe, however, despite some evidence to the contrary, that educated citizens are by and large more enlightened citizens, more capable of recognizing complexity in relations among different social and ethnic communities, more capable of civility and tolerance of people who think otherwise than they do. Unfortunately much evidence to counter that idea surrounds us. A higher percentage of the population than ever is attending college, yet as a society we seem to be increasingly sinking into appalling brutality. The products of commercial culture—on the television, in the movies, on the radio—seem to revel in the brutal degradation of human beings, and torture is now an acknowledged instrument of our national policy. I suppose I am driven to conclude that while more people than ever are receiving degrees, most of them are not in fact receiving an education. So in welcoming you, I would also challenge you, one final time: think otherwise.

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