HANNA HOLBORN GRAY

Hanna Holborn Gray, Provost of the University, served as Acting President of Yale from May 1977 to June 1978. There is no inaugural address to include in this volume, but as Acting President in May 1978, she spoke of Yale and other institutions in a Baccalaureate Address to the graduating class.

Gray left Yale to become President of the University of Chicago, where she served for fifteen years with excellence and great distinction.
Gazing at you, I realize what Mrs. Malaprop felt when she exclaimed that she saw before her a veritable “progeny of learning!” Learning, of course, is not identical with wisdom or even its progenitor. But you are surely commencement wise—this season’s version of street wise. And therefore you are wise enough to know, in the fine blend of sophistication, surliness, and endurance nurtured by Mother Yale, that a great number of words are spoken to, or over, those who commence. And you are aware, too, that the effect of such words will not, alas, be to illuminate your lives in memorable ways. They will have instead the rather more modest result of prolonging this occasion and of exposing the speaker to the indignation expressed by the same Mrs. Malaprop when she protested: “An aspersion upon my parts of speech! Was ever such a brute! Sure, if I reprehend anything in this world, it is the use of my oracular tongue, and a nice derangement of epitaphs!”

On the derangement of epitaphs front, it occurs to me that you and I have been here four years, more or less. As we complete our exit interviews, we presumably share the preoccupations of veterans looking back on their enlistment and wondering, with both anxiety and anticipation, about civilian life. Some of us, myself included, have decided to re-enlist and go on for a little post-graduate work. We will continue to live varying lengths of time within the institution of the university. Others of us will be living and working in a different kind of setting, where universities are institutions among many. In either case, whether in our private or professional experience, we carry with us the question: who will care for our institutions? Have we the wisdom to know that the former days were not necessarily better than these?

Alfred North Whitehead said, “The task of a university is the creation of the future, so far as rational thought and civilized modes of appreciation can affect the issue.” That is a fine statement of an aspiration whose fulfillment is not easy to specify or predict. It implies the living bond that unites a diverse group of men and women who represent many generations in the continual movement of an evolving tradition. Their citizenship in the university is defined not by place of residence or manner of life, but by a common concern for the quality and substance of a civilized present and future, in a deep regard for understanding the past, in a willingness to confront complexity with critical judgment, in a due respect for the limitations of reason and for beliefs that transcend reason by itself.
Whether we like it or not, we need to acknowledge the fact that when we meet our institutions, they are us. In simple truth, you have already shaped this university, in countless and often intangible ways, even as it has helped to shape your development. And the nature of your future concern, whether for Yale directly, or indirectly in your concern for the many interrelated matters that contribute to the integrity and active impact of the university, will continue to affect and to animate the character of the place and of places like it.

Accompanying those concerns is a sort of paradox. One way of putting that might be as follows: It can be folly to bind ourselves to institutions; it may be wisdom to give ourselves to the convictions and consequences that institutions exist to serve.

So where, we must ask, does wisdom about the relationship of self to institution begin or end? The idea that institutions are us is not at all comfortable. Their cumbersome imperfections, the distance separating high purpose from everyday reality, the many ways in which we would not have the language of others speak for our individual selves—all contribute to our unease. And it is, after all, precisely the university’s aim to encourage people to think rigorously on their own, to question and debate, to achieve the freedom of self-definition and the disciplines of intellectual responsibility and of ethical choice.

But freedom can be a troubling acquisition, like that notorious privilege of doubt to which you were introduced four years ago. Beyond the liberties of thought and expression, there arises the need for judgment, for decision and action. And there emerges the problem of conflicts between possible choices, between retaining all options and committing to given directions and risks, between the illusory freedom of total choice and the actual, yet constricting, freedom of choices accomplished, between the freedoms of the solitary self and the intricate, and enhancing, claims of others.

The presence of these dilemmas is an inescapable dimension of our history and condition. Liberal learning, at its best, broadens and deepens our sense for the character and subtlety of the issues which they pose. But it offers no formulas, no answers at the back of the book. Learning, thought, and experience make their resolution not easier, but more informed. Deliberate ignorance or simple willfulness in the face of these complexities will not do.

We all know that choice and its qualified freedom bring with them obligations assumed and potentialities denied. We know equally that the failure to choose or to judge, as though all the world needed to be held forever, can lead only to disappointed hopes, the loss of possibility, and the
bitter paralysis of ultimate doubt. We see ambition or aspiration sometimes mistaken for immediate right, and quiet, constructive, and necessary beginnings for loss of dignity or intolerable impediment. Conceptions of what ought to be or to become are sometimes taken to be hopelessly corrupted or fatally flawed in realization by the gradual accommodations and lengthy adaptations that are required to give institutional form to far-reaching visions.

Montaigne’s is one voice to have described the timeless search for self-definition and understanding in relation to a world of ideologies, interests, and institutions in embattled disarray. This was his summing up:

“It is an absolute perfection and virtually divine to know how to enjoy our being rightfully. We seek other conditions because we do not understand the use of our own, and go outside of ourselves because we do not know what it is like inside. Yet there is no use our mounting on stilts, for on stilts we must still walk on our own legs. And on the loftiest throne in the world we are still sitting only on our own rump.

“The most beautiful lives, to my mind, are those that conform to the common human pattern…”

In the end, we have to establish for ourselves the significant balances, putting aside any pretense that the world should conform to us and refusing simultaneously to give it our automatic assent. No institution as it exists can or should demand literally our exclusive loyalty. Yet the purposes and possibilities of those that can be—and can make us—effective should engage our deepest capacities for committed concern.

The institution of the independent university has at its core a dedication to process. The process by which we arrive at conclusions is a major measure of their content and value. The university’s success in sustaining that process is no greater than the thousands of individual initiatives and commitments that activate and guide the process itself, be those related to teaching, research, or scholarship, to the self-governance of the community, to its deliberation on goals and activities, to its place in representing a force and choice in our society. It works only as well as those who think it matters will make it work. It is effective only as it strengthens and is strengthened by the individual and diverse competences and convictions of each of us, whether resident or graduate.

Members of the graduating class:

The institution of the university is not, in Emerson’s phrase, the lengthened shadow of one man, but rather that of many men and women who care for its purposes. At best it is one of the institutions that can make
the human environment more humane, and permits it to be freer, if no less complicated.

Let us be modest realists about the world with a thoughtful will to dissent from its follies, and at the same time let us be generous skeptics about the world, with an informed will not to evade its claims and obligations.

I thank you for what you have brought to this university and for all that you have done to make it a community of collaborative learning.

Have a great commencement — And good luck to you all.