In an unusual tribute, Benno C. Schmidt’s inaugural address made note of his predecessors seated in the audience: Kingman Brewster, then Master of University College of Oxford University; Hanna Holborn Gray, president of the University of Chicago; A. Bartlett Giamatti, president-designate of baseball’s National League; and representing A. Whitney Griswold, his widow Mary Griswold. Yale’s twentieth President was inaugurated before presidents and delegates of eighty colleges and universities including the Rector of the University of Heidelberg, the world’s oldest university (founded in 1386), and Michael Sovern, President of Columbia University where Schmidt had been Dean of the Law School until his Yale appointment. A graduate of both Yale College and Yale Law School, Benno C. Schmidt, Jr. had changed from a carefree undergraduate who characterized his experience in college as “more joy than wisdom” to a hardworking scholar in Law School graduating near the top of his class. He clerked for Supreme Court Chief Justice Earl Warren and then worked in the Justice Department before accepting an appointment at Columbia Law School. His deanship of the Law School at Columbia was so successful that when Columbia President Michael Sovern heard that Yale was looking for a new President, he was quoted as saying “Just don’t take Benno Schmidt.”

The weekend of the Schmidt inauguration began with a Friday evening concert in Woolsey Hall that featured two choices by Schmidt—Mozart’s Sinfonia Concertante for Violin and Viola and Schubert’s String Quintet in C. Major, Op. 163. At the conclusion of the inauguration ceremonies, an “Inaugural Anthem” with lyrics selected by Schmidt and music composed by Fenno B. Heath, Jr., Professor of Choral Music, was performed. The text was from T. S. Eliot’s Four Quartets beginning with

We shall not cease from exploration
And the end of all our exploring
Will be to arrive where we started
And know the place for the first time.

The years of Schmidt’s presidency saw much faculty dissension because of the attempts to restructure the Faculty of Arts and Sciences and bring about a balanced budget. There was a recession nationally, and New Haven had serious economic and social problems. Schmidt worked closely with the Mayor of the city to improve relations, and was also able to negotiate labor agreements which left the campus strike-free.

1 “Probing the Presidency,” Yale Alumni Magazine (October 1992), 52.
INAUGURAL ADDRESS

BENNO C. SCHMIDT, JR., SEPTEMBER 20, 1986

I

“Wisdom hath builded her house.” With these austere and in the circumstances optimistic words, John Davenport inaugurated the proceedings in Robert Newman’s barn on June 4, 1639 that laid the foundation for the religious and civil institutions of the Colony and the Plantation of New Haven.

Davenport had had a different message for his Puritan fellows one year before. On the Sabbath, only one day after they had set ashore for the first time on the banks of the Quinnipiac, he took as his text the third chapter of Matthew, and admonished his fellow divines “on the temptation of the wilderness.”

Eight years ago my predecessor, A. Bartlett Giamatti, began his inaugural address to you in this great hall by saying, “We at Yale have never been stronger.” I say to you today with more than emulative conviction that what our friend and leader said then is indeed true now. “Wisdom hath builded her house,” thanks to him and his fellow workers in the vineyard these past eight years, and thanks to the patient work of our great predecessors. Three distinguished former Yale Presidents honor us with their presence here today: Kingman Brewster, Hanna Holborn Gray, and A. Bartlett Giamatti—and in Mary Griswold we are joined by the partner of a gallant fourth, A. Whitney Griswold. They know better than anyone in this hall how modest is the contribution of Yale’s Presidents to the building of this house, compared to that of the faculty, the students, the workers who make this place operate. But Yale has had leaders suitable to the greatness of its mission.

II

The greatness of Yale is rooted in the respect for education of the community that is its home; as the Colony and Plantation of New Haven, as New Haven in the Colony of Connecticut, as the great city and state we are proud to call our home today. We carry forward the Puritan zeal for education as the path to salvation. The Puritans embodied the scholastic determination to rationalize faith and the conviction that learning showed the way to truth. In their radical dependence on the word of God lay a radical capacity for collective independence in matters of politics, a respect for mind, and an intensity of striving and spirit that are the hallmarks of great intellectual achievement. Observing the ineluctable progress of the Puritans’ educational institutions toward liberality of thought and magnanimity of mind,
we may even go so far as to suggest that in their radical dependence on the word lay the seeds of the heretical imperative, that irreducible individual obligation and freedom to which the Greek verb *hairein* refers—as to choose—that is the essence of intellectual freedom.

Our exiled forebears also established the tradition of community support and sacrifice for education that has been our sustenance from the day our tiny institution opened its doors in 1701 in the Connecticut Colony, its charter almost exactly borrowed from John Davenport’s statement of the Puritan education ideal, “wherein youth may be instructed in the arts and sciences, who, through the blessing of Almighty God, may be fitted for Publick employment both in Church & Civil State.”

The colonial assembly which sanctioned the establishment of this College excused the students from taxes and public service, ordaining “that no scholar…shall be entered in the publick list of male persons, nor be rated for his head.” There followed repeated legislative grants of money for “the encouragement of Yale College,” which after early perambulations had settled in New Haven when our city offered the enormous sum of £1,600 to attract the college here. And even so, the college had to rely on the good offices of Governor Gourdon Saltonstall to send the sheriff “to impress men, and carts, and oxen” to seize Yale’s books from a recalcitrant Saybrook for delivery to Yale College.

I recite those familiar facts of our history to recall us to the truth that from our beginnings we have been of this community, an expression of its deepest values. Our success has been built on our community’s dedication to our educational mission. Yale is not an island in New Haven and Connecticut, it never has been and never will be so long as it remains true to its heritage. I am a citizen of New Haven, as proudly and significantly as I am of Yale.

From its beginnings Yale has been intimately of another community, also born of Puritanism. I refer to the American community of higher education. As is well known, albeit often exaggerated, much of the energy and commitment that went into the founding of Yale stemmed from a group of dissident Harvard graduates outraged at their alma mater’s deviations from Puritan orthodoxy. Despairing to reform the sinfulness of their own institution, they organized another. Thus, out of the heretical impulse of our Puritan parent institution came our own.

Yale in turn has carried a proud nurturing responsibility for the community of higher education, its sons spreading the gospel of education to the wilderness where great institutions now stand. From those it nurtured, it has received nurture in return, and so the cycle of proselytizing education, family quarrels over intellectual content, sectarian pride in local edu-
cation for community purpose, and creation of new institutions, produced the happy colonial pattern of a multiplicity of higher education rather than a clustering at centers of learning as in the English pattern at Oxford and Cambridge. And so, the family kinship of Yale with the colonial colleges of the eastern seaboard has grown through the years to a vast network of affiliations with universities around the world. From its rudest beginnings Yale has not been an island in the community of higher education. The presence of so many honored guests from great institutions around the world testifies to our deep sense of educational community.

The central mission of a university is to preserve, disseminate, and advance knowledge through teaching and research. A university is of course much more than its central mission. It is indeed a small society in itself: a place to live, work, and eat, to play, to attend to the social side of life and the urge to affiliate for a thousand reasons, to pursue all the varieties of experiences, religious, aesthetic, athletic, which make for the full life. This University brims with myriad activities that are not strictly speaking a part of its central academic mission, but that make life here enriching, fascinating, fulfilling. Most of these activities are precious to Yale and precious to me. But none of them, nor even the sum of them, is as important to the University or as valuable to the world as the protection of our central mission.

The foundation of this mission is academic freedom and absolute adherence to freedom of expression within the University and the associated freedoms and protections that sustain it.

The academic freedom that seems in a steady state of equilibrium at Yale and other great research universities in the United States is in fact highly complex, little understood, and both more recent and more contingent than most of us suppose. Its basic tenet is that neither students nor teachers—and I would add neither administrative officers nor staff members—need answer to any test of religious dogma, political orthodoxy, or civic virtue in their academic pursuits. Excellence, integrity, and industry are the measures of academic merit at Yale, and should be everywhere. Academic freedom is strong at Yale.

In respect of its commitment to academic freedom, as in all other respects, Yale is not a sanctuary apart from American society. It is rather an integral reflection of our society’s commitment to pluralism, private ordering, and institutional and personal autonomy in the pursuit of freedom of inquiry and expression.
No institution devoted to the spirit of free inquiry can survive in a society so riven with doubt and fear that it hunkers down in futile rejection of the ugly truths of our imperfect world, that it flees from the complex vision of modern science, that it shies away from nonconforming ideologies and affiliations. You did not call me to this platform to solicit an apocalyptic vision—and indeed I fear I should not be capable of issuing such even were the trumpet to sound in my ear—but I say to you that intellectual freedom is hard-pressed in the United States today. Our officials in Washington exercise their discretion over such matters as visits to the United States by foreigners thought to carry a controversial message or the degree of secrecy in matters thought to relate to that most umbrageous of concepts, national security, with little thought for intellectual freedom. They seem to be under the misimpression that they are the ideological nannies of a population of preadolescents rather than the servants of a free and responsible people. And I speak of both parties, and liberals and conservatives alike.

Even more threatening is the insidious tide of conformity and fear that menaces so many of our public schools, where offending books are ransacked from libraries, science is subverted to sectarian ends, and teachers are harassed for intellectual convictions, elections of private lifestyles, and simple commitments to truth. And even our great universities need not look back to the paranoid excesses of the McCarthy era to find assaults on intellectual freedoms that shame their traditions of liberty. Speakers have been hounded and intimidated into silence by forces both inside and outside the university. Scientific investigation has been throttled out of misplaced fears and fantasies, and teachers and students harassed for their research interests, their politics, their sexual identities.

We will protect our own with fierce resolve. But Yale is not an island where intellectual liberty is at stake; we must never ask for whom the bell tolls when academic freedom is jeopardized.

IV

Related issues of freedom of expression at Yale also will bear further scrutiny on this occasion, although these problems have been splendidly traversed by the so-called Woodward Committee Report of 1975. I agree entirely with the basic principle of the Woodward Report that in a university community intellectual freedom and the freedom of expression collateral to it are the highest values of the place. But the time is ripe for further reflection on the implications of this.
I think the principles developed for the governance of our civil society are not an adequate account of the place of freedom of expression at Yale. The theoretical roots of our constitutional commitment to free expression lie in the relation of expression to capacities for political participation and in an abiding intellectual skepticism, represented most prominently by Justice Oliver Wendell Holmes, Jr., that sees truth as the shifting residue of competition in ideas.

The problem with these theories of free expression for a university community is their failure to address what freedom of mind is really about, which is how to think.¹ We need to confront expression not because it gives us information, permits us to participate in decision making—although those are useful—but most fundamentally because we need to develop our own capacities for freedom. To stifle expression because it is obnoxious, erroneous, embarrassing, not instrumental to some political or ideological end is—quite apart from the grotesque invasion of the rights of others—a disastrous reflection on ourselves. It is to elevate our fear and our ignorance over our capacity for a liberated and humane mind. It is to trammel our capacity for salvation over our fearful and parochial selves.

There is no speech so horrendous in content that it does not in principle serve our purposes, though this is not to say that we may not have better things to do. Even egregious error sharpens our perception of the truth, and if that fails I say to you that we are always and invariably thrust by outrageous expression into better awareness of our enemy.

Earlier this summer I was asked to select a text for the Inaugural Anthem by Fenno Heath that you are about to hear. In my modest previous life I lacked occasion to search my mind for the fruits of an ode. I approached the task, I have to confess, in a frame of mind more ironical than serious. But so typically of this place, this simple request started me on a long and truly wonderful journey of discovery, as I read and reread old personal favorites. Again and again I came back to Eliot’s Four Quartets.

And as I reflected on the Puritan tradition and Yale’s beginnings in preparation for my talk today I found that Eliot speaks to me of the abiding glories of this tradition for the life of the mind.

And not only for the obvious reasons. We know of Eliot’s insistent concern with questions of belief, his heightened consciousness of good and evil, his understanding of the sometimes tragic consequences of loneliness, denial, disaffection and repression, his trust in visionary moments, his belief—passionately held—in the virtues of self-sacrifice, of community, of

tradition, and his conviction that human beings “come nearest to being real” — and ultimately most human — in moments of intense “moral and spiritual struggle.”

But above all, I think, Eliot inherits the Puritan tradition in the conviction that issued forth at the end of his life: that a poem — I would say any intellectual journey — should be more than a mélange of impressions and sensations, no matter how artfully conceived and poetically rendered. Instead, the poem should carry with it — in its bones, in its very essence — an expression of life outside the poem and ideally the very “truth of its time.”

Eliot’s beliefs about liberal education, about the life of the mind, and the goals of a university flow from this and place him in the grand tradition of such thinkers as Samuel Johnson, Matthew Arnold, E.R. Leavis, Lionel Trilling, and others who believed that knowledge of the best that has been said and has been thought deepens and refines the human experience. It is a tradition built on the assumption that there exists a close relationship between one’s capacity to respond to art, to delight in the mysteries of science, and the ability to lead a humane life.

These assumptions about the contributions of literate culture and the pursuit of scientific curiosity to moral perception are no longer self-evident. They — along with the entire tradition — are being questioned, challenged, and even fiercely attacked. Deservedly so. For there has been too much inhumanity in our supposedly civilized enlightened world to allow for easy complacencies about the humane and moral components of liberal education. And the questions about whether culture and scientific exploration are necessarily — or even marginally — humanizing forces can no longer be so easily answered. But if they are not, what are we doing here in the University? Are such questions about the moral worth of what we do imponderable or even beside the point?

I believe these questions are urgent. The critic George Steiner, among others, has been pressing them insistently for the last few decades and forcing our attention to the truth that a literate humanistic culture was no barrier to totalitarianism. Not only not a barrier, but in certain instances, the citadels of culture and art threw open their doors to the new barbarians. It is a matter of record that the faculties of some great universities offered little resistance to the degradations that occurred inside — as well as outside — their walls.

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In Steiner’s own searing words, “Knowledge of Goethe, a delight in the poetry of Rilke, seemed no bar to personal and institutionalized sadism. Literary values and the utmost hideous inhumanity could coexist in the same community, in the same individual sensibility.”¹

The question Steiner is forcing us to contend with—and it is profound, certainly disturbing and not easily answered—is whether there is something in the very nature of the intellectual enterprise, in its abstractness, in its neutrality, in its remoteness from the texture and the exigencies of daily life, that diminishes our capacity for moral response.

I think not, and finally neither does Steiner. I deeply believe that the liberal arts culture is precious and that it does, in fact, humanize if we can open ourselves. But I say this—as anyone in the twentieth century must—in hope and humility amidst the uncertainty of our fallen state. And all the while I recognize that these questions about our enterprise are valid and must be raised again and again.

As I said in an earlier talk with the freshmen, there is a simple truth about liberal arts education, and that is that studying what is outside us in an open, curious, even playful way gives us two indispensable gifts. One is happiness. And the other is empathy. Being informed of how others do things, how they lead their lives, how atoms dance, how the stars move and plants grow—all of this gives us not only a deep and mysterious joy but a respect for otherness that is essential to moral capacity. I insist that an essential part of our growth as literate and moral beings depends on our ability to grasp the fullness of another person’s existence from within.

And it is this inability or unwillingness to imagine otherness, to accept complexity and nuance, and finally to live in the tension between uncertainty and certainty that is the root of so much of the intolerance and cant that passes for political debate in government and in the academy. To get inside another human being requires great effort. It can result in great art. To perceive the imagination of others is a moral as well as artistic and intellectual act, and intolerance too often is simply moral laziness.

Eliot, a critic of extreme understatement, once described the process of reading a poem as “surrender and recovery.” In the Four Quartets he warned us against so-called safe knowledge, preferring that “the wisdom of old men should be folly…frenzy and possession.” And Kafka says, “We must have books which come upon us like ill fortune and distress us deeply, like the death of one we love better than ourselves…A book must be an ice axe to break the sea frozen inside us.”² I agree. To read and understand well, whether in literature, in psychology, in science, in preparation for the learned professions, in any and all of the disciplines so

¹ George Steiner, Language and Silence (Atheneum Publishers, 1970), 55 (from the chapter “To Civilize our Gentlemen”).
magnificently represented in this University, entails risk, vulnerability, and change. Liberal education should prepare us for a lifetime of such vulnerability and risk. Or as Eliot put it in the *Four Quartets*, a life in which “the pattern is new in every moment and every moment is new and shocking valuation of all we have been.”

Our education in the end prepares us not only for our professions, but for the two thirds of our life that is not about our jobs, our work, our status. But about dailiness. About inwardness. About our capacities for affiliation. The best education is richly specific, helps us to create delight in otherness and in beauty — whether we find it in Beethoven, Einstein, Rilke, or Freud — and by doing so, allows us to become poets of our own lives, enables us to possess our inner lives, and truly to experience life rather than simply to pass through it.

I would like to end on a personal note, one inspired by a line in the *Four Quartets* that seems especially relevant as I stand here today: “We have had the experience but missed the meaning.” And in many ways that is how I feel as I look back over my life. Twenty-seven years ago I came to Yale as a freshman and left it seven years later. I loved Yale then. Perhaps with greater joy than wisdom. And perhaps with a bit too much of “folly” and “frenzy,” to recur to Eliot. But I have been given an extraordinary opportunity. A rare moment in anyone’s life. The gift of a second chance. I have been given the chance to have the experience again. And now truly to strive for the meaning.

To all of you here today who have given me that chance, I thank you. To all of you who will accompany me on this journey, most especially to the many who will correct such false consciousness as the aridity and religious obscurantism represented by the late works of T.S. Eliot, I welcome enlightenment.

Wisdom and beauty and that passion for education we trace to our deepest roots will continue to build her house.