



An Elite University in Populist Times

The following commencement speech was presented in May 1999 at Washington University in St. Louis by Ursula W. Goodenough.

We are here to celebrate the scholarly achievements of the outstanding men and women who are graduating with honors from Washington University. We hereby send you forth to join the intellectual elite of our society.

Whoa! What did she say?

Intellectual elite?

Most of you are likely starting to feel pretty uncomfortable. Intellectual and elite are tricky words. But why? I'd like to explore what these words mean, why they are tricky, and how we might get past feeling uncomfortable about them, and hence become more comfortable with who we are.

First, the words. Both intellectual and elite, I have discovered, come from the same Latin root, *legere*, which means to pick out, choose, select. Elite refers to those who stand out overall; intellectual refers to those who stand out in wisdom and understanding.

In the history of human culture, the intellectual elite were celebrated unabashedly.

Whether in Africa, or Oceania, or Asia, or Western Europe, or in Native American traditions, enormous status and reverence have always been accorded to the wise ones, the healers, the poets, the interpreters of the histories and the religions and the natural world. True, the warriors and the politicians usually wound up usurping the economic resources. But in the end, their worth was tightly coupled to their association with the intellectual members of their societies, and many of the great leaders in human history have been both shrewd manipulators and deep thinkers.

Given that you have been singled out for superior performance at an elite university, does this mean that you should consider yourselves intellectuals? To be sure, people often distance themselves from the term, preferring instead something like intelligent. But if we get specific about what we mean by intellectual, I think that most of you would find the concept acceptable.

An intellectual can be characterized by four traits. First, intellectuals are *curious*. They are eager to figure out the answers to the questions they are asking, questions that they find extremely interesting. Second, intellectuals are *flexible*. They are comfortable about changing their minds when they are presented with a better idea than the one they have been holding. Third, intellectuals are interested in *abstraction*, in generalizing about things, rather than just categorizing specific experiences. And fourth, intellectuals have a well-developed sense of *irony*. They deeply appreciate both the pathos and the humor of human frailty, including their own.

I rather suspect that most of you, and indeed most graduates of Washington University, could self-identify with these four traits. So let us proceed with the assumption that your inherent disposition, and your training, allow you to feel comfortable with the idea that you are an intellectual, at least in the privacy of your own mind.

Then why is it that we feel vaguely embarrassed, and cast down our eyes, and perhaps even try to offer a refutation when a commencement

speaker reminds us that we belong to an intellectual elite?

An obvious answer is that the intellectual elite is under siege in this country. In fact, the intellectual elite has never fared too well in America. The siege has been pretty continuous.

But if we focus on our current detractors, whom we can call populists, they include two groups. The first are the flat-out anti-intellectuals, including, I'm afraid, a number of our elected political representatives, who openly snigger at the liberals sitting around in their faculty lounges getting a free ride. The second perspective is more subtly anti-intellectual: It holds that the intellectual approach is somehow effete, irrelevant, and in fact responsible for our global dilemma, and claims that we must instead embrace something that is far more intuitive, right-brained, and informed by our emotions.

All of this strikes me as most unsettling. Why is it that curiosity, flexibility, abstraction, and

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I can suggest some answers.

There are those who are afraid of the questions we are asking, and the answers we are offering, since they all too often challenge convention and hence predictability.

There are many who have learned to think in concrete slogans, indeed, who need to think in concrete slogans, and they are uncomfortable with flexibility and abstraction.

And finally, there are those who unfortunately interpret what we call irony as a manifestation of amorality. In fact, of course, our insistence that individuals can and should develop their own system of values doesn't mean that we don't have deeply held values of our own.

Given this distrust of the intellectual agenda, the Great American Compromise has been to put us intellectuals in a separate class, give us our universities and books and professions, and let us talk to one another while the "real folks" get on with "real things" like politics and power. In exchange, we are expected to feel vaguely apologetic about our privileged, if marginalized, position, and not make waves. Indeed, if we presume to suggest too strongly that our perspective might be of value, the word elite is transmuted to elitist and we are told that

we are self-serving, out of touch, arrogant. A dear friend of mine, a distinguished professor at Columbia University, testified eloquently before a House subcommittee several weeks ago on the importance of government support for our universities. When he finished, he anticipated specific questions on his remarks. Instead, a long silence was finally broken by a single query: "Tell me, professor, what's your current salary?"

Given the gist of my remarks, my bottom line will not be surprising. I think we are acting like wimps, which is, in fact, the way we are commonly perceived. We intellectuals somehow have to develop the courage, and the conviction, to reassert our rightful place as deeply valued members of our culture. Importantly, we need to do something about our fear of leadership, both our fear of exerting leadership ourselves and our fear of responding positively to the leadership of those who show courage, conviction, and wisdom.

Intellectuals do not live exclusively in universities. They do just about everything, and crop up in the most unexpected locations and vocations. No matter what you proceed to do, let the intellectual flourish, and things will never get dull. ■

—Ursula Goodenough
for the Women in Cell Biology Committee

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