

by Reynolds Price

The following was presented at the annual Founders' Day convocation on Dec. 10. Copyright 1992 by Reynolds Price.

Ronald Reagan has recently reminded us that he knew Thomas Jefferson. On the face of it, who can doubt him? Sad to say -- while I first visited Duke University in 1943 and returned as an undergraduate from 1951 to 1955 -- even I can't claim to have known James Buchanan Duke. The loss is mine. Evidence for a full picture of him is provided by our colleague Robert Durden in his volume "The Dukes of Durham" and in his forthcoming and fascinating "The Launching of Duke University."

The two books combine to suggest in Mr. Duke a steeltrap mind of size, ceaseless complexity and magnetism -- even occasional charm. And a reading of the indenture by which he established his endowment 68 years ago tomorrow shows in a few passages of bareboned eloquence the uncluttered mind of its source -- a man born only a few miles from here, who made good worldwide, planned his mammoth benefaction with deliberate care over many years and who, at the very least, knew what he wanted.

In the indenture, J.B. Duke signed his name to a paragraph of specifications for a new university. However influenced the passage was by lawyers cautious to the point of paralysis or by President Few of Trinity College, here are the specifications as Mr. Duke agreed to phrase them (and note the delicacy with which he "requests" and "advises" his successors -- if I were giving millions of dollars to a small college in my birthplace, I suspect I'd employ verbs like "require" and "direct.")

I have selected Duke University as one of the principal objects of this trust because I recognize that education, when conducted along sane and practical, as opposed to dogmatic and theoretical, lines, is, next to religion, the greatest civilizing influence. I request that this institution secure for its officers, trustees and faculty men of such outstanding character, ability and vision as will insure its attaining and maintaining a place of real leadership in the educational world, and that great care and discrimination be exercised in admitting as students only those whose previous record shows a character, determination and application evincing a wholesome and real ambition for life. And I advise that the courses at this institution be arranged, first, with special reference to the training of preachers, teachers, lawyers and physicians, because these are most in the public eye, and by precept and example can do most to uplift mankind, and, second, to instruction in chemistry, economics and history, especially the lives of the great of earth, because I believe that such subjects will most help to develop our resources, increase our wisdom and promote human happiness. (Emphasis my own.)

What J.B. Duke said he wanted, or hoped for, then is clear in general and is often quoted with little reflection on state occasions hereabouts, though he stipulated that the whole long document be read aloud to the trustees annually, a request that I'm told is still honored.

A clever fantasist might amuse us by guessing at what J.B. Duke would make of his creature, had he survived the trials of the

20th century to stand here today. But I'll decline that impersonation and hope that it won't prove entirely unwelcome on a grateful occasion if I, as a witness of the past four local decades, glance at my balance-sheet of hits and misses, especially those misses which I suspect would have given Mr. Duke painful and very likely impatient pause: in the indenture he after all gave his trustees power to suspend payments, at their will, to the university.

Short of a suicidal attempt to examine myself and my faculty colleagues as "men of ... outstanding character, ability and vision" (and yes, I hear the absence of the word women from that time-locked phrase), I join with pleasure in the growing sense throughout America and a good part of the world that -- with certain desert treks occasioned by war, short funds or an excess of folly -- the university faculty has grown in responsible intellectual daring and professional stature to a point at which we may begin at least to think of ourselves as a first-rate academy, presumably the youngest such in the world.

That anyhow has been the claim of our recent campaign for capital endowment; and I've more than once endorse the claim, while quietly muffling (like a kinsman possessed of good family values) my reservations about this or that program, this or that howling banshee of a colleague.

I even try to believe, admittedly with a frozen smile, the annual announcement by our admissions office that this September's crop of freshmen is more beautiful-in-mind, body and soul -- and better equipped to meet the faculty's challenge than any previous

generation. But beneath the grin I'm unavoidably recalling my certainty that the 5,000 Duke students of my undergraduate years -- the early 1950s -- gloried in a proportionally greater number of absolutely first-rate student minds and that fruitful personal exchanges between teachers and students were far more common in those days.

Anyone in search of face-saving explanations for our gradual dilution of that splendid compound might say that the 1950s were more propitious years for white middle-class public education in America. They were also years in which, as Mr. Duke clearly intended, the university more easily wooed and won the exceptionally intelligent, ambitious and almost never wealthy white students of its own region -- both the upper and deep South.

Despite recent efforts to repair that neglect, the ongoing absence of so many of those most promising Southerners -- of every race and degree of income -- is partly owing to a breakdown of regional boundaries throughout the nation and partly to our steeply rising tuition. But most sadly the absence of those young Southerners among us is owing to this university's inexplicable loss of will to find the means of supporting those needy students of North Carolina and the South who have earned the right to come here but cannot. I date that loss of will to the early 1960s.

So for more than three decades, that failure has not only sent most of the best Southern high school graduates elsewhere -- especially to Chapel Hill where the Morehead Foundation skims a drastic share of the cream of the state, the South and the nation -- it has also deprived us of the benign role so explicitly

intended for us in forming the future leaders of our time and place. Our benighted politicians and voters are in part our children -- our abandoned children.

I'm aware too that, while I encounter in my classes each year a nexus of extraordinary students who keep me teaching, I likewise encounter -- and all my classes are elective -- the stunned or blank faces of students who exhibit a minimum of preparation or willingness for what I think of as the high delight and life-enduring pleasure of serious conversation in the classroom and elsewhere.

Disturbingly often I'm left wondering why a particularly lifeless student -- one so apparently vacant of Mr. Duke's "real ambition for life" -- is present in a university that affirms its luxury of choice and its stringent standards. Whose rightful place is that dullard usurping? My baffled curiosity is by no means eccentric in me.

If we are getting the students we claim to deserve -- our earned share of the most intelligent, original and ambitious American high-school graduates -- then why do I hear so many colleagues whom I know to be dedicated teachers sharing the same puzzlement; and why do so many long-time members of the faculty agree that our standards of grading have steadily inflated in recent years? A teacher who grades the students of the '90s as realistically as he did in the 1950s or '60s will face a roomful of empty desks at the start of the next term.

Anyone present here today who has not recently spent sustained time in a Duke classroom and who doubts my word owes him

or herself an unobtrusive campus tour. Before I suggest a few stops on your route, let me forestall any question of my devotion to the place by stating the obvious -- that I've happily chosen to spend my life here and that I'm certain you'll find rewarding sights. You'll witness many probing enlightening, even pleasing investigations of the urgent mysteries of Homo sapiens -- investigations conducted by alert and communicative men and women. You'll likewise witness, among all ages, exchanges of magnanimous courtesy and mutual profit.

But you'll find other sights that breed concern. Visit especially those classes in which a teacher encourages student discussion and is frequently met by a speechless majority who are either lost in riveting meditations of their own, too precious to expose, or have simply never bothered learning to talk in a challenging forum. You'll also note occasional teachers who waltz alone in self-intoxication before their ready but unfed students.

Then walk your attentive self through the quads. Stand at a bus stop at noon rush-hour; roam the reading rooms of the libraries in the midst of term and the panic of exams. Lastly, eat lunch in a dining hall and note the subjects of conversation and the words employed in student discussion. (I'm speaking mostly of undergraduates, but not exclusively.)

Try to conceal your consternation at what is often the main theme of discourse -- something much less interesting than sex and God, the topics of my time. If for instance you can eat a whole meal in a moderately occupied Duke dining hall without transcribing a certain sentence at least once, I'll treat you to

the legal pain reliever of your choice. The sentence runs more or less like this, in male or female voice -- "I can't believe how drunk I was last night."

Considering that the social weekends of many students now begin -- indeed are licensed by us to begin -- at midday on Thursday and continue through the morning hours of Monday (as they never did in the old days of "country club" Duke), maybe the sentence is inevitable -- at least in the bankrupt America we're conspiring to nurture so lovingly and toward which we blindly, or passively anyhow, wave our students.

But how vehemently I doubt that we ought to accept such a message as normal fare in a place as honored as this by a huge gift for doing better with our botched genes. And how bitterly that impoverished sentence in the mouths of students flies as the banner of the university's remaining enormous failure to them and to J.B. Duke's intention.

That failure proceeds from us all -- from the Board of Trustees and the resident administration down through the permanent faculty and the youngest instructor to the students themselves (they join us after all at official voting age.) And the failure can be stated quickly -- All of us, in the long collusion, have failed to exert a sustained and serious attempt to nurture the literal heart of a great university. That heart, in the premier universities of America and the world, consists of two things --

First, an environment that is suited for and continuously encouraging to the more or less constant discussion of serious

matters and

Second, an atmosphere that awards itself a steady supply of human beings (students, faculty and other staff) who are fitted to converse with one another on serious matters or are willing to learn how.

Am I asking for something the Duke indenture warns against -- a world of grinding abstract study and a social life built entirely on books? Do we want a place crowded with that dark dread of admissions offices -- the not well-rounded students? By no means (though all my most rewarding students have been not-well-rounded). The serious dialogue that proceeds through the year at all superb institutions worldwide is, as each of us knows, not a joyless dialogue. On the contrary, such useful discourse is the direct product of the highest human skill; and its large rewards at the simplest level are as exhilarating as Olympic gymnastics.

Like many of you, I've had the luck to spend long stretches of my life in universities where human discourse is centered on the communication of adult thought about matters of enduring interest. I've also had a simultaneous lot of the best fun of my life in such places -- pleasure, love and lasting friendship -- and Duke at times has been one of those places, as it still can be at its best today. But our best is still too rare an achievement.

As I debated a theme for today and asked a number of current undergraduates for a personal list of local hits and misses, their all but invariable refrain come to this -- With our many causes for gratitude, still the thing that holds us back by the minute at

Duke is the prevailing cloud of indifference, of frequent hostility, to a thoughtful life. If the students are truthful, and I'm sure that they are, we've partly wasted years of their lives; and we owe them recompense -- if not at once, then at least to their younger siblings and children.

Grant, for the moment, that those students are more than half right, where do we turn to redeem the wrong? And what do we do by way of repair? The question has defeated generations of us; and though I've participated here since I was 18 in numerous student- and faculty-conceived discussion groups, coffees, wine and cheese parties, dorm courses, picnics, overnight seminars beside Lake Michie, I've seen such initiative die for lack of commitment or continuity on the part of all involved. I'm long since certain that our failure proceeds from a lack of courage to confront the failure.

I wish I could offer a blueprint today for starting at once on that confrontation. It will be giant-work for everyone here and for long years to come. But I may have the start of, if not a vision, then maybe, a sighting; and on occasion of Founders' Day, I'll take the last risk. If I were as wise as William P. Few and if an equivalent of James B. Duke entrusted me with many million dollars, how would I and my colleagues begin to use it? I could hope they'd join me in an earth-moving act which this university has delayed many decades and for lack of which it has punished all its members.

We'd take firm steps to move out briskly every fraternity and sorority among us; they would not return. I was once a member of a

fraternity that survives on this campus. I enjoyed the laughter in the days before alcohol became our grim solvent; but the uses of such organizations -- play and violence and the occasional charitable project -- are automatic functions of an animal species as social as our own. And our present fraternities and sororities, grotesque relics as they are of 19th century small rural colleges, have long since ceased to serve any role not better served by means less expensive, in every sense, of the university's time and life-blood. Worse, they're our main force for division and waste -- waste of the crucial youth of our students and what their elders might learn from them.

Freed of that burden, we'd move with deliberate speed to organize life throughout the university on a residential college model. We'd redesign or rearrange individual quads and buildings, each with the shortest corridors possible, with private bedrooms for every student and with a dining room in each quad where students could meet like sane adult members or a group dedicated to legitimate principles of thoughtful social life, punctuated by normal bouts of revel.

We already have the seeds of such change in the arts and language dorms, the interesting anomalies of Epworth and the Round Table. We'd work to find even more promising means of merging the latent minds and energies of this now-scattered place into enviable groups of women and men -- informed citizens, friends and lovers in a fruitful place.

Mountains of cash would be spent in the effort. It would take years, but years are precisely what a university has in

plenty, and we've proved our skill in raising Himalayas of money.

If we actually want a great university -- for ourselves, our students and the world -- and if we want it hard enough to make a start now, then in -- say -- a decade, I strongly suspect that another member of this family could raise at Founders' Day, or sit like me, and inform the recumbent James B. Duke that his unimaginable generosity had finally built a place more useful than he imagined: a diverse community, shedding at least a civilized light.

May some new benefactor hear of the need and endow us now for a next huge step -- our half of the deal J.B. Duke made. Failing that, we can start with what we've got, here at the end of this tired millennium, and take the first steps toward opening the long-buried vein of human ore we've yet to deserve. Our first need, after all, is mere courage; the second is vision, another free gift. We could reach and take both.

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