The Educational Consequences of the Tragedy

This is the first commemoration of the Kent State University Tragedy, since the settlement. Let us of the academic family welcome the terms of that settlement as the immediate personal families have welcomed them. We know that the real causes of the Tragedy may never be uncovered; but I hope we will now cease to search for blame, which is morally different from root cause.

Almost everyone I know--indeed all that I personally know--have come to terms with that settlement and have seen that human justice, perhaps fallible and perhaps late, yet nevertheless has been done. The Tragedy is over. I expect there are a few who would never accept any settlement but it is not to those unnatural few whom I talk today. Indeed, most of us find it impossible to sustain initial grief very long. That is not to say we forget. The whole point to this commemoration and others like it is to say that we shall never forget and that we shall continue to try to wring out a meaning from that Tragedy.

But time changes everything. We do not now feel the bitterness we once did over Pearl Harbor. As Professor Kaplan said last year at the first faculty convocation, we no longer grieve over the Massacre at Boston Common, yet it is not forgotten since 1770. Nor, I might add, do the British grieve over the 1819 massacre at Peterloo, that cosmic accident so like our own Tragedy and which, like it, never be "solved" and have the "guilt" assigned.
Let me bring you back up to date. All of you listening have lost parents or children or lovers by disease, accident, war; but your sense of grief has inevitably lessened with time. We have all lost recently a great and good friend of the University. In a few weeks our grief will be just as real as it now is; but, God willing, it will be less bitter. That "time cures all" is at once the glory and the shame of mankind. It is up to us to another

We at Kent have not forgotten. We are here to commemorate. And what we are here to commemorate is a Tragedy. I am about to bring my own academic discipline into these comments. I make no apology for that. I do not bring in the study of literature, kicking and screaming, but to the point. This is a faculty convocation. The whole point to faculty life and academic study is that it is not done in an ivory tower. The crucial thing about academic life is not only that one's scholarship can be but should be brought to bear upon the specific issues of the times.

In that term Tragedy are contained some of the essential elements I wish to talk about. We had a Tragedy here. But a Tragedy is not simply a violent act. A Tragedy is an act or a sequence of acts which we were the spectators of, and which we can now look back upon and observe in our minds' eye. And in a Tragedy a strange phenomenon occurs.

The Tragedy itself, stemming from, and being caused by, and exhibiting, terror and fear and pity and hatred—all those terrible forces within us and within others—somehow gives birth to a terrible magic and beauty in its very action. The Tragedy in its very resolution rids us of those awful emotions.

As we look back on the moments of May 4, 1970, we relive again that anguish caused when somehow hatred and fear were brought together here on
these commons. Those moments excite our tragic pity and as one of the poets has said, the passion is in the pity.

This is the paradox I ask you to think on. That somehow after that tragic moment there is a stasis and we come to peace with ourselves and with others. We can renew that peace, as well as that anguish, each May Fourth. It may not be a joyous peace; yet perhaps it is all the more meaningful for that. Our 1979 commemoration should be of that tragic peace as well as of that tragic pain.

That is the nature of the Tragedy. But what are the educational consequences of that Tragedy? I don't think we have really arrived at them. We have been all too totally immersed in the economic consequences of the Tragedy.

The economic consequences have consisted of a long, long, loss of money, of attenuated fiscal problems, of dropping enrolments. We have indeed been walking through a long schoolroom. We have bogged down in these problems far too long. We knew back in 1970 and 1971 how dreadful our financial problems would be; but somehow foreknowledge has not led to forebearance. We have concerned ourselves constantly with the immediate fiscal problems, and we are in very real danger of not being able to devote enough of our time and our thought to the significant problems of memory and learning.

Let us permit no longer the urgent to displace the important.

Yet in one sense, the University has not really suffered educationally. We have kept up our scholarship; but barely. We have devoted our lives to students and to learning; but scarcely. It has been so difficult a struggle just to keep the university going, the attrition has gone on for so long,
that I fear we might now lose entirely our sense of scholarship.

It is therefore all the more important that now we must dedicate our-selves to the achievement of a better education for the students and a better university for us all. We can build no grander memorial to these lost students than that. They were here to express their civil rights, yes; they were here as all normal young people, just having a good time between classes, perhaps; but most of all these students were here at this University with goals specifically and particularly concerned with education. They were here to learn. Let us continue to build a University for their goals.

As we think on the state of the university now, we of course recognize that it is not solely a product of the war in Vietnam. If we have troubles, obviously they cannot all be traced to what happened on that day. Long before 1970, there were difficulties between town and gown in Kent, as there probably have been in all University cities since the Middle Ages. Long before May 1970, there were troubles between administration and faculty at Kent, as perhaps there have been at all times at all universities. Long before May 1970, there were antagonisms between junior and senior faculty and between the great teachers and the pedants, the scholars and the hams; between the students and the faculty; between the demands of vocational education and liberal education. What happened in the anguish of that problem was that all of these were heightened at one stroke. Just at and just after May 4, 1970, the conflict between generations in America took on one of its most violent forms in history. But that was not caused by May 4: May 4 brought to the surface and highlighted it.

The result, however, was catastrophic. Again I am reminded of my own discipline. As it happens I am teaching the Victorian novel this term and
I see once again one of the main values of literature: it gives us the images in which we can view life and understand it and come to terms with it. In Charlotte Brontë's novel *Jane Eyre*, there is one of the finest images of the 19th century. It is the central symbol of a gorgeous horse-chestnut tree—indeed, a buckeye. The tree, half way through the book, is struck by lightning.

Listen to the description: "... What ailed the chestnut tree? It writhed and groaned; while the wind roared in the lilac walk. ... [original, laurel.]

"The great horse-chestnut ... had been struck by lightning ... and half of it split away. .................. .................. .................. .................. ........

"The trunk, split down the centre, gaped ghastly. [But] the cloven halves were not broken from each other, for the firm base and strong roots kept them unsundered below ... ."

As I read that passage for class the other day, it seemed to me that that is how we were all divided back then. Middle-age torn from youth. Guard split from students who were of their age. University and town ripped apart, though in essence dependent upon each other.

Yet as the novel says, blasted and ruined though the relationships were, that tree could somehow survive. And so it does: "You did right to hold fast to each other ... ." says the heroine to the broken tree. "I think, scathed as you look, and charred and scorched, there must be a sense of life in you yet; rising out of that adhesion at the faithful, honest roots . . . . ."

That, my friends, is what we have done against all adversity over the years. We have clung together, all but ruined by that blast which killed
those youths in 1970. We have kept alive that near ruined tree of disparate parts—youth, age, teacher and student, town and gown. The tree of this community is alive if newly attacked.

We must help the tree of the University to grow. We must not let the economic consequences of the Tragedy overwhelm us, to divide this community even more than did the passional tests of those days of 1970. We must be on guard against those forces which, attacking now from many angles, some old, and some new, may blast us asunder. The central and living components of this university must cling together.

It may seem odd to say it, but I think we must now recapture the tragic sense we had in the fall of 1970. We must reunite. We must be as we were. But we must be enriched by that common ordeal of nearly a decade ago.

Can we not now turn to educational things? I don't by any means belittle the Center for Peaceful Change or the Experimental Programs, which grew from that Tragedy. But where are the others we once had? Where is that pervasive spirit? Where is the Faculty Associates Programs through which faculty advisors visited dormitories? Where, for example, is that system we had (for perhaps one year only) whereby a student who became ill would not have to take a W or an Incomplete in a course, but could complete it—say by correspondence during the summer while he or she is working? If we had that educational flexibility then, cannot we have it now if only we can get back to our basic educational work?

We have now a chance to reawaken that self-recognition which comes with Tragedy, that moment of stasis, that moment of re-dedication. In art, that moment comes in every Tragedy. In life, it sometimes comes only after that lapse of time such as we have had since 1970.
Cannot we change that blasted and divided chestnut-tree of *Jane Eyre* into the one found in W. B. Yeats's poem which is in part about learning, "Among School Children"? For in that the chestnut-tree—surely once again a horse-chestnut or buckeye—is the symbol of the good life, the great-rooted blossomer: where labor is blossoming and wisdom not blear-eyed, and the body is not bruised, and where we know the dancer from the dance.

(It is almost as if Yeats were referring to a good many of the educational programs which we have here at Kent State University.) Our life has firm twin roots in town and in University; let us let the tree blossom.

In this hour we can cease to turn against one another—and especially faculty against faculty, and faculty against student and administration. It is no accident, I think, that these various images from my academic discipline of literature into my thoughts today: the blasted but alive tree in *Jane Eyre*; the beauty and learning found in the symbol of the horse-chestnut in Yeats. Kent is, after all, Tree City. This is the place, after all, where Hillel planted trees in memory of these students.

This is the place where we can again renew our pledge to education. There can be no better memorial for our students than that. In God's name let us turn our thoughts from money.

As temporary spokesman for the faculty, then, I call upon everyone to re-dedicate themselves to the life of learning. I was honored to be chosen by my fellow faculty members to speak today, temporarily to lead the faculty, temporarily to speak for this university and this community. I therefore dare to call in that name and in the name of those four students, for that recovery which not only follows Tragedy but which is in the very essence of
Tragedy, that renewal which by definition comes to humans after nearly being struck asunder by lightning. I call for a return to education and to learning, and to study. Words are not enough. Our dedication must change those words from platitudes to action, to ways of life. This University must be the place of the life of the mind. In that way and only in that way can we, in terms appropriate to a living University, memorialize the true spirit of these four Tragic people.

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