

THE OUTREACH OF A UNIVERSITY

Talk by

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Don Smith was not content to rely upon my regard for him nor my respect for this great University when he asked me to speak today. The hook he dangled in front of me was not only baited with a description of an audience that would excite Monsignor Fulton J. Sheen, but with suggestions of talk titles to match, like "The Community of Scholars--A Modern Interpretation," "Learning in the Modern World," and "The Outreach of a University". From among these I have chosen "The Outreach of a University". It was the word "Outreach" that I found most appealing--the breaking away from traditional confines implicit in the act of reaching out.

To be partially facetious for a moment, I could also add a subtitle in the tradition of seminar programs generally. "The Outreach of a University--or Who is in the Ivory Tower Now". Let me give you an example. Last fall an ambitious symposium was held to discuss the relationship of morality and business. Apart from the implicit assumption that they might be separable which bothered me, I was particularly disturbed by one speaker. This man had been fortunate in at least one respect. He had succeeded very well in a material way with a business that had not involved any excursions into scientific fields, nor had it involved any confrontation with any of the social and economic forces many American businessmen must accommodate in the pursuit of their occupations. He was a rare specimen indeed then, a man who had lived well into middle age, with all the prejudices of his youth and another era still intact.

Among these was a picture of a college professor carried from this gentler time. His college professor lived in the ivy-covered world of the college campus, totally detached from reality. Thoughts of money or the world's

commerce seldom entered this professorial mind, and when they did they were to be exorcised by the academic counterpart of the confessional. Never a participant in the economic and political processes of the country, his pallid Mr. Chips meant well, but after all, if he could do anything, would he be teaching? With loving pity, the speaker dwelt upon this poor unfortunate in the ivory tower, whose rescue he regarded as part of the businessman's burden.

Well, the ivory tower still exists in our society, but the tenant has changed. Mr. Chips is now "Dr. Chips," and if he is not in the chips, he certainly knows where they are counted. Not only is he not in the ivory tower, but he often cannot even be found on the campus; and as for his awareness of money and the world's commerce, Dr. Chips in pursuit of a grant frequently shows a knowledge of and a positive talent for the tactics of laissez-faire that would have embarrassed Jay Gould.

But, while the speaker's academic world never existed in that extreme form, it cannot be maintained seriously that fundamental changes have not taken place. Although there still exists a division between town and gown--a point to which I will return--the line is faint; by comparison to the division thirty years ago it is hardly discernible. So pervasive is the influence of the modern university, it can be fairly argued there is no element of our society untouched in some way by a university program.

This has come about in a number of ways, but usually with a single purpose--to tap the creative energies of the academic community. A few examples will illustrate what I mean. There are few campuses on which some research and development activity cannot be found. The concern of federal, state, and now local governments to stimulate economic progress has been well served by the enlargement of the body of economic theory by practitioners of that dismal science lodged mainly at universities. The business corporation is now well aware of the pecuniary rewards flowing from special arrangements to tap the

technical competence of academia. And of course the astonishing leap in the productivity of American agriculture which has occurred in the past 30 years would not have been possible without the land grant college programs.

I might add here that sometimes the university succeeds too well, It might be argued that the land grant college in bringing about the astonishing technical progress of United States agriculture unwittingly added the new and frightening dimensions of the American slum--areas now filled not with emigrants from other countries, but emigrants from rural America who are no longer needed in agriculture.

All of this is illustrative of a point frequently made of the complexity of our society.

The phrase is an unfortunate one to the degree it connotes a machine composed of a number of interacting parts that by knowing design or otherwise have definable patterns of interaction. The connotation of a single identity of society, however complicated, is inappropriate. In its place, may I suggest we consider as a substitute the phrase "the complexity of our social system." A system made up of constituent elements, but a system in which the components are linked together in a most tenuous way by a balance of tension that is the only thing they have in common. Like the solar system, each moves in its own orbit, with its own pattern of rotation, responding to pressures and tensions internally created. There are many examples, but a few will suffice to illustrate my point.

(a) Suburban communities tend to pursue courses independent of those followed by the core cities, and both are usually distinct from those of rural America. Witness the dislocations of reapportionment and area wide government.

(b) Michael Harrington emphasized the separateness of the economic worlds within the United States in the title of his book "The Other America".

All the efforts to establish patterns of communication between the residents of

this "other America" and the one we know spring from an awareness in a few quarters of the disengagement. But even this is an oversimplification, for of course there are all kinds of sub-groups within the affluent and the poor that have only tenuous identification with their larger economic class. Witness the problems being encountered by poverty warriors in their attempts to drape massive federal programs around such diverse frames as the rural poor, the urban poor, the Puerto Rican, the colored, and many others.

(c) In an occupational sense, it has long been obvious that each of us tends to move in a circle subscribed by professional interests and occupational associations. At this great University, it is seldom, for example, that at a party given by one economist one meets representatives from any other department of the University. It is axiomatic that only bankers understand other bankers, but here perhaps it is because no one else would find it worth while, or so our critics say. The list could be continued, but the point appears inescapable.

The natural momentum of any particular group in our society is internally generated and always tends toward greater isolation, not less. This does not mean the courses are necessarily divergent--frequently they are parallel--but the rationale of the selected course is internally determined with little consideration of the relevancy to other social groups.

This is the neutral projection--but it can be altered externally; sometimes by direct collision with another group with a conflicting path and sometimes by intervention of an outside agency. There are very few social institutions that cut across the lines to provide channels of communication. Preeminent among these, though, is the University. If there is a truly ecumenical social force in our country, it is here. Not only does the university bridge the different elements of our American society, but its influence now extends around the world. The force of a university has two dimensions--a search for the unknown, a distribution of the known.

University faculty from the University of Minnesota are found throughout the world, participating in programs sponsored by national agencies and foundations, but also in many originating at the University. And, of course, within our own Upper Midwest, the influence of the University of Minnesota cuts across State lines, nor is its role unique in this particular; as universities of the district have developed competence in particular areas, they, too, have tended to lose their historic intra-state orientation, and have each become a nexus in the interchange of their choice. There is no other place where the same sense of urgency is attached to the identification of the problems of human relationships and the posing of alternatives for resolution. Every major university is a seminal source of ideas for its areas of influence, which can at the same time be as great as the world or as small as the classroom. Its audience is no longer confined to undergraduates, or even those in graduate courses; for anyone who has even the slightest desire to expand his horizon there is a university program. In listening to the University station on Sunday I heard an invitation to participate in the learning process addressed to anyone anywhere in the State of Minnesota, who could assemble a group of fifteen. Nor was there any limitation imposed on the subject matter. This is not education by correspondence in an old-fashioned sense, but classroom experience via the telephone, with every opportunity for an interchange with the teacher. To a degree, expansion of these programs has a respectable economic base, that is, many of the courses I assume are designed to enhance the expertise of the people exposed to them in their chosen occupations, or even to enable them to enter new and more desirable occupations. But to an equally encouraging degree, I am also quite sure that many of them are designed to satisfy the participant's thirst for knowledge, his desire to know something more about himself and his relationships to others and to the world in which he finds himself--in short programs designed to enhance the quality of life.

The messianic role I have sketched for the University is not one without its problems. Missionaries are not always well received, especially in alien cultures. There is always going to be conflict between the University and the communities, however defined, to which it extends its efforts because the purposes of the University to teach and to learn are not always compatible with local objectives. As I mentioned earlier, the overwhelming desire of people everywhere is to be left alone.

I can remember a visit once with Sir Willmet Lewis, who served as the distinguished Washington correspondent to the London Times prior to the Second World War, who in response to a question of how the German people could have embarked on the national madness of nazism said he had lived in many places in the world and believed, upon his observations, most people were good-natured, lazy, and wanted only to be left alone, but there were a determined few who insisted on trying to reshape the environment and its occupants to a bright image of their own making, for good or evil.

The University in its attempts to deflect the neutral courses of groups within society or individuals is going to incur resentments. People are resistant to change. And once social equilibrium is shattered it is a foolish man indeed who thinks society can preset the new point of rest. No, the shaking of folkways, the substitution of new values is never without pain. The University must always be in a running fight with those power groups who do not want their intellectual souls saved by the University missionaries which often leads to direct confrontation between power groups who are the unwilling shakees. But it is an essential concomitant of change. The University that is unwilling to assume the risks inherent in the extension of its area of influence may still have a role, but I am unwilling to attempt its definition. In fact, I doubt whether a University even has a choice today.

Once we moved from a fairly passive acceptance of our environment to the conviction we can by human reason at least condition it--with the tantalizing and sobering possibility of someday totally reshaping not only the environment of man but the nature of man himself--once that step was taken, there was no turning back for the University. It is irrevocably committed to the role of an active aggressive intervenor in the social system of man. The outreach can never be withdrawn.