



The Cogut Center for the Humanities

Address by

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General Director of the Berlin Philharmonic Orchestra and
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at the re-dedication of Pembroke Hall

Brown University

October 17, 2008:

Dear President Simmons, Chancellor Tisch, Provost Kertzer, Professor Weed,
Professor Steinberg, dear Faculty, Students, Alumni, dear Friends of Pembroke Hall;

I am very honoured to be with you today to help celebrate the rededication of the stunningly renovated Pembroke Hall, home to both the Cogut and Pembroke Centers. Toshiko Mori has achieved a really splendid fusion of the past and the future. This building is for me a visual metaphor for the core work carried on by both Centers, namely the study of context and the interfacing of frames of reference. It is also very moving to be standing here today in the first building for women at Brown, built initially with funds raised entirely by women. This legacy from the past is the basis for going onto the future. I would like to congratulate and thank all who made this meaningful renovation possible.

In 1962, when I enrolled as a freshman at UC Berkeley, I had already made up my mind that I was going to major in History. My father and I had very heated arguments about this decision. He was appalled and repeatedly during my senior year of high school, asked the question, "What can you do with History?" He would have slept better at night if I had chosen something concretely applicable such as Electrical Engineering, something the need for which he could understand and something with which I could presumably have earned a decent, predictable salary.

My answers were not reassuring to him. I couldn't tell him what I was going "to do with" my History degree. I didn't think I wanted to become a schoolteacher, and beyond that I didn't have any ideas. All I knew was that I was fascinated by History and that I wanted to learn as much about History as I could. I wanted to understand how and why the ways of the world had evolved as they had. I wanted to understand connections and distinctions between cultures. I wanted to have knowledge about context. These passionate and smug answers of mine used to give my father anxiety attacks—he thought they were just a bunch of blah-blah-blah. I would usually end my side of the argument by imperiously walking out of the room while tossing off a parting shot such as "the only reason to go to college is to learn how to learn and to feed one's curiosity and NOT to learn how to lead a safe life."

My pubertarian arrogance left my father sputtering (especially since he was paying the bills).

Now, over 40 years later, I am arrogant enough to be proud (albeit surprised) that those words came out of my (only slightly post-pubertarian) mouth. Admittedly I had had the luck of having a brilliant and stimulating history teacher in both my junior and senior years of high school, who taught me a lot about trying to understand context. But I also felt personally pretty passionately that I didn't want to be boxed in at that point in my development by choosing a major for the sole purpose of exactly mapping out the course of my future life. I just felt that the reason I wanted to go to college was that there was so much to learn. I was really excited to be able to partake of that feast. And the four years at Cal, as I know they are here at Brown, turned out to be a feast, every single day. I am still immeasurably grateful.

The world has changed so much since I graduated in 1966; the accelerated pace of the change of the parameters that define the work place and our society is very heady and quite terrifying. It is even more of an illusion now than it was in my time or, indeed, in my father's time, to think that college is where you learn your trade and skills, so to speak, which you will practice until you retire. Flexibility is pretty essential for survival these days.

But I basically want to talk about why the idea of context that the humanities, including the knowledge of history, give us, is so important, indeed existential. I find it of grave concern that we are living in a society, which operates in almost a total vacuum. By that I mean not only do we have a government which too often bases its foreign policy on an astounding ignorance of the history and cultures of the countries that it is existentially impacting through its actions. But we also have a citizenry which, on the whole, is deeply ignorant of history and other cultures, including our own. The concept of our democracy is based on an informed citizenry being able to understand and pass judgment on the background upon which decisions are taken. We, the citizens, through our representatives, are meant to be able to shape actively both the forward movement of our society and our intercourse with the world.

But our democracy has been weakened by a loss of substance in our collective and individual knowledge over several past decades. I perceive an almost complete lack of context in understanding where and what we are at this point in history because in the country, as a whole, there is dangerously little knowledge of "what has gone before." I perceive very little knowledge of the connections between cultural, social, scientific, historical, environmental and political developments over the course of history. There is so little reflection on the causes and effects of events over time and so little awareness of cultural context. We are a very insular, us-focused nation with little realization of all of the connections and cross-fertilization over the course of history that created our specific culture as well as the global community of today.

To be sure, the technology for accessing information is more developed and widespread than ever before. Every kid knows how to Google the facts he or she

needs to know to write a history paper in school. But it is only the lucky few who are still being given an education based on the concept of learning to absorb knowledge to add to the accumulated fund of our personal knowledge, of our personal being. We should learn to have knowledge within us, to have culture within us. Education in too many schools seems to be not about acquiring more and more knowledge and wisdom and being encouraged to reflect deeply upon these insights, but it seems to be about knowing how to access info when you need it. And you learn that you don't need to clutter up the filing capacity of your brain by retaining the accessed info. You can just delete it as soon as the message has been delivered!

The phenomenon of not carrying knowledge within you is fundamental, in the meantime, to our society. Alas! We have become a media culture and we are a people increasingly shaped by sound bites. We are in danger of becoming the products of sensationalism and spin. Our personal and collective attention spans get shorter every year. I'd say that whereas 10 years ago people maybe would remember an important and earth-shaking national event for a month, say, now it's contracted to a couple of weeks or less before the latest sensationalist fix blots out the memory of whatever the former issue was. If we keep on at this rate, we'll be like a nation of toddlers: take something out of our line of vision and we'll forget it instantly.

I make no apologies for being an alarmist: I think that ours is a perilous state of being. Although the frontiers of knowledge and science are constantly and awesomely expanding, paradoxically our collective ignorance regarding the history of our civilization is also growing exponentially.

How can we counter this "erosion of awareness"?

Well, the Cogut Center for the Humanities and the Pembroke Center for Teaching and Research on Women are good starting points! They both are forums for reflection on our state of being. They are all about exploring cultural context and connections; they are about examining the interfacing of multiple frames of reference; they are about identifying sub-texts and asking heretical or as-of-yet-unasked questions; they are about analyzing the past and from this analysis, coming to an understanding of the present which then leads to an ability and desire to stipulate the new. (Actually, now as I lay this out, I realize that all of these attributes describe the ethos of Brown as a whole! When one is on this campus, one can easily become wildly optimistic that the negative developments I've been describing will be easily reversed.) But, it will still take hard work!

On this campus, Pembroke Hall offers a center of focus for these multiple paths of exploration. It is sort of a fulcrum, in which ideas come together and burn brightly. It offers roaming minds a haven. Here scholars and artists are offered a chance to work in an atmosphere which is conducive to contemplation, to asking probing and original questions, to coming to an understanding of context and to positing new parameters. I hope that the results of these creative thought processes will radiate out into society-at-large and help shore up our eroding awareness and prevent stagnation and cultural atrophy.

At this point, I think it important also to talk briefly about the integral role that the arts play in sharpening our perceptions and in maintaining the general health of our body politic. It is evident that delving into the history of the arts immediately implies immersing oneself in the idea of context. It is impossible to understand the evolution of painting, architecture, poetry or music, etc. without understanding the *Zeitgeist* and the historical periods from which they burst forth. And coming to grips with the exploding artistic expressions of a particular period of time is a tremendous aid in getting a handle on the substantive and subjective issues of that era. So, the arts help us to understand the interfacing of cultural and historical trajectories that have led to where we now find ourselves.

In the here-and-now, the arts are also absolutely essential to the well being of our collective body. They help us look at life anew, from different perspectives and more fully—using all of our senses and our intellect. The arts are a portal to who we are inside, how we think and how we feel...how we process words and images and consciousness which ultimately reflect our inner selves. But they also help us ask questions not only of ourselves, but of each other and about the life forms and social structures we create together. They help us to reorder our perceptions and to dream dreams and to stipulate the new. Through the arts, we create that which has not yet been. The arts move us forward in life and that is why they are so essential for our well-being. They are a measure of our vitality and the measure of the richness and vibrancy of our communities. A society which maintains itself by only reinforcing the status quo will surely atrophy and disappear. Unleashing our creative abilities and pushing at our known boundaries empowers us and ensures that we will continue to evolve and thrive, and that is why the arts are indispensable for a society that is to flourish.

So, we must do everything we can to increase the awareness of the looming threat of stagnation and atrophy. I fervently hope that society at large will develop a sense of the *urgency* and the need for the kind of searching and questioning and learning which takes place here in Pembroke Hall. Our citizens need help in coming to understand that the world and our knowledge of it are multi-layered and cannot be comprehended by media shorthand. They need to come to an understanding that the arts are necessary for our collective sanity and vitality. They need to be supported by an educational system that helps them discover and cultivate the creative capacities that each of us has. The Cogut Center for the Humanities and the Pembroke Center for Teaching and Research on Women can be among the leaders helping our society keep its forward thrust. They will, I hope, be bulwarks against the creeping mindlessness and trivialization eroding our democracy. This is a heady and exciting prospect. I think even my father, were he alive today, would understand how existential learning for learning's sake and reflection for reflection's sake have become.

Again, I would like to thank and congratulate everyone who has funded and supported this very existential enterprise of Pembroke Hall. Thank you for helping to stoke the flames.