Remarks by Professor Glenn C. Loury on the Occasion of the 2005 Commencement

Presented at Convocation of the University Professors, Boston University, May 22, 2005

A formative experience of my growing-up on the South Side of Chicago in the 1960's occurred during one of those earnest political rallies so typical of the period. Woody, who had been my best friend since boyhood, suggested that we attend. The rally had been called to galvanize our community's response to some infringement by the powers-that-be, the exact nature of which I no longer recall. What I can distinctly remember is how very agitated about it we all were at the time. Judging by his demeanor, Woody was amongst the most zealous.

Despite this zeal, it took courage for Woody to attend. For this meeting had been organized by the Black Panther Party. Although Woody often proclaimed his blackness, and though he had a Negro grandparent on either side of his family, he nevertheless looked to the entire world like your typical white guy. Everyone, on first meeting him, assumed as much. I did too, when we began to play together nearly a decade earlier, just after I had moved into the middle class neighborhood called Park Manor where Woody's family had been living for some time. There were a number of white families on our block when we first arrived; within a couple of years they had all been replaced by aspiring black families like our own. But Woody's parents never moved. This puzzled me until one day I overheard his mother declare to one of her new neighbors, "We just wouldn't run from our own kind." Evidently, Woody's family had been “passing for white” in pre-integration Park Manor. The neighborhood's changing racial composition had confronted them with a moment of truth, leading them to elect to stay and to raise their children among "their own kind."

This was a fateful decision for Woody who, as he matured, became determined not simply to live among blacks but, perhaps in atonement for his parents' sins, unambiguously to become one. The young men in the neighborhood didn’t make this easy. Many delighted in teasing him about being a "white boy," and refusing to credit his insistent, often repeated claim: "I'm a brother, too!"

So there we were, at this boisterous, angry political rally. A critical moment came when Woody, seized by some idea, enthusiastically raised his voice above the murmur to be heard. He was cut short in mid-sentence by one of the dashiki-clad brothers-in-charge, who demanded to know how a "white boy" got the authority to have an opinion on what black people should be doing. A silence then fell over the room. "Who can vouch for this white boy," asked the “brother” indignantly. More excruciating silence ensued. Now was my moment of truth; Woody turned

plaintively toward me, but I would not meet his eyes. To my eternal disgrace, I refused to speak-up for him. He was asked to leave the meeting, and did so without a word having been uttered in his defense.

This incident of nearly forty years ago stands as a kind of private metaphor for me, underscoring the ongoing difficulty of living in good faith. That moment of truth, in that South Side church basement, and my failure in the face of it, has helped me become aware of the depth of my need for the approval of others. The fact is that I willingly betrayed someone whom I loved and who loved me, in order to lessen the risk of being rejected by strangers. In a way, at that moment and often again later in my life, I was "passing" too – that is, hoping to be mistaken for something I was not. I had feared that to proclaim before the black radicals in the audience that this "white boy" at my side was in fact our "brother" would have compromised my own chance of being received among them as a genuine colleague. The indignant "brother" who challenged Woody's right to speak was not merely imposing a racial test (only blacks are welcome here), he was mainly applying a loyalty test (you are either with us or against us), and this was a test which anyone present could fail through a lack of conformity with the collectively enforced political norm. I now know that denying one's genuine convictions for the sake of social acceptance is a price which society often demands of the individual, and all too often this is a price that we are willing to pay.

But, enough about me!

In his justly famous essay, *On Liberty*, John Stuart Mill offers a radical, passionate defense of the norm of unencumbered public discussion. Individuals must be allowed to express themselves freely, no matter what may be the consequences for society. Quoting Mill:

> "Society can and does execute its own mandates, and if it issues wrong mandates instead of right, or any mandates at all in things with which it ought not to meddle, it practices a social tyranny more formidable than many kinds of political oppression, since, though not usually upheld by such extreme penalties, it leaves fewer means of escape, penetrating more deeply into the details of life, and enslaving the soul itself. Protection, therefore, against the tyranny of the magistrate is not enough. We need protection also against the tyranny of the prevailing opinion and feeling, against the tendency of society to impose, by other means than civil penalties, its own ideas and practices as rules of conduct on those who dissent from them."

In this post-9/11 world, we Americans are frightened. The "terrorists" want to kill us, for reasons we do not fully fathom. We have determined to kill them first, and many principles that we cherish are being compromised in the process. Perhaps this is unavoidable, but there has been far

too little public debate. Our campuses are quiet. The political opposition is tepid. Much of the press has been cowed, or has enthusiastically embraced the cheerleader's role. Articulate and privileged young people, perhaps because they are not being forced to put themselves in harms way via compulsory national service, are mostly silent. Thus has been born a latter-day American solidarity.

But there is something troubling, even a little unseemly, about this new solidarity. For, as my personal experience with co-racialists taught me long ago, the camaraderie engendered amongst a people by their common experience of suffering provides an unreliable and inadequate foundation for the expression of our full humanity. The external givens of one's social condition merely set the stage of one's life. They do not provide a script. That script comes from within. It emerges out of a reflection on the meaning of this existence for which no ideological, nationalistic or ethnic program could ever substitute. This is true for all of us. Expression of an individual's personality and, indeed, of his humanity, is to be found in how he elects to react to the external givens – what he makes of them. This problem – devising a humane, dignified and authentic response to the givens of one's life – is a constant of human experience. By facing it forthrightly, we can infuse our lives with substance and meaning.

So, as you will by now have surmised, the message I wish to convey here has nothing to do with the demands of ethnic loyalty. The desire for social acceptance can get in the way of authentic living for any one of us. In the spirit of John Stuart Mill, I am suggesting that our society will pay a price, a terrible price, if the individuals who make it up fail to break away from safe, formulaic and socially acceptable responses when confronting the most serious issues. And no issue facing Americans today is more serious than the question of how we should conduct ourselves on the world stage in the wake of the disaster of September 11, 2001.

In closing, let me remind you of something the great Czech playwright and politician, Vaclav Havel, wrote in his essay "The Power of the Powerless." Writing a decade before the revolutions of 1989, Havel is trying to explain from whence derived the power of the dissidents. He begins by asking a seemingly innocuous question: why does the green grocer whom he must pass each morning on his way to his office place a sign in the shop's window that says, "Workers of the World: Unite!" when everyone knows that this is nothing but propaganda? Fear is Havel's answer. The grocer wants simply to get by. So, he complies with the tacit social norm which holds that the prevailing party line – in this case, the Communist Party line – must be affirmed.

Dissidents derived their power from their willingness to expose, and then openly to challenge, this norm. In the end, Havel's essay boils down to a celebration of the glorious fact that there is something in every human heart that cries out for truth: So long as people are determined to live authentically, the human spirit cannot be extirpated. Quoting Havel:

> "The essential aims of life are present naturally in every person. In everyone there is some longing for humanity's rightful dignity, for moral integrity, for free expression of being, and for a sense of transcendence over the world of existences. Yet, at the same time, each person is capable, to a greater or lesser degree, of coming to terms with living within the lie. Each person somehow succumbs to a profane trivialization of his or her inherent humanity and to utilitarianism. In everyone there is some willingness to merge with the anonymous crowd and to flow comfortably along with it down the river of pseudo-life. This is much more than a simple conflict between two identities. It is something far worse. It is a challenge to the very notion of identity itself."

So, Mill tells us that there are social tyrannies having nothing to do with the magistrate, with the law, which nevertheless can enslave the soul. Havel knows all too well that this is so, and warns that we are all susceptible to being seduced by such tyrannies. But, as the example set by the dissidents of Central and Eastern Europe makes clear, we need not succumb. They did not, and because they did not, half a continent now enjoys the blessings of liberty. That this is so, in my humble opinion, is due mainly to the force of character, not the force of arms. These dissidents are now remembered, rightly, as heroes; and, their heroism consists precisely in the fact that they were determined, no matter what the consequence, to "live within the truth" as they understood it.

This is the challenge I want to issue here, now. Not that you should agree with any political position that I may hold, but that you and I, and all of us in this society, might become more fully human, more fully willing to risk speaking truths about ourselves, our communities and our nation, as we understand them. I challenge you to avoid the easy path, to eschew that least-resistance-utilitarianism which amounts, in Havel's memorable phrase, to flowing comfortably with the crowd down the river of pseudo-life.

With this nation at war abroad; with civil liberties being revised if not restricted at home; with the rise of what my colleague, Andrew Bacevitch, calls in his latest book "The New American Militarism"; with interrogators who act in our name and on our behalf torturing their suspects, even to the point of death; with politicians seeking votes by playing to the electorate's fears and not their hopes; with the proliferation of hortatory banners urging that we "support our troops"; with the airwaves flooded by jingoistic propaganda passed-off as news; and, most importantly, with public

debates over these matters being so one-dimensional and so impoverished, this is a concern of the utmost urgency.

You have come to the university to learn how to think, to gain an awareness of the central questions with which reflective people have struggled over the centuries, and to develop an appreciation for how elusive the answers to such questions can be. But all of this will be for naught unless you leave these hallowed halls animated by a determination to live within the truth. As a teacher, it is my fervent hope, indeed, my eternal prayer, that you will do so.

Thank you.