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Creative Places: A Dean's Welcome

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Mr. President, officers, colleagues, families, and most of all, members of the Class of 2008: I am thrilled to share the stage this morning to welcome you to Yale and to New Haven. It also is a marker for me: I have played many roles in this institution, but today you are the first class I welcome here as the Dean of Yale College: your dean.

This morning I would like to take a few moments to fix our gaze not on ourselves but on what surrounds us. We owe our past and future successes not merely to intellectual prowess and hard work, important as they are, but also to good fortune: the good fortune to be at a place whose existence inspires creativity and greatness. Indeed, I believe that you are here at Yale not only because of your gifts; rather (and, perhaps, paradoxically), you are gifted because you are here. By being here, in this place, greatness is thrust upon you. Perhaps this sounds heretical. Does distinction ultimately reside in places rather than people?

Now, this idea may not sound so surprising — or appalling — when you remember that I am a social psychologist. Social psychologists place great importance on context — situations and environments that shape behavior. The father of modern social psychology, Kurt Lewin, famously articulated the first principle of this emerging field of study: $B = f(P, E)$. Behavior is a function of the person, his or her environment, and the interaction between the two. Now, this may sound so obvious you cannot imagine how an entire field of study could be built upon such a simple equation. But, in fact, the emphasis on environment as a determiner of human behavior at least equal to the person was a fairly novel idea among the major psychological philosophies of the early part of the twentieth century.

Others have made similar observations. On a trip to Sweden a few years ago, my wife and I visited the wonderful Nobel Prize Museum, where an exhibit titled “Creative Milieus” celebrated the importance of environment to the creative process. It would be reasonable to expect the Nobel Museum to bask in the reflected glory of personal achievement; but, no, the Centennial Exhibition was not about persons, but about places — the importance of place in promoting, as the museum’s own literature states, the courage to think in entirely new directions, daring to question established ideas, and innovatively combining insights from different fields of study.¹

The Nobel Museum’s theme was that special environments and the unplanned conversations and interactions that arise within them spur creativity — indeed, they define creativity. Spectacular examples from all over the world were presented in amusing ways through film and text. Visitors could travel to Calcutta and find themselves in a pro-

gressive, outdoor school-without-walls inspired by Nobel Prize-winning poet-philosopher Rabindranath Tagore in 1901. Then it was on to the cafes of Paris in the 1920s to feel the atmosphere of creative revolt as experienced by Ernest Hemingway and Samuel Beckett. The exhibition asked us to appreciate next the endless conversations and “Copenhagen spirit” that characterized the theoretical physics institute of Niels Bohr in the 1920s and 1930s. Guests were transported to Cambridge University’s Cavendish Laboratories, where a young James Watson and Francis Crick worked out the double-helical structure of the DNA molecule (and, earlier, the electron and neutron were discovered). Visitors could enjoy the Basel Institute of Immunology, described as a scientist’s paradise, distinguished during the 1970s and 1980s by its lavish resources, egalitarian spirit, wild parties, and, of course, prize-winning science.

These and other work environments fostered spontaneity, collegiality, intellectual intensity, and, most importantly, the opportunity for the unfettered exchange of insights and ideas, some bizarre and others amazing. The curators of the Centennial Exposition unabashedly declared, “The creative process is extremely dependent upon the individual’s surroundings.” The point is that whatever brilliance we have been able to attain, is in part a function of the environments in which we find ourselves.

Let me make this point in another way by focusing on a very different time and place. One of your teachers here at Yale is Maria Rosa Menocal, the R. Selden Rose Professor of Spanish and Portuguese and Director of the Whitney Humanities Center. Prof. Menocal is an expert on medieval Spain, and has written an exciting book that focuses on the region of Andalusia, and especially on the city of Cordoba, during the Middle Ages.² In it, she describes a part of the world in which a culture of great literature, philosophy and science thrived. Her argument is that the intellectual riches of this period were fostered by an especially tolerant political and religious climate. Jews, Christians and Muslims lived side-by-side; and, as she says, “despite their intractable differences and enduring hostilities, nourished a complex culture of tolerance.” Prof. Menocal calls this an “authentic multiculturalism.” Jews rediscovered the Hebrew language and created what has been termed a Golden Age of Hebrew poetry; philosophers of great religious commitment, like Maimonides, guided the perplexed. This was the setting that motivated the introduction of Arabic number systems — think of Arabic-origin words like algebra and algorithm.

You now find yourself at a university that is proud of

its architectural gems, residential colleges and their courtyards, libraries, galleries, and museum collections. You have just entered a creative milieu on a grand scale, and your success—though certainly in part attributable to your hard work and intelligence—will also be a consequence of the nature of this place itself, including your classmates. In the coming years, perhaps you will discover a bustling laboratory, an alcove in the library, a little-known artistic collection that is especially meaningful, a theater, rehearsal hall, athletic field, or some other spot on campus that inspires you to wise thoughts and creative syntheses. In my graduate student days here, I liked to read (more often just daydream) sitting on the leather sofas on the second floor of the Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library. The translucent marble walls glowed in the sunshine; the books themselves sparkled behind the central glass tower, and the soft whoosh of white background noise reminded me of the sound of the seashore. There was something about that place that sent me back to the laboratory clear-eyed and motivated, and my windowless basement office in Kirtland Hall just could not compete. Inspiring places bring together inspired people who, together or individually, do remarkable things.

And so this brings us to these opening days of college life. I suggest, if I may, that one of your tasks as you move into the amazing setting that is this university is to recognize the importance of place in your achievements so far and to expend some effort finding those local environments that will allow you to discover your personal strengths and talents but also stimulate you to explore new ones. Most likely, your creative milieu will include what sociologist Ray Oldenburg calls a “third place.” Neither the room where you live nor the place where you typically do your work, the third place is where you will find that combination of camaraderie and intellectual safety in which you can try out a really crazy idea.³

Jonathan Spence, Yale’s Sterling Professor of History who teaches a famous undergraduate course on China, describes a third place that some of you are likely to discover too. In *The Search for Modern China*, he noted that, “This book was written, in just about equal parts, either in Yale’s Cross Campus Library, or in Naples Pizza... I would like to thank the entire staffs of those two admirable establishments for providing two complementary worlds in which to mull over, and then to pen, this record of the past four hundred years of Chinese history.”⁴ Others of your teachers have found less public third places inspiring to them. Prof. of Music History Craig Wright, for instance, describes architectural mazes and labyrinths as solitary

places that help to structure our perceptual experience in ways that can inspire creative choices.⁵

My remarks this morning have emphasized the psychology of the social and physical environment. I have underscored the relevance of milieu in nurturing creativity, whether in the laboratory, library, studio, or community. I suspect Yale will nourish your accomplishments in your years here. Indeed, I wish you good fortune as you strike out to find your inspiring places of study and friendship. And, having found them, you will experience just a little humility and awe contemplating their role in your future successes.

My hope is that you will find great joy in the four years ahead and that you will discover, in Tagore’s words, a Yale:

*Where the mind is without fear and the head is held high;
Where knowledge is free;
Where the world has not been broken up
into fragments by narrow domestic walls;
Where words come out from the depth of truth;
Where tireless striving stretches its arms toward perfection;
Where the clear stream of reason
has not lost its way into the dreary desert sand of dead habit;
Where the mind is led forward... into ever-widening
thought and action...⁶*

I welcome you to Yale College and know that you will embrace, in my predecessor’s words, “the good of this place.”⁷ Starting right now, this place is yours.

Notes

1. A description of this exhibition and the creative environments described can be found in U. Larsson, *Cultures of Creativity: The Centennial Exhibition of the Nobel Prize* (Stockholm: Science History Publications, 2001).
2. M.R. Menocal, *The Ornament of the World: How Muslims, Jews, and Christians Created a Culture of Tolerance in Medieval Spain* (New York: Little Brown, 2002). All of the observations about Andalusia described here are from Professor Menocal. I have paraphrased her observations liberally.
3. R. Oldenburg, *The Great Good Place: Cafes, Coffee Shops, Bookstores, Bars, Hair Salons, and Other Hangouts at the Heart of a Community* (New York: Marlowe, third edition 1999; originally published by Paragon House in 1989).
4. J.D. Spence, *The Search for Modern China* (New York: Norton, first edition, 1990).
5. C.M. Wright, *The Maze and the Warrior: Symbols in Architecture, Theology, and Music* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2001).
6. R. Tagore, poem 35 in *Gitanjali: A Collection of Prose Translations Made by the Author from the Original Bengali* (New York: Scribner Poetry, 1913/1997).
7. R.H. Brodhead, *The Good of this Place: Values and Challenges in Higher Education* (New Haven, CN: Yale University Press, 2004).