



THE IVORY TOWER AND THE EXECUTIVE DESK

by John W. Gardner

John W. Gardner, U.S. Secretary of Health, Education and Welfare, came to Pasadena on October 24, 1966, to bring greetings from the President of the United States to the California Institute of Technology on the occasion of its 75th anniversary celebration and to deliver the convocation address. "The Ivory Tower and the Executive Desk" has been adapted from his message to the more than 2,000 educators, government, civic, and industrial leaders, and friends of the Institute gathered on Beckman Mall that day to share in the historic event.

I have the deepest respect for the California Institute of Technology. But despite the solemnity of a 75th anniversary, I have to tell you my respect is not based on its great age. When I was born a very few miles from here, Caltech was only 21 years old; so there is little time between us, and in my present job I am aging more rapidly than it is. Fortunately, we are both sufficiently young that we haven't lost our faculties. There are other similarities between us. Both of us believe in serving the nation. But Caltech, having more brains at its disposal than I,

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figured out how to do so without moving to Washington. Caltech has done better than I have financially, but it wasn't all that affluent when it was my age, and so I have considerable hope for the future.

But let me speak more seriously about this extraordinary institution for which I really do have the deepest respect. For the past 20 years I have spent a considerable portion of my time appraising the performance and the promise of institutions—universities, schools, laboratories, government agencies, industrial firms, philanthropic organizations—and those years have taught me to give free rein to my gratitude and my awe when I have the privilege of knowing an institution in its moment of greatness. It isn't an everyday experience, believe me. I don't want to alarm you by that phrase “moment of greatness,” but, in the perspective of decades and centuries, institutional greatness is a transitory thing.

The appearance of greatness is more enduring. Reputation and tradition are effective cosmetics for a fading institution. But what is all too transitory is that fine moment when an institution is responding with vigor and relevance to the needs of its day, when its morale and vitality are high, and when it is holding itself to unsparing standards of performance. And when those attributes are not present, they are not easily supplied. One cannot build a great institution as one would put together a prefabricated house, knowing the ingredients and simply arranging for their assembly at some appropriate time and place. Nor can one repair a second-rate or dispirited institution the way one might repair a leaky roof. There's a pleasantly unpredictable quality about institutional vitality. One can speak of great leadership, which Caltech has most certainly had. One can speak of the brilliant men who drew other brilliant men. One can speak of loyal and generous support, which again Caltech has certainly had. But then one has to yield again to the mystery of things and to say that the growth of a small manual arts school into a world-renowned university in a brief span of 75 years is a prodigious and awe-inspiring occurrence.

One of the most striking characteristics of a university in its time of greatness is the creative interplay between the world of thought and the world of action. This is a subject of special interest to me

because my own career has spanned both worlds. When I was a young man and tended to devote my career to teaching and research, particularly research, I thought my role in society would be a detached one. I thought of myself as an observer rather than a participant. As I reflect on the fact that my own career, which has led by fits and starts from almost complete disengagement to almost total involvement in the action and effort of society, I am reminded of a barnyard fable:

A pig and a hen were walking down the street one day, and they passed a church with a sign that said *Church Bazaar, Your Contribution Needed*. The hen, in a generous, expansive mood, said, “Let's give them a ham and egg dinner.” The pig said, “Oh no! For you that's a contribution, but for me it's total commitment.”

I am now in a position to know how he felt.

I want to talk today about the ivory tower and the executive desk. I want to talk about the whole range of social roles from the extreme of total detachment to the other extreme of complete involvement. At one end of the spectrum sits Thoreau by his pond, the poet in his garret, the scholar in his study; and at the other extreme sits the executive at his desk, the active citizen in his committee meeting, the leader surrounded by those with whom he works.

Between the two extremes are a thousand way stations. Each individual must decide where to place himself along that range. Each has to decide how much he wants to become personally involved in the action and effort of his society, and there is no correct answer. The individual must decide in terms of his own temperament and motivation.

A society that aspires to creativity has urgent need of its detached scholars and critics, as well as of those who will become deeply involved in the world of action. And a university must play a vital role in producing both.

Until very recently almost all of the conventional pressures on young people were to get them totally involved in the action of society, so perhaps I had better begin by stressing the other side of the coin—the value of the detached observer. There is a certain perspective on any social enterprise that can be had only from the outside. That is why De Tocqueville was able to see our country as no

American of the time could see it. That is why corporation presidents seek the advice of outside management consultants. That is why anthropologists can be objective about other cultures but not necessarily about their own.

Every organization, every society is under the spell of assumptions so familiar that they are never really questioned—least of all by those most intimately involved. The man who is relatively detached can scrutinize those assumptions. Creativity requires the freedom to consider “unthinkable” alternatives, to doubt the worth of cherished practices. The closer you get to the purposeful action of this world the less likely it is that you will have such freedom. People at the heart of an enterprise are striving with all their energy to accomplish certain objectives. They haven’t the time to doubt or to speculate, and even if they did, it would be a risky form of self-indulgence.

So as I cope with the incredibly heavy pressures of my job, caught up in the endless crises of the day, I’m glad that there are people, in the universities and elsewhere, who have the time and the detachment to think not of the moment, but of the past and the future; not only of how to solve the problem, but whether it’s worth solving; not only of what is, but what might be.

Now, having paid my respects to the detached observer, let me pay my respects to those men and women who become involved in the central action of their society. That central action is forwarded by people who are willing and able to move into leadership roles, managerial roles, professional roles—men and women who are fitted by character and inclination to endure the dust of the market, the heat of battle, and the frustrations of purposeful action.

It goes without saying that these men and women who have committed themselves to be in the battle rather than above the battle, who have undertaken to cope with the machinery of society, who have the capacity to lead or manage or execute, will play a considerable role in shaping the world we live in. No society can survive, certainly not our own complex and swiftly changing society, if it fails to persuade a high proportion of young men and women to choose this path of complete involvement. We are in desperate need of talented and highly motivated young men and women to move into the key leadership and managerial roles in government, industry, the academic world, the professions, and elsewhere in the society.

It seems clear to me that the creative society will be one in which there is continuous and fruitful interchange and interaction between the two worlds

of action and reflection. And no institution in our society can do more to keep that interaction vital and productive than the university.

The university encompasses both worlds. It must preserve within its walls an environment in which the relatively disengaged scholar, artist, critic, writer, or scientist can live and flourish; but it must also relate itself to the organized world of action. It does this in a variety of ways, through the activities of many of its faculty members, through applied research, through its professional schools and extension activities, but most of all through educating the young men and women who will eventually act and lead. Every great modern university must balance its responsibilities to the worlds of reflection and action. It isn’t easy, and forces are always at work to throw the enterprise off balance. There are those in the population, even in the alumni population and on the boards of trustees of some universities, who resent the fact that the university is a haven for dissent, for criticism, and for the free examination of assumptions and practices. They often strive to diminish this fundamental role of the university. They seem to imagine that the chief role of the university is to endorse the status quo.

On the other side, there are some within the university community who seem to want to cut all ties with the rest of the society and to persuade every last student to choose the life of detachment and dissent. They don’t like the way the society is run, but they aren’t inclined to prepare young people to run it better. And some of them communicate to their students a moral snobbism toward those who live with the ethical dilemmas of responsible action.

The life of reflection is not superior to the life of action nor vice versa. Both are essential to a vital society. Surely our universities should strive to be as effective as possible in preparing young people for either role. I hope that in preparing young people for lives as scholars and critics our universities will make them aware of the dangers of irresponsibility and moral snobbism. I hope that in preparing them for the world of business and government the universities will make them appreciative of the social function of the scholar, the dissenter, and the critic. Finally, I hope the universities persuade a reasonable proportion of their graduates to move back and forth between the two worlds.

In conclusion, then, our society must have the wisdom to reflect and the fortitude to act. It must provide the creative soil for new ideas and the skill, the patience, and the hardihood to put those ideas into action.

Our great universities can help us to forge that kind of society.