

A Celebration of Community: A Celebration of Truman

Installation Address

Troy D. Paino

September 17, 2010

Introduction

I wanted to come to Truman because I believed it represented the values to which I have committed my professional life. It is rare when someone gets the chance to work at a place whose mission and values are so aligned with his own. To not only work for such a University but also get a chance to lead it during such a critical time in its history is a humbling and almost overwhelming experience. Over the last two years, I have grown to love this place even more than I thought possible. For the most part, it is because of the people who make up Truman and the community of Kirksville that has been so accepting of my family and me. But it is also because over the last two years I have learned that my suspicion that Truman represents those values I have devoted my life to is actually true. These are the value of education rooted in community, the value of the liberal arts and sciences in the life of our democracy, and the twin values of opportunity and excellence. These values are what I would like to briefly talk about on this occasion.

The value of an education rooted in community

“We must delight in each other, make others’ conditions our own, rejoice together, mourn together, labor and suffer together, always having before our eyes our community as members of the same body.” These are the words of John Winthrop just before the establishment of the Massachusetts Bay Colony back in 1630.

Two hundred years later, the Frenchman Alexis de Tocqueville traveled to the United States to investigate the country’s prison system but instead made astute observations about a democracy in its infancy. Rather than witnessing the tight-knit communities of Winthrop’s dreams, de Tocqueville was struck by Americans’ individualism and devotion to self-reliance. While impressed with the uniqueness of the American character, he warned that our individualism could inevitably lead to the fragmentation of American society and the isolation of its citizens. This faith in self-reliance, to de Tocqueville, could be the country’s downfall if not balanced by other habits of the heart, namely an understanding of our interdependence.

If Winthrop and de Tocqueville could be with us today, what would they say about our current state of affairs? My guess is that they would agree that now, more than ever, for the sake of our democracy and the pursuit of meaningful and satisfying lives, we must nurture and value our connections with one another.

In our country we proudly believe in the idea of self-determination, but there is a point when this belief not only becomes inaccurate and prideful but increasingly self-defeating. It is true that we are created to be individually unique, but the reality is that we are inevitably social creatures who desperately need each other not merely for sustenance, not merely for company, but for any meaning to our lives whatsoever. This is the paradox of our humanity: We are all individuals struggling toward independence and self-reliance who are inevitably dependent upon our relationships with others.

Truman is the institutional embodiment of this paradox. While we are here to help students liberate their minds and become independent, self-sufficient citizens in a competitive world, we hold tightly to the belief that true independence, whether it is intellectual, economic or political, can only be achieved through consenting to interdependence. It stands for the idea that we grow in individual liberty when we recognize the needs and rights of others. It stands for the concept that a state of independence comes when we decide through our intellect to forge human connections. In short, by its very presence it loudly proclaims the importance of community.

When I speak of community, I am not talking about a utopian concept where everyone gets along. Quite the contrary, true community requires a collective commitment to the transcendence of individual differences through a deep appreciation of those differences. Therefore, the establishment of community is not easy work; it is messy, complicated, difficult, and cannot be done in the abstract or online. But learning to live in community is necessary if this country is going to confront and solve its most intractable problems. The lessons of a life in community are learned at places like Truman, a place where students are afforded the opportunity to live, learn, lead, serve, solve problems, and yes, make mistakes within a safe, supportive and challenging environment; a place where they are afforded the opportunity to use their individual passions and talents for the good of the whole.

As we have seen over the last decade, technology is a valuable tool in education, but it is no substitute for the sort of education that offers our democracy the greatest hope for the future: An education that is built upon the concept of life in community, one that encourages and is even

dependent upon deep human connections. As our world travels farther down the road of relying on distant communication and virtual communities, the sort of education Truman offers, an education reliant on human interaction, becomes even more relevant and critical to our nation's future.

Online communities distort the more profound meaning of living a life in community. An increasing body of research is showing where our growing reliance on social media and electronic interaction is leading us to a dark place, where electronic stimuli is slowly replacing the joys of human contact. As a society, we have replaced the quality of relationships with the quantity of relationships. So as we become more "connected," we are becoming a lonelier and more isolated people. But more than this, because of our growing alienation from authentic human relations, we are becoming a people less equipped to meet the challenges facing our world.

True communities are necessary for the future of our democracy and our ability to solve problems because they consider many different points of view and provide the freedom to express them; they come to appreciate the whole of a situation far better than an individual, couple or special interest group can. Community incorporates the dark and the light, the sacred and the profane, the sorrow and the joy, the glory and the mud; its conclusions are well-rounded and thoughtful. Those who live in community are more contemplative, self-aware and, most importantly, humble.

If we are to continue to learn, to grow and to improve, we must be aware of our own human frailty and open to what others can teach us. True community fosters humility because it causes you to appreciate the gifts of others, thereby causing you to recognize your own limitations.

The sort of communities we have created online or on television do just the opposite. Virtual communities can actually foster arrogance because they make it so easy for one to shoot verbal shots across the electronic bow without much thought, evidence or consideration of other viewpoints. In fact, our television and Internet communities are so polarizing because they encourage people to listen only to those with whom they agree. These sorts of communities are ultimately a destructive force in our society because they foster mistrust and are quick to assign blame instead of doing the hard work of finding solutions.

So I stand here before you to celebrate Truman as a place that offers our students, faculty and staff a community that together is able to face a challenge, pursue truth, solve problems, make mistakes, extend grace, offer support and provide service to others in our earnest attempt to live meaningful, purposeful lives. At Truman, one finds a place where a state of independence is achieved by broadening our intellectual, spiritual and human connections, by understanding our interdependence.

It is also important to understand that Truman would not be the sort of institution it has become if not for where it is located: Kirksville, Missouri. Truman reflects the values of the community in which it resides. Without the benefit of bankable natural resources or easy access to larger populations, the people of Kirksville have learned that the meaning of life is found in community. Life on the clay of Northeast Missouri can be unforgiving, so we have learned to rely on one another. Against long odds, the people of Northeast Missouri have survived, thrived and built meaningful lives because of an appreciation for their interdependence. Because they have learned the value of community, the people of Northeast Missouri would not want to live anywhere else. What better place to teach the value of a life lived in community?

The value of the liberal arts in the life of our democracy

I fear that in our country's recent focus on the utilitarian value of higher education, we have turned universities into something other than the ethical, moral and intellectual hub in which independent thinking is done. While I recognize the importance of workforce development, the social utility of a college degree, and the variety of institutional missions we need in our country's higher education landscape, we also need public universities that offer at their core those disciplines of knowledge that teach the mind to free itself in order to freely pursue the truth. Truman, in Missouri, is the public university that by decree and through its institutional behavior serves that mission.

A. Bartlett Giamatti, former President of Yale and Commissioner of Major League Baseball, described a liberal arts and sciences education as teaching "the interplay of freedom and order that shapes an individual and a society." More to the point, a liberal arts and sciences education strives to order the mind so as to set it free. It is through this liberation of the mind that we make medical and scientific breakthroughs, unleash entrepreneurial impulses, protect the environment, ameliorate poverty's effect, test the limits of human potential, find the capacity to

forgive, create and appreciate beauty amid the cruelty and brutality of this world, and better understand the depths and variety of human experience.

Truman's mission, to provide a public liberal arts and sciences education, is an almost sacred process in our officially secular society because it is through an unadulterated pursuit of truth, knowledge and understanding that we live out our nation's most fundamental values and principles. If we are true to our mission and public purpose, Truman is here to open opportunity, promote access and social mobility, foster excellence, recognize merit, and do all things that urge our students to make themselves productive, free and equal. At the heart of a liberal arts education lives the conviction, derived from the Greeks, that freedom of thought is the necessary precondition to political freedom. If freedom does not reside in the mind, it cannot finally reside elsewhere. Is there a greater public purpose than this?

To speak directly to those who question our social value, I say this: There is nothing more necessary to the full, free and decent life of a person than to free the mind by passionately and rationally exercising the mind's power to inquire freely.

With that said, Truman's biggest threat is the belief that our social value is self-evident and no longer in need of explication, our mission so manifest that it no longer requires definition, justification and articulation. When we do not hold ourselves accountable and constantly examine our presuppositions, our processes and acts, we will stiffen and lose our complimentary value to other social institutions.

Higher education has faltered through the years by believing its inhabitants are removed from the common stream of society; that because we at colleges and universities assert the mind's capacity, we can condescend to whatever we do not encompass. In this way, higher education has chosen to act at times more like sanctuaries from society than tributaries to it. Truman does not, cannot and will not make this mistake.

Truman, in the fulfillment of its public purpose, must use the knowledge and understanding it generates to serve humanity. It must foster the value of service in our students, extend its hands to the least of us, and daily reaffirm our core values of focusing on students and their personal, social and intellectual growth within a supportive and challenging environment; cultivating a diverse, engaged community of high-achieving students, faculty and staff; providing affordable access to an exceptional education; and committing to continuous improvement through assessment.

The values of opportunity and excellence in equal measure

Beyond our strong sense of community and commitment to the public purpose of a liberal arts and sciences education, Truman stands for the very American principle that we must offer our citizens opportunities for social uplift but that these opportunities will always be unproductive, unfulfilling, and even a threat to our social welfare if not accompanied by high expectations and a commitment to excellence. Truman sets the bar high because we understand that access and opportunity are empty concepts if not balanced by the counterweight of merit. Truman stands for the core American principle that everyone regardless of race, creed or social station deserves the opportunity to the best education this country has to offer. But if we are to expect our students to push the limits of their potential, to serve society to their utmost ability, there must be public universities that reward merit and provide access in equal measure.

Words like access, opportunity, excellence and high standards are merely platitudes if we do not make them come alive through our institutional behavior. Every day we must get up and reflect upon our mission and values and ask the questions: Are we doing our job? Are we living up to the high standards we have set? Are we living up to the twin pillars of access and excellence in everything we do? Do we offer opportunities for all deserving students, regardless of race, class, religion or place of origin?

Sure, we could rest on our considerable laurels and answer “yes” to most if not all of these questions. Even a recent ranking by the *Washington Monthly* ranked Truman 6th in the nation for schools that are fulfilling their public purpose as measured by our students’ social mobility, research and service; but at Truman it is deeply embedded in our culture to not rest on our laurels, to ask those challenging questions, to continuously assess our institutional behaviors not to feel self-satisfied and prideful, but to stand as a testament to our commitment to access and excellence. We can and will do better.

Conclusion

By now some of you are wondering: “When is this guy going to talk about the challenges facing Truman? Is our new President completely clueless and out of touch with reality? He hasn’t said the first word about our severe budget cuts and how we must do things differently if we are going to survive in the 21st century. Where, for the love of Pete, is this guy’s five-point plan for how he is going to lead Truman through these challenging times?”

To these questions I say yes, of course we have to respond to these budgetary challenges. I am mindful of the greater demands that are being placed on us at the same time we are experiencing severe funding cuts. I too worry about our ability to preserve and enhance the Truman experience as we continue to suffer Draconian cuts in funding. I am also aware that we have to be responsive to the world in which we are preparing our students to live, work and lead. I know that we must partner with our sister institutions, many of them represented here today, in new and creative ways toward our state and nation's broader purpose of educating our citizenry. We also have to be innovative in how we use technology, not as a substitute for community, but to improve learning with fewer resources.

But today, I intentionally did not focus on these realities because I believe that the effectiveness of our response to these immediate challenges will not be measured by our ability to execute a plan or even adapt our pedagogies to a digital age. Rather it will be measured by our ability to adapt to this new reality while remaining true to our calling and faithful to our values. If we survive but do not serve our mission, we will have failed. Therefore, we must first reaffirm who we are and the public purpose we serve. We do this by celebrating community, promoting the value of a liberal arts and sciences education to our democracy, and holding in balance and without compromise the values of opportunity and excellence.

As a public liberal arts and sciences university rooted in community, we understand that the solution to our challenges cannot be found in a five-step plan, inspired vision, or a charismatic leader; it is only found in the work of a community that stays committed to its values, mission and sense of purpose no matter what. Make no mistake about it, no university, public or private, has an innate right to exist. Every single day, Truman must prove itself as deserving of public and private support by demonstrating the positive difference a Truman education can make in the world. It does this by demonstrating through the work and lives of its faculty, staff and students that the pursuit of knowledge and truth for their own sake is necessary in order to preserve our democracy and serve humanity.

As we look upon the challenges we face, consider the Chinese word for crisis that consists of two characters: one represents "danger" and the other "hidden opportunity." Hidden in our current crisis is an opportunity. To take advantage of this opportunity, we must come together as a community and reflect upon our mission as Missouri's public liberal arts and sciences University, assess with humility and honesty our success in fulfilling that mission, and

reaffirm the important service we provide our students, the state, our democracy and the world. Because we are a community committed to our mission and the twin pillars of opportunity and excellence, we should not fail. Because we are Truman, we will not fail!