

The Wisconsin Tradition of Academic Freedom

(Sifting and Winnowing)

By Helen C. White



Main Address by Helen C. White, Chairman of the University of Wisconsin English Department and President of the American Association of University Professors at ceremonies rededicating the Freedom Plaque, Bascom Hall, University of Wisconsin, February 15, 1957.

Mrs President, Mrs Governor, ladies and gentlemen:

First of all, I want to express my appreciation of the honor you have done the American Association of University Professors in asking its president to speak for the faculty of Wisconsin on this historic occasion. I am proud to remember that President Fred when he became Dean of the Graduate School defined his schedule as forty-nine per cent administration and fifty-one per cent teaching and research that he might maintain his membership in our chapter, and though as always he gave each half of his job what most of us would have considered one hundred per cent attention, his attendance at chapter meetings put the rest of us to shames And Dean Ingraham is not only one of the most distinguished of my predecessors in the presidency of the A.A.U.P., but a friend and counselor on whose never-failing interest and wisdom generations of A.A.U.P. officers, both local and national, have come to depend. This respect of the administration of Wisconsin for its professors is one of the things that has made possible our record of devotion to our common principles, and the continuing reliance of the A.A.U.P. on Wisconsin, in turn, is one of the finest evidences I know of the recognition nationally accorded to the Wisconsin tradition of Academic Freedom.

Dedications and rededications may seem a mere formality to some people, but I think they are a very important thing in family life and in community life, and still more in the life of an institution which partakes to a considerable degree of the character of both, For any real community life is based upon a great many assumptions, usually unvoiced and taken for granted, It is, therefore, a good thing now and then to remind ourselves of some of these principles that we live by that give value and direction to our common life, For it is all too easy to lose sight of them in the routines of day-to-day living, particularly on campus, where the college generations succeed each other so fast that each new undertaking is advertised as the "first annual", and if it survives, the first repetition is established as an "old custom". Under such circumstances there is something peculiarly instructive in the commemorative occasion, especially when it reminds us that this Wisconsin tradition of ours is already more than six decades old.

The "sifting and winnowing" plaque on Bascom Hall was so much a part of the landscape that most of us had ceased really to notice it as we went in and out those crowded doors. Indeed, when it disappeared last fall, there was, you remember, some uncertainty as to when it had gone. That is one of the dangers of something like freedom that is as the very air we breathe. One takes it so much for granted that one ceases to think about it. In that sense, we may even owe some debt to the various currents of suspicion and alarm that from time to time have blown up State Street to our pleasant heights. I remember a legend that was already old when I first came. It is of the professor who, during a famous Investigation of the University, was asked if he had noticed that the figure of Progress on the top of the Capitol dome had her back on

Bascom Hall, The questioner mischievously wondered if there was perhaps something disparaging in that sculptural orientation.

"Thank God," said the old-timer, "there is one pair of eyes in Wisconsin that is not fixed on the University!"

Of course, we all know that the continued interest of the State of Wisconsin is something on which we depend for our very life, And to one who came as I did from a part of the country where the state university does not occupy the highest hill on the landscape, it never ceases to be a wonderful thing that the State of Wisconsin, year in and year out, in breezy weather and in calm, does keep a steady and, on the whole, generous and proud eye upon our institution, And it is the more wonderful when you remember that with the human eye being as selective as it is and the human ear as undependable as it is our patrons and protectors must now and then hear some very odd things of us, I have often thought as I read student themes that if parents get as highly colored a picture of the University as we sometimes get of the home towns from which their informants come, it isn't surprising that parental solicitude is now and then aroused. What does surprise a professor, however, especially at this season of the year when he's just finished reading a variety of versions of what he is supposed to have been saying for a whole semester, is the idea that anybody ever paid enough attention to what he had to say to be catastrophically affected for either good or evil. Put seriously, parental concern is something that we all respect. I think, therefore, that we owe it to our constituency to take every chance to explain what we are trying to do and why. And especially should we take the opportunity of an occasion like this to make clear why it is that we do lay so much stress on academic freedom.

We want it, of course, that we may do our own distinctive work--that is, the work of research and teaching. Both of these are creative enterprises. Anybody who has ever attempted even the humblest "do-it-yourself" project knows what it means to try to make something of his own. However modest the thing which he attempts, he wants it to be his own; he wants it to express his vision, however imperfectly. He wants to express it, also, in his distinctive fashion. Before you ask a man to do a creative job, then, you must face that fact--that he is going to want to be free to do it in his own way, the best way he can. That is why when you want to make sure of a good job you are careful about choosing the man in the first place; why you demand evidence of his competence. Then when you're satisfied about that, you let him do the best he can for you.

That is why at the University we put a good deal of store by character, and why on the whole the wrong sort of man doesn't last very long here. And that is why we put so much stress on training and evidence of competence, scrutinizing records and gathering testimonials. We know that we have to live with the man we bring here, and, I assure you, we have enough pride in ourselves to want only the best company we can get* But once we have a man here and have tried him and tested him, and made him one of us, then we have to trust him within the field of his competence. And we have to do that not for his sake but for the sake of the society he serves, A doctor who will tell you only what you want to hear and not what you ought to hear, or a lawyer, or a business adviser, or a clergyman, is not of much use to anybody. It is indispensable to the service which we expect of our experts in various fields that they should at all times be free to do their best for us.

Of course, academic freedom, like anything else, can be abused by the bluff, the exhibitionist, or the crackpot. That they should not go their destructive way unchallenged is the responsibility of all of us whose credit they compromise. But we should remember always that the real test of principle come when people we do not like are involved. There are always certain prejudices of what might be called basic rhythm to watch but for. If a man is slower in his reactions than I am, then clearly he is a stupid fellow;

but if he is a good deal quicker than I am, then undoubtedly he is too bright to be trusted. We all of us have to watch out for our natural human preference for a congenial world.

Of course, there are foolish ideas, and all sorts of illusions as well, and the highest hill on the landscape is sure to attract the winds. I once heard the late Carl Russel Fish say that Wisconsin was a very interesting place to be because there was no idea loose in the country, wise or foolish--particularly foolish (may I remind you that this was in the middle thirties)--but sooner or later it turned up here. I suspect that is why so many of the young people who sounded radical at that time turned out so solidly middle-of-the-road afterward--they had heard it all before. The atmosphere of free critical discussion is, it seems to me, the best possible protection against folly. More than once I have known healthy student laughter to blow away an absurdity much faster than any professional blast.

The ultimate threat is, I suspect, not political at all, from either the right or the left, Some of the staunchest defenders of academic freedom that I have known have been what most people would call thoroughly conservative men. It is rather a matter of philosophy or even psychology.- the habit of oversimplification. "But I thought a liberal was always a liberal," one of my students said to me once when she was reminded that not all the answers were on one side. We need free discussion to fill in the shades between black and white, and jog the immature mind from premature complacency.

And especially do we need it when we are living as we are today in a world where we may be sure that we shall have sooner or later to face some very uncomfortable facts. I can remember when I and many of my countrymen a good deal older than I thought that ours being a young nation with the voice of the future, we had only to raise that voice for a fair share of the world to rally to us. Now even the veriest freshman among us knows that it isn't so simple as that. It is precisely because it isn't so simple that it is so very important that those to whom we look for surveying new country, for map-making, to say nothing of road-opening, should in the years ahead be people who have been trained to seek the truth at any cost, and to give as true an account of what they have learned as they can, even when they know that they must tell us what none of us would choose to hear.

There is today a good deal of dispute over the advantages of various types of bomb shelters for our bodies. But there is no dispute over one fact, and that is that there are no bomb shelters for our minds. Indeed, I know of no readier way to disarm ourselves than to try to hide from disturbing knowledge, and, conversely, I know of no surer way to steady our nerves and find the courage we need than to take arms against a sea of rumors and alarms and by understanding end them.

The fact is that truth in any age is hard to find, and wisdom more difficult of compass than the world's wealth* In the free give-and-take of the University students get a vision of what a lifelong undertaking the pursuit of both is. Indeed, I think that that is the most valuable thing we give them on this campus. For there is only one thing more important than the preservation of freedom, and that is its use. That is why I like so much that sentence of the Board of Regents' Resolution of December 8, 1956. "The search for truth is the central duty of the University, but truth will not be found if the scholar is not free, it will not be understood if the student is not free, it will not be used if the citizen is not free." In other words, freedom is the first business of all of us. That is, in a word, the heart of our Wisconsin Tradition of Academic Freedom