

Inaugural Address

Jeffrey S. Lehman

October 16, 2003

Chairman Meinig. Justice Ginsburg. Honored Guests. Distinguished Colleagues. Dear Family. Fellow Cornellians.

A few steps to our west, in the rare book collection of the Carl A. Kroch Library, there is an intellectual treasure. Its spine is wood, bound in rope, covered in leather. It is a rare first edition of Nicholas Copernicus's masterwork, *On the Revolutions of the Heavenly Spheres*, often referred to simply as *The Revolutions*.

In the first few chapters of *The Revolutions*, Copernicus carefully considers the ancients' belief that the Earth occupied the center of the universe and demonstrates its inadequacy to explain what astronomers observed. Then, in breathtaking Chapter Nine, he suggests that our observations can be explained if one places the sun at the middle of the universe, with the planets revolving around it. A current translation of the last sentence of that chapter reads, "All these facts are disclosed to us by the principle governing the order in which the planets follow one another, and by the harmony of the entire universe, if only we look at the matter, as the saying goes, with both eyes."

The Revolutions forever changed the way human beings understood their world. Today, when we look at the matter with both eyes, we see Copernicus's vision. We see our planet orbiting the sun. Indeed, it is so natural to us that, if we are not careful, we might forget that *The Revolutions* was truly a revolutionary achievement.

Cornell University's copy of *The Revolutions* was acquired by its first president, Andrew Dickson White. President White loved science. And he loved revolutionary achievements.

Not so long ago, the historian Frederick Rudolph wrote a history of American undergraduate education. In that book, Rudolph recounts Cornell's transformative impact on all of higher education. He observes, "Andrew D. White, its first president, and Ezra Cornell, who gave it his name, turned out to be the developers of the first American university and therefore the agents of revolutionary curricular reform."

Before 1865, America's greatest universities were almost all sectarian institutions, established to prepare young men as members of the governing class for the professions of law, medicine, and the ministry. To do so, they relied on a liberal education in the classics.

But the first sixty-five years of the nineteenth century had brought to our country an industrial revolution and a civil war. There was an emerging sense that higher education was needed for more than just the young men of the professional classes. The first efforts at change, however, did not take hold. In some universities the president resisted; in others it was the governing board. Not until Cornell did a university succeed in providing an education that was open to all and that showed equal respect for traditional classical subjects and for more applied technological subjects. A true university, universal in its approach to knowledge, universal in its approach to people.

The creation of Cornell University forever changed the world of higher education. Today, when we look at the matter with both eyes, we see the vision of Ezra Cornell and Andrew Dickson White. In all of our nation's finest comprehensive research universities we see coeducation, nonsectarianism, racial diversity. We see theory and application, humanities and science explored with equal fervor and equal dignity. Indeed, it is so natural to us that, if we are not careful, we might forget that Cornell University was truly a revolutionary achievement.

Revolutionary Cornell.

A few steps further to our west, in the Uris Library, there is another intellectual treasure. It is a copy of *Beloved*, the novel by Cornell graduate and Nobel laureate Toni Morrison.

In *Beloved*, Morrison shows us America between 1855 and 1873 through the eyes of a slave family. The mother, Sethe, kills her one-year-old daughter, whom we know as “Beloved,” to spare her a life of slavery. But eighteen years later the ghost of Beloved returns in human form and re-enters the family, forming and re-forming new relationships with all the other characters.

In a set of breathtaking pages late in the book, Morrison stops writing as an impersonal narrator, standing at the middle of the universe, observing the characters in their orbits. She forces the reader to view the world first with the eyes of the mother, then the eyes of the sister, then the eyes of the daughter. And then she asks the reader to hold all three perspectives in mind at the same time:

Beloved
You are my sister
You are my daughter
You are my face; you are me
I have found you again; you have come back to me
You are my Beloved
You are mine
You are mine
You are mine

A great book like *Beloved* forever changes the way we view the world. It leads us to wonder in new ways about what it means to be a person, to be alive, to be a slave, to love someone else. It makes us wonder whether, and to what extent, our responses to such questions are conditioned by our races, and to what extent our responses transcend race and are more purely human.

In 1869, between the time of Beloved’s death and the time of her ghostly return, the real-life students of Cornell University’s first class were completing their first year of studies. In June of 1869, a member of that first class wrote the following words:

“And at the close of this our first year at Cornell, we ask in a ringing confident tone, has not a new and advancing power arisen in the land? Even as we write, the sound of the afternoon chimes undulating down the valley’s side, seems to tell us that they have rung out the old, and that they have rung in the new. ... We leave older and wiser heads to discuss and decide whether Cornell is a success or not, but we in undergraduate enthusiasm cry out that it is a success if only for the fact that it has inspired love. ... Our University may be new, but Cayuga Lake has glistened in the moonlight and in the sunlight, and the numerous glens surrounding us have emptied their waters into it for ages past – and as we behold our University amidst all this beauty, we feel that we revere it, we feel that we love it, that it is really our alma mater.”

Beloved Cornell.

Among the handful of truly superb comprehensive research universities in the world, Cornell embodies a unique history – bold and innovative, open and engaged, a community of universal aspiration and boundless contribution. The fearlessness of our founders has spawned a tradition of innovation and contribution to the well-being of humanity. The boldness of our founders has spawned a legacy of devotion in the hearts of those who studied here. In New York State, in Doha, Qatar, everywhere in the world, Cornell is the embodiment of dreams, a source of hope for the future of our species.

Revolutionary Cornell, Beloved Cornell.

It is time again for us to consider fundamental questions of who we are and what we should be. What should our university be when it celebrates its 150th anniversary a dozen years hence? In the year 2015, what do we think a beloved, revolutionary, truly superb, comprehensive research university should be offering to its students and to humanity?

Over the course of the past few decades, our world underwent changes that were every bit as profound as the nineteenth century changes that prompted Cornell’s creation. The revolutions in telecommunications and transportation technology. The end of the Cold War. The mapping of the human genome. The identification of global warming. Have these developments altered our understanding of what Cornell

should be? Should they be prompting evolutionary changes in what we do?

In any era the most important set of questions a university must answer has to do with what it chooses to teach its students. What intellectual dispositions, character traits, and essential knowledge do we believe Cornell should nurture in its students? What do we believe Cornell should do to inspire our undergraduate, graduate, and professional students to become intellectual and moral leaders of their communities? What do we believe Cornell should do to prepare our students for well-rounded lives that incorporate humanitarian, political, social, cultural, artistic, and athletic dimensions?

A second set of questions has to do with how we teach our students. Have new technologies and research on how students learn created possibilities for better pedagogy, or are they mere distractions? What kind of mentorship, inside and outside the classroom, should we providing our students at the different stages of their educations?

A third set of questions has to do with whom we are teaching. What mix of undergraduates, graduate students, professional students, and non-degree students will best help Cornell achieve its educational mission?

A fourth set of questions has do with where we are present. As our world has changed, we have added new places where we teach those who would earn Cornell degrees. How much further should we be extending ourselves, our resources, and our reputation around the globe?

A fifth set of questions has to do with what our land grant mission means today. What forms of extension and public service are the best modern expression of Senator Morrill's nineteenth century program for having outstanding universities contribute to the practical education of society? Should we do more to ensure that the fruits of our research become part of the fabric of the larger society?

A sixth set of questions has to do with how we collaborate. We already collaborate with other great universities in the United States and around the world, on projects large and small. What other institutional partnerships, international and domestic, might permit a scale of en-

deavor that would allow us to accomplish things we cannot do alone? With whom might we collaborate, closer to home, to enhance our local and regional economies, and to strengthen our ties to New York City?

A final set of questions is one that I posed when I accepted the presidency last December. Should we be identifying special domains of research emphasis where Cornell is unusually well situated to make enduring and significant contributions? Can such an identification be reconciled with the highly adaptive decentralization that has been one of the hallmarks of research innovation at Cornell?

Revolutionary Cornell. Beloved Cornell.

The Cornell that we cherish today reflects the accumulation of 138 years of carefully considered answers to all these questions. Every day, in every classroom on our campuses, we enact a set of answers to these questions. In suggesting that we return to these questions anew, I am not suggesting that we should be revisiting or second-guessing commitments that we have made. I am fully dedicated to fulfilling them all.

Rather, I am suggesting that we must return to these questions in order to plan our future. We must decide what new commitments we should be making to ourselves and to others, so as to ensure that Cornell continues to be the university we want it to be.

Over the course of the next year, I will be committing myself to thinking deeply about these questions. I will be doing so in order to become more settled in my beliefs about our university's direction. And I will be asking you to join with me in that exploration.

In approaching these questions, we must begin where we are today. We must respect the wisdom of our animating principles, our history, and the considered judgments that have been made by our forbears.

But at the same time we must not be afraid of the discomfiting insight. We must permit our worldviews to evolve. We must welcome perspectives that illuminate new corners of our world, even when a part of us would rather not see what those corners contain.

For example, we must be willing to entertain the possibility that our university might become more true to its creed not by enrolling a student

body that looks like America, but rather by enrolling a student body that looks like Earth. The possibility that some teaching might be more effective if it is isolated and asynchronous instead of communal and synchronous.

Careful, deliberate consideration might lead us to conclude that the Cornell of the sesquicentennial should be the Cornell of today. If that is our conclusion, we should have the courage to remain constant. But if we conclude that we must continue to change, then we must be prepared to allow our practices to evolve in step with our understanding.

Revolutionary Cornell. Beloved Cornell.

Earlier in this inaugural week, on our campus in Doha, Qatar, I expressed my belief that great universities must continue to nurture a transnational perspective on the human condition. On our campus in New York City, I expressed my belief that great universities must continue to advance scientific understanding of our world's unifying forces.

Today, on this campus in Ithaca, let me express my belief that great universities must continue to promote the spiritually satisfying coexistence of people with one another and with our planet. The dividing lines of race and religion have long been especially powerful stimuli for conflict, mistrust, segregation, and war. Scientific and technological progress have long challenged societal institutions to sustain humanistic and environmental values, even as they enhanced the quality of human life. I believe that universities have a special capacity to help students to be open to these challenges, to appreciate their complexity, and to engage them with all of the scientific, social scientific, and humanistic resources we can muster.

I believe these things about our university. I am asking whether you agree. And I am asking you what other things we should believe about Cornell.

Revolutionary Cornellians, Beloved Cornellians.

Cornellians are everywhere on planet earth. Indeed, at this moment one of us, astronaut Edward Lu of the Class of 1984, is up in the space station, engaged in his own revolutions around our planet.

Today I am asking all Cornellians everywhere, including Edward Lu, to join with me. Let us, together, engage the fundamental questions about our future. Let us renew an institution where any person can find instruction in any study, where any person can engage, criticize, and improve on the instruction that is offered, where any person can be challenged and enabled to make an enduring contribution to the betterment of our world, where intellectual values are respected and cherished, and where people around the world can find inspiration and hope for the future of humanity.

I am humbled to have been called to serve as the eleventh president of Cornell University. In accepting the responsibilities of office today, I pledge to serve our university with all the ability that is mine to offer.

Thank you.