

Harry Lewis – Morning Prayer – October 18, 2007

The reading is from the 14<sup>th</sup> chapter of the letter of St. Paul to the Romans, the 13<sup>th</sup> verse. *Let us not therefore judge one another any more: but judge this rather, that no man put a stumbling block or an occasion to fall in his brother's way.*

Times do change, and progress in human affairs is possible. Surely we can take these happy messages from President Faust's inauguration last Friday. She brought smiles to every face by reading from President Conant's 1951 letter to his unknown successor. It began, "Dear Sir"—a stunning reminder that in fifty years, even at Harvard, we can transcend our unacknowledged prejudices.

This symbol of Faust's triumph, and Harvard's, had a special significance for me because of a letter my mother received in 1934. It was from the University of Michigan and it began, "We take pleasure in informing you that you will be permitted to register as a first year student in the Medical School ...." At that time Harvard still judged women unsuitable for careers in medicine, but here was Michigan admitting the ambitious daughter of Ukrainian laborers. My mother's letter was addressed to "Miss Anne Helene Kowalyszyn, 324 Gunnison Ave. S.W., Grand Rapids, Michigan. Dear Sir:"

In *his* letter, Conant wondered "how the free world is going to get through the next fifty years." He then expressed confidence that, if Harvard were not destroyed, it would be maintaining its "traditions of academic freedom, of tolerance for heresy." The connection between the two kinds of freedom would have been painfully evident in 1951. Human freedom—the privilege of self-determination—had very nearly been lost only a few years earlier, in the World War. And academic freedom—the special responsibility enjoyed by university professors to speak the truth as we see it—could not be taken for granted in 1951. It was under vicious attack by an increasingly powerful Senator Joseph McCarthy.

The real significance for us in Conant's letter is the immediacy of the threats to both kinds of freedom and the connection between them.

There was another happy symbol at President Faust's inaugural, and it was the ROTC color guard, which led the procession out of Tercentenary Theatre. The status of ROTC at Harvard is suspended in a troubled balance of forces, both historical and moral. The only thing that has recently come close to the metaphysical ambiguities of ROTC was the weird status of women undergraduates during the last years of Radcliffe College, an institution that visibly existed in practice but was barely comprehensible in theory. Today Harvard ROTC students can stand guard over our president, and yet Harvard pretends ROTC isn't there, except to deny it support.

Students wishing to serve their country by becoming military officers can join the unit at MIT. There are actually more Harvard cadets than MIT cadets in that unit. But ROTC may not meet officially at Harvard, and the costs MIT incurs on Harvard's behalf are paid not by Harvard but by alumni volunteers.

Harvard denies these modest forms of support in the name of the important principle of nondiscrimination on the basis of sexual orientation. No Harvard money may support any organization that excludes gays and lesbians—even the US armed forces, which protect the freedoms we have to debate this dilemma. And so MIT gives *our students* the opportunity to defend us, while giving *Harvard* the opportunity to feel morally pure about itself.

But can we achieve moral purity for ourselves in one area by shifting a separate moral burden to other shoulders?

I admire the idealism of those who have fought for gay rights over the past forty years, and who have educated us about their importance. I hope I am considered a supporter of gay rights. I believe the ban on gays in the military is unwise and will eventually be lifted.

But I don't think Harvard's stance on ROTC is morally tenable. We should not attempt to remove the barriers facing some of our students by placing stumbling blocks in the path of others.

To quote Congressman Barney Frank, speaking courageously last week on a related matter, "idealism that is empowered by pragmatism is the way in which we make progress." We are part of American society and ROTC is *sui generis*, an exception to our rules about student activities.

Our ROTC students are trying to understand why the College has used Harvard's money for equality of alcohol access, but not for buses to take them to MIT to learn to protect our freedoms. And why Harvard, which admirably does *so much* to support students' freedom to choose their futures, does *nothing* to support their choice to serve our country.

So I was pleased to see the Harvard cadets in an honored position at the inaugural. And yet, the image of our cadets standing guard over our president makes our moral chasm more visible. Who better than the woman who gave Radcliffe its new identity, a historian of civil strife, to lead the Faculty out of this thicket?

The issue is not bringing an ROTC unit to Harvard. Units are merging today, not splitting. We should normalize Harvard's relations with MIT ROTC. Harvard ought to pay its bills to MIT directly. It ought to bus our ROTC students as it buses our volleyball teams.

The millennium of universal gay rights—including the right to serve in the armed forces—will come no more slowly if we provide these simple courtesies and conveniences to our students.

In the meantime, may all our service men and women come home safely, and soon.