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Exploring the Soul of Syracuse, Together

Nancy Cantor

Syracuse University, ncantor@syr.edu

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Exploring the Soul of Syracuse, Together

Inaugural Remarks by Nancy Cantor
Chancellor and President, Syracuse University*

Thank you, John, Debbie, Tom and Mary Jane, and all who have worked so hard to make this day one of many nations, generations, friends, neighbors, and colleagues. Thanks to Buzz, who has built such a solid ship at Syracuse University that we are ready to hit the seas, on a grand adventure.

Thank you all for joining together at this great university for a ceremony that combines medieval academic costumes with the sights and sounds of the 21st century. Today's event is rooted in a distant past while reaching expectantly for the future.

This seems only right, for in universities we examine and learn from the past even as we try to inspire those, inside and outside our walls, who will make and change the future. Today we mark that continuity and the possibilities ahead.

In her autobiography, *The Story of My Life*, Helen Keller, who could neither see nor hear, wrote that she did hear a voice once when she was a child. It told her: "Knowledge is love and light and vision."¹ So let us enjoy the warmth, the illumination, and the possibilities that can actually happen when universities and communities join forces for the good of all.

The Crooked Timber of Humanity

Among us are my mother, Marjorie Cantor, and many members of my family and extended family—traveling from as near as 300 Comstock Avenue and as far as Florida, California and Belize, from Madison, Grand Rapids and Ann Arbor, from Champaign-Urbana, Baltimore and Boston, and, of course, from my hometown, New York City. Thank you for making the journey. I am so grateful to all of you.

One person is not here, and that is my father, Aaron Cantor, who died after an accident and 70 days of struggle to stay alive. The night before his death, he asked my brother Rick if I would be too terribly disappointed if he couldn't make it here today. Of course, my brother said no, but, of course, I am (disappointed), deeply. My dad inspired everything I will say today and all I hope to do at Syracuse in the years to come.

If there was one thing he stood for, it was never to let yourself think that your injuries, to body or to ego, amount to anything compared to those of people who are really suffering in this world. When I'd call my father in a panic over one thing or another, his favorite advice was: drink a glass of water.

So I will start today where my father left off—by drinking a glass of water and considering the words of his favorite thinker, Isaiah Berlin, in a book I found on his bedside table at home after he passed away.

Berlin wrote an essay entitled “The Pursuit of the Ideal,” in which he observed how difficult such a pursuit was, observing that even his hero, Immanuel Kant, said “in a moment of illumination, ‘Out of the crooked timber of humanity, no straight thing was ever made.’”ⁱⁱ

Berlin looked at the metaphysics of the 18th century from the vantage point of the wars and atrocities of the 20th century and wrote: “To force people into neat uniforms demanded by dogmatically believed-in schemes is almost always the road to inhumanity.”ⁱⁱⁱ But then he added, “We can only do what we can: but that we must do, against difficulties.”^{iv}

As my father would have said more eloquently than I, at the dawn of this new millennium, the ideal may be unreachable, but we must do what we can in the pursuit of it. He would have cautioned, as Berlin did, that it is essential to keep an open mind about what constitutes perfection, ethics, truth, or a perfect society.

Great universities such as Syracuse take as given the complexities of people and ideas and the imperfections of what we know, who we are, and how we treat each other. They take for granted the creative turmoil in which we live—in fact, they take the *luxury* to cultivate an attitude of playfulness, rather than rigidity, about knowledge while recognizing the profound seriousness of *the responsibility* to pursue it.

Universities, in my view, are about the uneasy but productive tension between the recognition of complexity, uncertainty and diversity, and the need to push on toward the future.

We need to keep complexity in mind because people and ideas and the places we inhabit are simply not straightforward, easily reduced to neat categories or simple truths. And wisdom comes in many packages—I, for one, have learned the most from those closest to me who supposedly would have the hardest time understanding reality.

So how do we in universities live with this uneasy equilibrium? How do we make the most of the crooked timber of humanity? What we want to strive for is to tell our own truths passionately and then have the empathy of mind and the courage of will to cross boundaries—of our own and others’ making—and to try to understand the truths that others tell. And that is our responsibility: to extend ourselves in collaborations to make a better world.

Over the years I have had a running debate over the odds for and against changing the world with my husband, Steve, whose family roots are in the harsh landscape of Northern Ontario, where efforts to “control” the environment can be problematic. He says, “there’s no way of knowing” just how things will turn out. I say, “it won’t happen if you don’t try!” emphasizing our responsibility to try to make a difference—and revealing the bullheadedness of a kid from New York City, a place where we just build it and see what happens.

Boundary Crossings, Transitions, and Migrations

So where do we begin? We start where every first year student, every new Chancellor, every expert learning new disciplines, every traveler coming to a new home starts—with the realization that things are in flux, in transition, full of migrations that can change things profoundly in ways we don't expect.

Listen to the words of Ma Joad, in John Steinbeck's novel *The Grapes of Wrath*—this year's shared reading in Central New York—as she reflects on the fate of her family, who fled their Dust Bowl farm during the Great Depression and ended up as migrant workers in California:

“They was the time when we was on the lan’. They was a boundary to us then. Ol’ folks died off, an’ little fellas come, an’ we was always one thing – we was the fambly – kinda whole and clear. An’ now we ain’t clear no more...”^v

In such a world, we'd better learn to cross boundaries and engage new partners or we won't survive. In such a world, we need to believe that our efforts might just produce something special.

In recent years, this city and this region have experienced hardships not of their own making but through global shifts in manufacturing and trade. Factories have closed, industries have departed, and populations have shifted. At the same time, other sectors of this economy and society are gaining strength: health care, education, new technology, and the arts.^{vi}

As we think about the transitions endured in our region and the remarkable fortitude of its citizens, let's recall 1817, when construction began on the Erie Canal, and inventions, energy and dreams followed. Let's also recall the legacy of valiant struggle and monumental endurance from those who fought for human rights and opportunity long ago in this region—from the Haudenosaunee whose democratic confederacy pre-dated

the arrival of the Europeans, to the courageous women at Seneca Falls, and the abolitionists who ran the Underground Railroad right through Jermain Loguen's house at Genesee and Pine, at the foot of the Hill.

These movements in Central New York were led by people not afraid to speak their own truths passionately. Then, as now, there were many truths espoused—for it was also the era of the “burned-over” district that managed to encourage both radical religious movements and utopian social experimentation. It was a time, not unlike today, that demanded empathy for the truths that others tell, and the willpower to work through difference.

As we think today about this history, and as we acknowledge that “there is no way of knowing” (how things will turn out) now, there is still that will to keep trying.

People here remind me of *Fireweed*—the image used as a title and central metaphor for the autobiography of one of my personal heroines, Gerda Lerner. She was a refugee from the Nazis and has been a pioneering figure in the field of women's history. She taught at Sarah Lawrence during my years as an undergraduate and is now Emeritus Professor at the University of Wisconsin-Madison, where my daughter is an undergraduate.

Fireweed is a weed of astonishing beauty that grows in fire clearings in the forest. Its name alludes both to its rapid growth and its magenta pink flowers—the first to appear on fire-blackened land. An Indian legend says that every fireweed plant is the soul of a tree burned in a forest fire. Fireweed is also a pioneer, and during World War II it blossomed all over the bombed and burnt out areas of London.^{vii}

What is most inspiring here in Central New York is the optimism, the survivors' spirit, and the will to be responsible. New things are possible here. All we have to do is begin. As Elizabeth Cady Stanton, a “fireweed” at the Seneca Falls Convention, wrote

nearly 50 years later: “Come, come, my conservative friend, wipe the dew off your spectacles, and see that the world is moving.”^{viii}

Indeed it is, and we in Syracuse, at SU, are ready to move with it. We know there are no simple truths, no known recipes, and we know to look for the fireweeds—human talent of all ages, colors, bodies, and minds. We know that we have to be adventurous, some of us coming off the Hill and others coming up the Hill, some of us working locally and others traveling globally, but all of us sharing.

We know we need to pool our knowledge across disciplines, professions, sectors, roles and constituencies. We know we need to air our differences, even our conflicts, or we’ll remain skeptical rather than trusting. We’re ready to cross these boundaries, some of our own making, and others made for us.

Many may wonder if we loyal academics are really ready for mixing it up, getting engaged. I can assure you that we can and we must. We live in a knowledge economy, and if we don’t share our knowledge generously, widely, and ethically, progress won’t be made.

We can’t think about new technologies to protect the environment without considering the intricate dynamics of environment and society. We can’t pursue the wonders of the new biology without respecting how it may change our views and values about humanity. We can’t promote information technology as the communication medium of human interaction without worrying about those beyond the digital divide, and those others who hide within the loneliness of virtual reality.

In a knowledge economy, we also have to be moral brokers, accepting the implications of our discoveries and accelerating our collaborations to improve lives.

Exploring the Soul of Syracuse

So how, I ask, do we explore the soul of Syracuse? In the interest of speaking our own truths passionately, we should first look at ourselves, with a view from our own perch. When I look at SU, I see a place that is ready to think about journalism through the eyes of artists and art through the eyes of journalists. I see a legacy of thinking about citizenship that is now examining the often-harsh realities of transnational citizenship. I see geographers mapping hunger and citizens embracing geography, and I see architects and citizens joining in common cause in community design.

I see scientists, engineers and experts in entrepreneurship, working with corporate partners to turn discovery into products that change our indoor environment and protect our health. I see lawyers and educators and health professionals pooling knowledge to open opportunities for children and adults with disabilities. I see scholars in the law and public affairs joining forces to improve our security and counter terrorism. And I see archivists and curators caring for our past while creative writers weave tales to keep us going.

I see students migrating back and forth across the boundaries of Arts & Sciences and our professional schools. I see them preparing themselves for world citizenship by studying abroad, and learning from SU alums in places as near as New York City and D.C., and as far as London and Korea. I also see them learning just how “local” the world’s problems turn out to be by working in the schools and neighborhoods of Syracuse.

I see the creative campus everywhere, and newly represented in the installation *SIX CURVED WALLS (SYRACUSE)* of our distinguished alum Sol LeWitt.

Like the “crooked timber of humanity,” LeWitt’s walls are curved, walking us around rather than dividing us neatly. They stand out in the elements, not protected indoors. The six walls are not connected so they can be shut; they are meant for boundary

crossing. I hope these walls will challenge us not to let natural or built barriers—either the Hill or route 81 or boundaries between nations—keep us apart. When Sol came to campus recently, he told me how nice it would be to see people hugging or in conversation, wrapped within a wall, but outside with others.

I firmly believe that the excellence of this institution can only be fully realized if we open our selves up, looking outward to the world. Collaborative activity is what makes this place so exciting, whether it is across disciplines, overseas, in town, with children, outdoors or indoors, in partnership with companies and sister institutions, virtual or personal, for profit or voluntary, with those on the team or on another team, in the concert hall or in the studio.

So, as we explore the soul of Syracuse, let's work together, and be inventive and maintain willpower. Let's look for our fireweeds; souls of past times of innovation and struggles for opportunity, re-asserted now in brilliant colors, many colors, including Orange.

Most of all, let's try to find that empathy of mind as we work together. Last week, as I watched some of our drama students do part of a scene from the Syracuse Stage adaptation of *The Grapes of Wrath*, I was struck by the words of Tom Joad, telling Ma about the murder of preacher Casy, who had always felt part of something larger: "Well, maybe like Casy says, a fella ain't got a soul of his own, but only a piece of a big one."^{ix}

I like to think that our students and their mentors chose that particular scene in that venue, partly to help us "explore the soul of Syracuse." May we find our big soul, together, in the years ahead.

Thank you for inviting my family and me into this great home.

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- ⁱ Helen Keller, *The Story of My Life*. The restored edition edited by James Berger. New York: The Modern Library, 2003, p. 16.
- ⁱⁱ Isaiah Berlin, *The Crooked Timber of Humanity; Chapters in the History of Ideas*, edited by Henry Hardy. New York: Vintage Books, 1992, pp. 18-19.
- ⁱⁱⁱ *Ibid.* p. 19.
- ^{iv} *Ibid.*, p. 19.
- ^v John Steinbeck, *The Grapes of Wrath*, New York: Penguin Books, 1992, p. 536.
- ^{vi} Rolf Pendall, Matthew P. Drennan, and Susan Christopherson, “Center on Urban and Metropolitan Policy: Transition and Renewal: The Emergence of a Diverse Upstate Economy,” The Brookings Institution, January, 2004.
- ^{vii} Gerda Lerner, *Fireweed; A political autobiography*. Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2002.
- ^{viii} Elizabeth Cady Stanton, *The Women’s Bible*, 1895.
- ^{ix} Steinbeck, *op cit*, p. 572.

* Chancellor Nancy Cantor presented this speech at her inauguration as the 11th Chancellor and President of Syracuse University on November 5, 2004. Chancellor Cantor expresses her warmest thanks to all who planned and participated in the ceremony.

She is extremely grateful to the honored guests and university representatives who shared the stage with her:

Shiu-Kai Chin, Professor, Department of Electrical Engineering and Computer Science, Associate University Marshal
 John A. Couri, Chair, Board of Trustees, Syracuse University
 Deborah A. Freund, Vice Chancellor and Provost, Syracuse University
 Chief Sidney Hill, Tadodaho, Onondaga Nation and Haudenosaunee Confederacy
 Sandra Hurd, Interim Dean, Whitman School of Management, University Marshal
 Rabbi Daniel A. Jezer, Rabbi Emeritus, Congregation Beth Shalom-Chevra Shas
 Jeffrey S. Lehman, President, Cornell University
 Chief Oren R. Lyons, Onondaga Chief and Professor of American Studies, The University at Buffalo
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 Francis McMillan Parks, Director, Students Offering Service, Syracuse University
 Nancy Weatherly Sharp, Professor of Newspaper Journalism, Mace Bearer, Syracuse University
 The Rev. Thomas V. Wolfe, Dean of Hendricks Chapel, Syracuse University