

**A&S DEAN IAN BAUCOM'S FIRST LECTURE
TO INCOMING FIRST-YEAR AND TRANSFER STUDENTS
MONDAY, AUG. 21, 2017
OLD CABELL HALL**

Welcome. I'm delighted that you are here. My name is Ian Baucom. I'm the Dean of the College. It gives me great joy to formally welcome you and to give you your first official lecture as you begin your time as students at this great university. It's a moment I look forward to with sharp anticipation every year. And every year, I have the same question for myself. What can I say to you? What can I say to this gathering of incredible young women and men at such a signature moment of your lives, as you are about to begin four years of study, and exploration, and discovery at this historic institution? What can I best say to you as you are about to begin being changed by this place and to begin changing it by what you do during your time here?

I ask myself that question every year, but this year, it seems especially urgent. Because this moment is not like any moment. This moment is a broken moment, one in which the great arc of history, in the words of Dr. Martin Luther King, has bent on Charlottesville and UVA. And if we are to take seriously Dr. King's conviction that the long arc of history must ultimately bend toward *justice*, then what we say to one another, and what we do together in such a moment, matters greatly. That, therefore, is what I want to take as the theme and inspiration for your first lecture—that remarkable statement by Dr. King: "The arc of the moral universe is long, but it bends toward justice."

What can we say to one another, with that line in mind? What can we commit to one another now, in such a moment? What does that great, passionate conviction and passionate hope of Dr. King speak to us, now? What does it say to you, now? What bearing does it have on your decision to attend this great university? On what it means to be a student in this College? Across all the range of your intellectual interests, across all the vital diversity of your individual convictions, passions and beliefs, what impact does it have on what it means to live, and study, and learn in a historical time?

What does it mean to be a student, entering this College, in a historical time such as this?

I asked myself that question a week ago, but with a slightly different audience in mind. I was struggling to think it through for the faculty of the College, the professors who will be your teachers over these coming years. I was on my way back from South Africa, the country where I grew up, flying into the news of the violence of the "Unite the Right" gathering. And I felt the urgent need to say something to them, to my friends and my colleagues, your teachers. With your permission, I would like to share what I wrote to them.

"What we have witnessed and experienced in the past few days is appalling and vile. The evil of racism. The evil of violence. The evil of hate visited on our city and our university must be condemned, and we condemn it. It is time to mourn and to remember the precious

lives that have been so tragically lost, as it is a time to continue to recognize the long and painful histories of intolerance and bigotry that led to this moment. The histories of slavery, of Jim Crow, of anti-Semitism and nativism are part of our present – around our nation, and around the world. There is much work to be done to reckon with these histories, and the University must be part of that work. It cannot be otherwise. It cannot do otherwise if it is to be true to itself, true to what we understand the University to be.

If there is one question that has animated me since I became Dean of this College, it is this: what do democracies need from their universities? Particularly from their public universities? Particularly from this University? How are we being called to advance the great, unfinished business of democracy?

What is needed from us? What does the world need from us? The world needs our thoughts. It needs our words, our ideas and our knowledge. Most of all, the world needs our commitment to truth. We must put forth an undaunted determination to speak the truth, and an unflinching resolve to build a place where all are free to speak and to think together, free of violence and intimidation. This past weekend reminds us that all those things remain urgently needed. It reminds us that democracy – if it is to flourish, if it is to realize its truest promises – needs us. It needs what we teach in our lectures and seminars. It needs our research and the policies we shape. It needs the open conversation we pursue, on Grounds and off. It needs the exchange of thought we share in community halls, synagogue basements, school boards and teach-ins. It needs the truth we bring to the lie of racism. It needs the courage of free thought in place of the cowardice of the closed mind.

Almost a century ago, in the wake of the First World War, the Irish poet, W.B. Yeats, wrote with aching despair, “The best lack all conviction, while the worst / Are full of passionate intensity.” As I look at you, as I look at our faculty, and our students, and our staff, I know that that is not true, and that we will not allow it to become true. We will hold passionately to our convictions. We will repudiate racism and bigotry. Through our work, we will brighten and intensify that healthier, more knowledgeable, open, just and free world at the heart of the dream of democracy. That is what universities do. That is what they have always done. That is what we are asked to do now.”

This was my charge to your professors.

But what does that have to do with you and the lives you will live here as students? What bearing does that idea of the university have on your choice to study here and the paths you will take in the four years ahead of you and beyond? *How will your presence here intersect with history's arc?*

A few days ago, I met with all of your academic advisors, the faculty whose role is to welcome you, talk with you, understand who you are individually, and provide their counsel on how you can design the richest program of study during your time here. We asked similar questions to the ones I raise today: What is always important? What is urgently important *now*? With history watching and waiting, what will we do?

We discussed four things. The first is that at the core of their time with you, in their labs and seminars, in office hours and lecture halls, the faculty has one sustained, unchanging commitment: a commitment to your intellectual growth. They are dedicated to the subjects you will find compelling, fascinating, and worthy of discovery. Their job is to teach you. That is what you came for, because that is what *we* do. We follow the passion and the curiosity of the human mind. Freely, openly, endlessly, without fear, wherever it goes.

That is what universities have done for more than a thousand years. That is what makes us unique among all humanly invented institutions. *We are* the space for the radical freedom of thought, in all directions, across all possible fields of inquiry. *We are* the agora, the public square for the unfettered freedom of the human mind, without which no society can flourish.

The second thing your advisors and I claimed for you is that you have a purpose here. Your education is built on *each* individual class you take. It emerges from *each* book you read, from *each* work of art you produce. From *each* gene sequence you decode. But at the same time, your education here is far larger than that. It is part of an unprecedented accomplishment of the human condition. Something bigger. Something far more precious. Something worth fighting for. What is it about? What is the purpose of a liberal arts education? To what greater end is it dedicated? We don't ask these questions often enough.

For too many of us, college has become just the thing you do after high school. It has become the space between high school and a job.

Now, on the one hand, it is a magnificent accomplishment of our society that so many of you have been able to assume you *would* find an affordable college experience waiting for you after high school. And it is a concurrent tragedy that for many others in our society, and around the world, that *can't* be assumed. This University is committed to erasing that divide as we seek to ensure that college, this College, is affordable for all.

But once you are here, we have to ask the question again: why are you here? Is it just the next placeholder in your life, or something more?

Over the past few years, our faculty has spent an enormous amount of time asking that question. One of the results of that conversation is the new curriculum that many of you chose and that we begin piloting this year. But whether you are in the traditional or the new curriculum, or in the Forums program, the answers we came to are the same.

What is the purpose of a liberal arts education? Why are you here? For these four things:

--To find a vocation (a word we have chosen deliberately from the Latin origins of the term, "*vocare*," "to call"—the call of work that gives meaning, dignity and purpose to your life in a complex social world, whatever your profession might be);

--To advance your formation as citizens and for the demands of overlapping citizenship in a nation, a local community, a profession, a religious conviction or a secular commitment — above all else, in a deeply cosmopolitan world;

--To enable your unique and individual flourishing: your flourishing in what delights *you*, in what moves *you*, in what compels *you*. (And in that way, a liberal arts education is deeply, deeply about the value of all individual lives, in *all* their differences, a value that was directly under assault last weekend);

--And finally, as a faculty, we have resolved that the purpose of the liberal arts, the purpose of your being here, is both to enable your individual flourishing and to equip you to contribute to the flourishing of a commonwealth, a common good, a common determination to live together in a democratic world.

That is why you are here.

But even as we name our purposes, we also know that we can use words like “citizenship,” and “democracy” so often and so easily that they sometimes lose their meaning. Until something like what happened in Charlottesville last weekend happens, and wakes us up, and reminds us that democracy is tough. That it cannot be taken for granted. That it has to constantly be renewed.

The third thing I spoke with your faculty advisors about was this notion of renewal. Starting tomorrow, you are doing something more than beginning your first day of classes. You are being invited to something bigger. You are being invited to participate in the renewal of democracy, to bring into being the fuller realization of democracy by what you do here. By advancing the discovery of science. By pursuing the profound and difficult philosophical questions at the heart of free speech, peaceable assembly, sovereign authority, civil disobedience, the rule of law and the right to dissent. By designing policies to deal with the crises of climate change, and refugee flows, global epidemics, and income inequality. By investigating the cultural and religious pluralism central to the idea and the possibility of the democratic experiment, whether that is by majoring in African-American Studies, Jewish Studies, Women’s Studies, or countless other fields.

The point I am making is simple. Whatever your major, whatever you study, seek that connection between your individual passion and the larger idea, the larger commitment, the dream of democracy. Make that connection. Test, and push, and sharpen it. And never, ever abandon the commitment to unfettered, free, and unintimidated thought that is at the heart of all these ways of knowing the world, and at the heart of the University’s promise of courage to the world around us. And then know you are not alone. Know that the University is with you, that we are going to continue to live, together, in the challenge of this moment. That we are going to continue to ask, and answer, and wrestle with the question of what a democracy needs from its universities: through the knowledge we produce, and the learning we advance, and our habits of critical questioning, and the diversity of who we are, and our commitment to the free, un-intimidated pursuit of knowledge and expression.

And know that right now, there is no more important university in the world than this one, in Charlottesville, Virginia, to be taking up those questions. That is the fourth thing I discussed with your faculty advisors. It is something that became very clear to me a few days after last weekend's intolerable events, when my daughter took out her cellphone and held up an image for me to see: a map of the country, with hundreds and hundreds of blue dots of light, one for each place holding a rally to stand with Charlottesville. Know that. Remember that. The world is with us. There is no more important place to be.

And then know one other thing. This is not only true now. It has always been the case. It makes us who we are, and it brings me back to the words of Dr. King, and to the arc of history.

All universities do what I have described. All universities teach. All universities conduct research. But since our founding, we have had one further commitment, one further conviction: that the fate of this place is tied to the arc of history; tied to the arc of the republic; tied to the arc of democracy, glorious and broken at its beginning. From the moment of our founding, we've always had the conviction that a free and democratic society requires a free and educated citizenry, and that we have a defining role to play in realizing the dream of the republic and in advancing the great unfinished business of democracy, around the nation, and the world.

This above all is what we will mark as we celebrate our Bicentennial this year.

Over the next four years, you will each come to your own decisions on whether, and why, that statement about the University's unique role is true. Let me give you just one reason why it has become powerfully true for me.

The launch of our Bicentennial this fall will begin with one signal moment. It will begin on October 7, when we come together, outside Pavilion VII on the Lawn, to commemorate the laying of the University's cornerstone, the day, 200 years ago, when three American presidents, Jefferson, Madison and Monroe, came together to found this place.

Why did they do that? What did they think they were accomplishing?

We know something about that from Jefferson, from the words he had carved into his tombstone, identifying the founding of UVA, and not his service as President, as one of the great accomplishments of his life. We know something about that from his countless writings on the intimate bond between the work of democracy and the work of education, from the intimate link he saw between the future of the university he established and the future of the republic he declared. We know something about that from the words he wrote in a letter to James Madison: "Educate and inform the whole mass of the people. Enable them to see that it is in their interest to preserve peace and order, and they will preserve them ... They are the only sure reliance for the preservation of our liberty."

And we know that over the last years of his life, after the cornerstone was laid, and he saw that great work of public education coming into life on the Grounds of the University of Virginia, Jefferson liked to come to the Dome Room of the Rotunda and look out over the Lawn. When he did – I like to believe, and truly believe – he was looking into the deep future. Looking centuries ahead. Toward us. Toward centuries of students and faculty walking the Lawn, and the history they would make, and the republic they would build, and the democracy they would advance. Looking to you, here, today, as you begin your time as students at this place.

Did you know that that was why you were coming here? Did you know that by coming here you were entering one of the great rivers of human history?

In a real sense, no, of course not.

You came to study, to paint, to advance science. You came to go to college. Not to be part of history.

But in another sense, yes, of course, you did. Because you didn't choose any college. You chose this College, this historic place, with this historic conviction. And now, that historic conviction meets the present. And as it meets the present, it meets with all the difficulty and the complexity of the hard business of democracy.

Did you come to a place that is perfect? No, you did not. Dr. King, with whose words I began, could not have attended the University of Virginia as a young man. The University was built on the sweat and toil of slavery but would not have allowed Dr. King to enroll. But Dr. King was right. The moral arc of the universe is long, and it bends toward justice. And this is a place where, thanks to the struggle of generations of African-American students, faculty, and civil rights activists, we can now firmly, proudly say, that black lives matter. And we are a radically better, radically transformed university because of that.

Did you come to a place that is perfect? No, you did not. The women in this room could not have attended UVA until the 1970s. But Dr. King was right. The moral arc of the universe is long, and it bends toward justice. And this year, thanks to the struggle, presence, passion and thought of generations of women, we have passed a historic milestone. There are now more living women alumnae of the College than men, and we are a radically better, radically transformed university for that too.

Did you come to a perfect place? No, but you have come to a place committed to blending the power of Jefferson's vision with the power of Dr. King's, a place that asks you not only to acknowledge what has previously been broken, but to name what remains broken, what remains to be repaired, here and around the world. You have come to a place that asks you not only to find yourself in history's path, but to bend its arc. You have come to a place that asks you—asks all of us-- to live *in* the aftermath of last weekend and not to flee from it. You have come to a place that asks you to never put the challenging dream of democracy behind us but, instead, to embrace that challenge as our common task, for our time together, in all these years ahead.

That is my charge to you, my beloved new Cavaliers: to answer again the call of democracy on this University. To do again and again what you did yesterday as you took the honor pledge, on as historic a day as the taking of that pledge has ever seen, a day when you restored honor on the Lawn. Hold that pledge. Honor it. Honor the wonder of having walked into this great current of history. Bend its course. Bend it to the dream of democracy. Bend it to the promise of justice. Earn the name of "Cavalier."

Thank you.