And That One Talent Which Is Death to Hide:

THE VIEW FROM A QUARTER OF A CENTURY AS A UNIVERSITY PRESIDENT

By Susan A. Cole

This speech is an excerpt from President Cole's lecture at AASCU's 2017 Annual Meeting in La Jolla, Calif., on Oct. 24. A tradition at the AASCU Annual Meeting for more than 30 years, the President-to-Presidents lecture is a signal honor bestowed by the AASCU Board of Directors on one of its colleagues. The full speech is available online at *aascu.org/map/ptop*.

WHEN I CONSIDER HOW MY LIGHT IS SPENT

by John Milton

When I consider how my light is spent,
Ere half my days, in this dark world and wide,
And that one Talent which is death to hide
Lodged with me useless, though my Soul more bent
To serve therewith my Maker, and present
My true account, lest he returning chide;
"Doth God exact day-labour, light deny'd?"
I fondly ask. But patience to prevent
That murmur, soon replies, "God doth not need
Either man's work or his own gifts; who best
Bear his mild yoke, they serve him best. His State
Is Kingly. Thousands at his bidding speed
And post o're Land and Ocean without rest:
They also serve who only stand and wait."

Many years ago, on one cold winter morning, as I rode to Erasmus Hall High School on the Flatbush Avenue bus in Brooklyn, I memorized Milton's 19th sonnet to the starts and stops and background noises of a city bus. And that sonnet stuck with me, even while I repudiated what its words seemed to say.

God does not need man's work? Wrong. I was taught by my immigrant parents that work in the world was the very essence of life, and education was the pathway to good work. *Who best bears a yoke, serves best?* Wrong. I was taught that no person should ever have to bear a yoke. We should be free to live a full and unharnessed life, and we should keep struggling until we are free. And, I was taught, education is necessary to freedom. *They also serve who only stand and wait?* Absolutely wrong. I was taught that a person must work hard for what she wants and that only a fool stands and waits to receive what she has not worked for. So much for Milton. What did he know? I believed my mother, not Milton, and so, starting from a very young age, I worked, and I have kept working ever since to what is now no longer a very young age. I knew, even as a child, that my responsibility was to find within myself that one talent that, if left hidden and unrealized, would be like death. And, moving through the years, I found my talent. I build public universities. It is my talent, and it is my passion.

During the 25 years of my two presidencies, I have led the transformation of institutions. When I came to Montclair State University (N.J.), it served 12,000 students; today it serves over 21,000 highly diverse students. When I came, it granted about 2,200 degrees a year; today it grants about 5,000 degrees each year. We have added new colleges, schools, programs, research institutes and centers. We added doctoral programs. We built hundreds of thousands of square feet of instructional, laboratory and research space for those many thousands more students and thousands of beds and parking spaces; rebuilt the entire energy infrastructure of the campus; and hired hundreds more faculty and technical and professional staff. A former governor of New Jersey who was present at the opening of one of our new facilities on campus referred to me as the "Master of the Loaves and the Fishes," and asked how on earth I had managed to make so much from so little. "Governor," I said, "sweat equity." We did not stand and wait; in particular, we did not stand and wait for state funding

or rational and responsible federal or state higher education policy. We just worked really hard and really smart.

Being a public university president is a very hard job, and I don't think we have the luxury of accepting lack of success, because success or the lack thereof is not about the institution, nor is it about ourselves. It is about the knowledge a university creates that can be applied in the world and it is about the students. If we are successful, the people have understanding, information and tools that otherwise they might not have had; if we are successful, we enable the success of our students. We cannot make excuses. We cannot say we're sorry, that the dog ate our homework, that the students were not well-prepared, that the budget is not adequate. Of course the dog is out of control; of course the students have not been brilliantly prepared or motivated; of course we don't have adequate resources. So what? We still have to do the job. We cannot, for example, explain away an unacceptable graduation rate by citing demographics or lack of resources. If we admit students, we must provide them with what they need to succeed.

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What I am getting at here is that public college and university presidents are not called upon to be brilliant. It's a lovely thing to behold when they are brilliant, but, first and foremost, what we are really called upon to be is competent, competent and indefatigable—able to get the absolute best out of people; able to keep the budget in order and to stretch the resources to their maximum usefulness; to be fully engaged and willing to invest the time to assure that all the systems are up and running; always problem solving to make sure the enrollments are on track, the curricula are what they should be, that the personnel decisions are rigorous, that the plumbing works, that the alumni and donors are giving, that the facilities and equipment are being used to best effect, that the students are getting the classes, the advising and the services that they need for success. Competency is under-rated and under-assessed, but it is, in fact, the main thing. And a person knows when he or she is competent. When you are competent, you can feel it, literally, in your bones, and, if you are not fully competent to the task, you should not, for example, be a surgeon or a governor or a teacher or a general or the president of a public college or university, because too much of importance is riding on your ability to get the job done right. Lives are at stake.

And then, while we are competently managing the institution, in the other 100 percent of our time, public college and university presidents are called upon to be able to articulate convincingly the fundamental values of the institution and its long-term vision, to inspire all of our internal and external communities to believe in, and commit to, the vision. We must be spokespersons for doing good and moral arbiters in the face of complex societal issues. It is the president's voice that reminds those within our institutions that what we do, we do in the context of the larger world, to serve the larger world, and to prepare the young to serve.

As a consequence, there are many things we must speak about. For example, we must speak about the achievement gap in the nation's schools. We must speak about the fact that, especially in communities stressed by poverty and the social obstacles born of discrimination, by the time they are teenagers and should be preparing for college and their futures, we have lost too many boys to lack of confidence, to hopelessness, to social pressures that drive them away from education and toward destructive patterns of behavior; we have lost too many to drugs, to death and to prison. We must speak about DACA, about refugees, about how we would respond as a nation if North Africa were a boat ride away from our shores instead of from Europe, about how we have responded to our own southern border and the thousands of children and other refugees walking across Central America to find safe harbor in our country.

We must speak to our university communities about our role in the face of the tragedies and devastation that nature, aided by man, brings to bear upon us. These devastations reveal the continuing divisions of race and class in our society, and we must remind our communities about the context for our work: we educate the scientists who understand the hurricanes and the geology; we train the technologists who know how to mitigate the forces of nature; we train the strategic managers who know how to get trucks and buses down the highway and water to survivors; we

educate the governmental leaders who, we hope, will be more effective at serving the needs of all of the people entrusted to their care; and, ultimately, we are a fist to break the back of class and racial and gender inequities.

When feelings are running strong, as they were after the most recent presidential election, we remind the university community that more important than the result of any one election is the democratic process made manifest in the peaceful transfer of leadership even when many may not like the result, and we remind the community that the university is one of the few places where we have the opportunity to teach and to model the principles of democracy before people have to actually go out into the world and try to live it. And right now, because of recent events at the University of Virginia and similar occurrences, we are called upon to speak about the meaning of freedom of expression in our republic and how we model that concept in the university.

Making public universities, that is, universities for all the people and not the select few, is what we do, and we do it in the context of a treasured and long national and international history that goes back centuries. With a profound commitment and the sweat of our brow, we are called upon to build our colleges and universities to support the fundamental and best principles of American democracy. These principles rest on providing the nation's people with a level field of educational opportunity, the platform from which all other economic and social opportunities can become attainable. The great Mary McLeod Bethune, founder of Bethune-Cookman College, said, "Education is the great American adventure, the world's most colossal democratic experiment," and she was absolutely right. In the 21st century, a higher education is as critically needed as a K-12 education was in the last century, but not a fake education delivered by some predatory money-making business, not a facsimile, but the real thing: an education that enables students to attain knowledge, develop their skills, and deepen their understanding of their place and their responsibilities in the world and the purposes and uses of learning.

Right now, we are among the caretakers of those institutions, the universities of the nation and the world, that, imperfect though they may be, have, more than any other human institution, been responsible for the unfettered generation of knowledge and for its dissemination to an increasingly broad population, responsible for paving the roadway between education and freedom. And so, it is our job to persevere, to wade straight through the mess of the world and to focus on saving from the mire of extinction the beautiful thing—the language, the history, the science, the art, the potential living in every person. And because we shape and prepare the people who will shape our world, we better be good at our jobs.

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During the course of my life, I have envied the ability of others to do great things. I would have liked, for example, to play the piano brilliantly, but it isn't my talent. I build public universities for people who need them. That is my talent. It would have been like death to hide it. We build public universities for people who need them. That is our talent. Everyone else in the world thinks they know what we do and how to do it better, but they really don't. Every college and university only has one president; only we do what we do. We need to demolish all the criticism with competence, and we must keep on speaking both within and beyond our institutions. Our work and our voices matter. P

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