

2010 ALEXANDER MEIKLEJOHN AWARD FOR ACADEMIC FREEDOM

The following introduction of Meiklejohn Award recipient Patricia Ann McGuire, president of Trinity Washington University, was delivered by David M. Rabban, chair of Committee A on Academic Freedom and Tenure, on June 12, 2010.

Many times during her twenty-one-year tenure as president of Trinity Washington University, Patricia McGuire must have felt like a "voice crying in the wilderness." When she assumed the presidency of Trinity in 1989, she was faced with a daunting challenge: to reinterpret and reinvigorate the institution's mission to serve the underserved by providing opportunities to the capital's neediest population—women of color, regardless of their religious affiliation or economic status. President McGuire braved criticism from traditional Trinity alumnae and from clamorous opponents. She endured, and Trinity Washington University has prospered. Looking back on the successful transformation, President McGuire said, "Yeah, it's different. But it's *good* different, and it's right."

No university is shaped by a single vision—not even Mr. Jefferson's University of Virginia—but the impact of President McGuire on Trinity Washington University is unmistakable. Her passion for social justice and her authentic appreciation of the central role of rigorous and open debate in a university have molded the curriculum and philosophy of Trinity. In her address to the 2002 graduating class at Georgetown University, her law school alma mater, President McGuire situated the tragic events of 9/11 in a moral and philosophical context appropriate to the occasion and expounded her idea of the university. "Simply put," she said, "the university is the rational center that must hold when all else has gone mad. The witness we give to our world is our reverence for the durability of knowledge, the ultimate sanctity of truth as the transcendent force making sense of human existence. Our witness is the voice of reason over the madness of the street; the patient whisper of charity piercing the rage of vengeance; the resounding roar of outrage confronting appalling injustice; the steely tone of ethical resolve filling the silent chambers of deceit;

the grace-filled melody of hope against the mournful bass of humanity's awesome sorrow; the truth spoken clearly to illuminate the willful darkness of tyranny."

Noting that "universities are stewards of the freedom that gives true democracy its ballast," she posed a series of challenges to her audience—students, faculty and administrators alike. "Where," she asked, "are the voices of the universities in this time of war and global danger? Where is the exuberant exercise of free speech in a raucous debate over the conduct of this new war? Do we have it in us to be as passionate about the ethics of the camp in Guantánamo as we can be about parking on campus? Where is the expression of outrage over the increasingly ominous threats to civil liberties in the name of national security? New federal regulations treat international students with suspicion and limit their fields of study. Academic freedom itself is in jeopardy, yet even on that score, the university community has been remarkably reticent on the question of how our nation can mount an effective program of national defense without trampling upon the very individual rights and freedoms we seek to protect. We need the passion of our past brought to bear on the problems of our present if we are to have any hope for peace in the future."

To raise questions about the policies of our government in a time of national stress a mere stone's throw from the White House is a courageous act. In raising those questions, President McGuire was particularly eloquent, but others publicly expressed similar concerns. When, however, she took on those in the Catholic Church who sought first to cancel and then disrupt President Obama's commencement address last year at the University of Notre Dame, she stood virtually alone. In her own commencement remarks to the Trinity community, President McGuire called the pressure on Notre Dame "one of the angriest and most aggressively hostile efforts to block a commencement speaker ever endured by any American university."

Citing the precedent of luminaries such as Fr. Theodore Hesburgh, a former Meiklejohn Award recipient, President McGuire noted that the "great leaders of the Vatican II era developed a rich and extensive body of

thought supporting the fundamental premise that our faith should not fear freedom, but rather, embrace it; that we must engage with our culture, not shun it; and that Catholic universities must have the same high intellectual standards as all universities, nurturing academic freedom as the bedrock of excellence in scholarship and teaching.”

President McGuire warned her commencement audience that “the terrible danger of the siege of Notre Dame, and the ugly specter of Catholic vigilantism’s efforts to intimidate Catholic academic leaders and politicians is that Catholics will be driven back to the edges of American life, unable or unwilling to be elected to public office, as we once were, unable or unwilling to engage with our colleagues of other faith traditions in the difficult, bruising, uncomfortable yet utterly necessary debates about essential moral issues that contribute to the shape of our society.”

In her commencement address, President McGuire reiterated themes that she had articulated a year earlier on the occasion of the visit of Pope Benedict XVI to the United States. In an op-ed piece published around the country, she spoke bluntly and forcefully. “Mindless dogmatism,” she wrote, “is not part of the Catholic intellectual tradition. . . . Nothing in *Ex Corde Ecclesiae* (the seminal Vatican document on Catholic higher education) expects Catholic universities to diminish our identity as normative institutions of higher learning. On the contrary, *Ex Corde* calls us to an active life as real universities with the additional distinctive dimension of taking the dialogue of faith and reason into the culture, with all of the complex problems that may pose.”

She went on to say, “The critics would have us ban plays, speakers, student clubs, faculty members, and alumni guests whose words or deeds run contrary to the most orthodox interpretation of Catholic teaching. A great silence would descend on most Catholic campuses if we did that. Rather than being afraid of the expression of contrary ideas, we should leverage the teaching opportunities inherent in the free and open exchange of ideas that is essential to university life. If our faith is as strong as we claim it to be, we should not fear the cacophony that emerges during the struggle of learning.”

“A church with a brain,” President McGuire concluded, “is not afraid to ask itself the hard questions about the role of faith, moral teachings, and theological exploration in contemporary life.”

President McGuire has a reputation for speaking out on topics other college presidents will not touch. She understood clearly that the drama that unfolded last year on the Notre Dame campus would affect the future of all Catholic colleges. She spoke out when others did



PHOTO BY MICHAEL FERGUSON.

Patricia Ann McGuire and David M. Rabban at the AAUP’s 2010 annual conference.

not. Her passion for justice, for the salutary benefits of open and rigorous debate, for what is simply right did not allow her to keep silent. Her voice has provided inspiration, encouragement, and guidance to the leaders of Catholic colleges and universities across the country and, in fact, to all those in the academy who must resist the forces of censorship and repression.

In recognition of her outstanding contribution to academic freedom, the American Association of University Professors is proud to present the Alexander Meiklejohn Award for Academic Freedom to Patricia Ann McGuire, president of Trinity Washington University.

President McGuire’s acceptance remarks follow.

Thank you, Professor David Rabban and the members of your committee for this marvelous award, and that awesome citation, and special thanks as well to [general secretary] Gary Rhoades and [director of external relations] Martin Snyder.

Even after all these years in the presidency, I still have the capacity to be surprised in delightful ways by the kindness of colleagues. And, every so often, the shock of humility arrests me in the face of so many still-daunting challenges.

When [former AAUP general secretary] Mary Burgan called to tell me of this award, I was surprised to think that what I’ve had to say was even noticed by the AAUP, let alone worthy of such a great honor. I am delighted and deeply grateful that my faculty colleague, Dr. Minerva San Juan, submitted the nomination, and I am also so grateful to Dr. Burgan for her wonderful support. My gratitude to the AAUP is profound; I treasure this recognition for saying things that I absolutely believe.

I am also deeply grateful that you recognize Trinity through this award. I would not be able to do my work as I do it, including speaking out when I feel I must, without the profoundly important sense of mission that

we share among the community at Trinity—faculty and staff, students and alumnae, trustees and benefactors. A Benedictine abbot once gave a homily at Trinity in which he said that the Sisters of Notre Dame who founded Trinity were dangerous women who created a dangerous place—a place that led women to believe that they could do absolutely anything; that, in fact, women could change the world. Trinity is still that very dangerous place, inciting new generations of students who need us now, more than ever, to achieve that radical sense of empowerment through education that is the best hope for improving the conditions of their children, families, and communities.

Along with the deep gratitude I feel in receiving this award, the shock of humility does arrest me when I think of the increasingly pernicious threats to academic freedom and to the entire purpose of higher education. I say “humility” because no one of us alone—no matter how blithe we may appear to be in mounting our defenses of the academy—can long withstand the pressure to concede silence without great colleagues supporting us, goading us, and even insisting that we mount the barricades together once more. That’s why this Alexander Meiklejohn Award is so important, and I hope the AAUP will find occasion to give it more often, because we presidents and our boards sometimes need others to strengthen our spines against the pressures to go along or be quiet.

I mentioned the threats to academic freedom. Among many, let me mention just three briefly:

First, the threat that comes with the devolution of higher education’s purpose from the discovery of knowledge and cultivation of intellect to the mundane tasks of job training, simply producing workers for the economic engines of society. Yes, ensuring that our graduates can have productive, fulfilling work is important, but that is a happy byproduct of the academy, not its central mission. This tension has been growing for years, leaching our purpose slowly under the surface, subtly draining out the urgency of our defense of academic freedom under the guise of satisfying the corporate sector’s demand for more accountants, computer scientists, editors, nurses, and pharmacologists—as if the professional workforce needed nothing more out of higher education than the technical knowledge and skills to do their jobs very well. Such a soulless purpose treats our graduates as mere instruments of the economy, as if all those well-educated workers have no souls to sing with a Shakespearean sonnet; no intellects to ponder the unfathomable evil that tortures human existence; no eyes to drown in the beauty of Renoir; no ears through which the strains of Chopin

can reach their innermost being; no unrequited impulses to ditch the calculator for scuba tanks to plumb the depths; no burning itch to pen the great American novel; no curiosity to reread Nietzsche just in case advancing age might make clearer what a nineteen-year-old brain could not comprehend.

Resisting the devolution of higher education into an overgrown secondary-school model links to the second threat: the increasingly prevalent bureaucratic interference in our internal affairs (and private organizations can be just as nefarious as governments on this score), a tendency that is exacerbated in a climate that treats higher education as simply an extension of K–12 education, or, for us Catholic universities and colleges, the parish grade school. If we think that what happened to the Texas social studies curriculum could never happen to the collegiate curriculum, we are alarmingly obtuse.

Higher education is one of the great counterbalances to government in a free society, but that balance only works through the free and frequent exercise of the muscle of our mission. We are the stewards of democracy’s brain, the guarantors of informed citizen voices, the producers of much of the knowledge that fuels innovation stimulating social and economic progress. Lilliputian bureaucracies will certainly always try to tie down our free sails as we venture into uncharted waters—whether condemning a speaker or forbidding a play or investigating a scholar. Our stewardship—as presidents, as faculty, as trustees, all stewards of the freedom of higher education to do its work uninhibited and unintimidated—requires us to swing mighty axes against the restraints that compromise our ability to conduct research freely, publish whatever we choose, teach as we must, and speak openly without fear.

Which leads to my last point: the biggest threat to our academic freedom and the health of our enterprise is our own tendency to self-censorship, especially among college presidents and trustees, on matters where we must be loud and unafraid. Attorneys general may rattle their swords, bishops may fulminate, opinion writers may harrumph about the faculty member whose views of reality may be no weirder than their own. Look out the window: out there, every day, all of that is going on. We presidents can either cower under our desks to escape the noise, hoping no one calls us out, resolving to remain silent lest we lose a donor or upset the alumni or incur the wrath of some self-appointed watchdog of orthodoxy blogging away in his basement (in his pajamas). Or, we can do our jobs, with responsibility, with integrity, and with audacity.

My most important obligation as a university president is not to raise money (a popular view of the presidency that is part of that devolution of purpose I mentioned earlier) but rather to protect the climate for academic freedom on campus because that climate is the lungs, the oxygen, the nourishment that is essential for the life of the university to flourish.

Academic freedom rarely dies in one egregious event; academic freedom erodes in a thousand small concessions. We can see what [Virginia] Attorney General [Ken] Cuccinelli is doing, and we can call him out. We know what the Cardinal Newman Society is up to, most of the time, and we can go about our business knowing full well that some of us will be featured on their blogs (and not in a good way!). We can accept that a bishop will have a different point of view on some matters, and we can discuss that with him without retreating from

the principled pursuit of unfettered learning, discourse, and scholarship on our Catholic campuses. We can see what Congress and the Department of Education are doing to use accreditation to reach long arms into our curricula, and we can testify about better solutions for more accountability while protecting our autonomy.

We can do all of that in the public eye with confidence that we are pursuing our purpose in higher education with integrity.

But we lose everything when we refuse the engagement, when we sit back and hope that this wave will just pass over us, naively thinking that our freedom will remain intact even as the ebb tide washes it away.

Thank you, AAUP, not only for recognizing what I have said in the past, but more importantly, for strengthening my resolve to keep swimming against that tide on all of the days still to come. ■

Past Recipients of the Alexander Meiklejohn Award for Academic Freedom

- 1958 President Eldon L. Johnson and the Board of Trustees of the University of New Hampshire
- 1959 Chancellor Ethan A. H. Shepley of Washington University (St. Louis)
- 1960 Dean Guerdon David Nichols of the College of Liberal Arts and Sciences of the University of Arkansas
- 1961 Dr. Robert W. Mance, a trustee of Allen University
- 1962 President Arthur S. Flemming of the University of Oregon
- 1963 Mr. Henry L. Bowden, chairman of the Board of Trustees of Emory University
- 1964 President Clark Kerr and the Board of Regents of the University of California
- 1965 President Willis M. Tate of Southern Methodist University
- 1966 President Mason W. Gross and the Board of Governors of Rutgers University
- 1968 President J. W. Maucker of the University of Northern Iowa
- 1969 President George W. Starcher of the University of North Dakota
- 1970 Reverend Theodore M. Hesburgh, C.S.C., president of the University of Notre Dame
- 1973 President Thomas E. O'Connell of Berkshire Community College
- 1975 The Board of Trustees of the University of Maine
- 1978 The Board of Trustees of Wake Forest University
- 1984 Vice President for Academic Affairs Dale Nitzschke and Dean of the Graduate College James F. Adams of the University of Nevada, Las Vegas
- 1988 President W. Randall Lolley of Southeastern Baptist Theological Seminary
- 1995 President Sean Fanelli of Nassau Community College (New York)
- 1998 President Roger W. Bowen of the State University of New York at New Paltz
- 2000 Chancellor William Danforth of Washington University (St. Louis)
- 2003 President Molly Corbett Broad of the University of North Carolina