

State of the University for Reunion Attendees
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Good morning, Cornellians!

I hope that your reunion weekend so far has lived up to your hopes and expectations. Indeed, I hope that it has exceeded them.

That would be fair. Because my first year as Cornell's eleventh president has far exceeded anything I dared to hope for.

One year ago today, I was nearing the end of my semester as president-elect. The transition period was almost over, and Kathy and I were about to move to Ithaca to assume our new roles. And at that moment I knew that much of my first year in office would be devoted to three activities: listening, evaluating, and establishing a voice.

Because I had been a student here, I already knew what might be described as the louder parts of Cornell – the features of campus life that were known to just about every student of a certain era. I knew about hockey games, trays on Libe Slope, and food from the Hot Truck. But to be effective, a president needs to know the many, many different quieter parts of the University. The delicate features of its past and its present that are not universally appreciated but that contribute to the whole. I would need to learn these things – by reading, by looking closely, and especially by listening.

And of course I would need to be engaged in a process of sober and serious evaluation. I would need to be assessing what aspects of the University were superb, and what aspects needed improvement. In order to frame a plan of action I would need to draw general evaluative conclusions about the state of the faculty. The quality of the students. The schools and colleges and programs and institutes. And I would have to evaluate the alumni. Because obviously if they weren't up to snuff I would have to get rid of them and acquire new alumni from some other university.

And third I would need, during my first year as president, to establish a voice. I would need to develop a way of speaking about our revolutionary and beloved University that rang true. A way that might express my own understanding of the distinctive qualities of our past. A way that might help today's students to understand the role this University can play in their lives. A way that might support our collective effort as Cornellians to keep improving our world throughout the course of our lives.

But even a year ago I knew that the activities of listening, evaluating, and establishing a voice would not follow a neat and orderly linear process. They would happen in bits and pieces, fits and starts, building up through a year's worth of experiences. And none of those activities would be completed in my first year – I would be content if by this time I could say that each of them was well underway.

And now, a year later, I can tell you that every day since Kathy and I arrived in Ithaca has been filled with elements of one or another or all three of these activities. Every day I have found something new about Cornell, understood a feature of our University in a new way, or found a new way of expressing a value that seems to resonate across the broad community of Cornellians.

And what I would like to do this morning is share with you one experience from one day from each of the months since we arrived. I believe that by doing so I will best be able to give you an appreciation of what I have learned about the state of Cornell University in 2004.

Last July 25, with boxes still unpacked, Kathy and I spent the morning with Sarah Thomas, the University Librarian. We met inside the front door of Olin library. We walked past a few hungry-looking students in the Libe Café, Olin Library's cappuccino bar. We went downstairs to the Rare Book and Manuscript Collection in the Kroch Library. And we saw things that made us gasp. Handwritten pages from James Joyce's manuscript of *Ulysses*. A first edition of Copernicus's masterwork, *On the Revolutions of the Heavenly Spheres*. Abraham Lincoln's handwritten write-up of what he had said in his Gettysburg Address. And we learned that one did not need to be a president or a first lady or a faculty member or a graduate student to see these materials; any undergraduate, any Cornellian, can experience them, with no justification required beyond curiosity.

Last August 23, we were in a very warm Barton Hall as I welcomed the members of the Class of 2007 to campus. I told the new students that while they were here they would develop their abilities to think in a sustained way about impossibly difficult problems. I told them they would become better able to engage constructively with arguments that were made by people they disagreed with, to keep pushing for a shared vocabulary and a shared understanding. I told them that they would develop other attributes that would matter to their lives, attributes such as curiosity, adventurousness, citizenship, and a reverence for quality. I gave them seven tips on how they might do that. Those tips included looking up into the Ithaca sky and seeing the planet Mars at its closest point in 60,000 years. They included eating too much ice cream at the Cornell Dairy Bar. And they included spending an hour in the presence of works of genius like those Kathy and I had seen in the rare book room.

On September 5, Kathy and I attended the opening of a new exhibition at the Johnson Art Museum. The exhibition displayed works from the world's finest private collection of surrealist art. The collection happens to belong to a Cornellian. The opening was attended by about 1000 students. They were eating food in the atrium of the museum. And they were spending an hour in the presence of works of true artistic genius.

On the evening of October 12, Kathy and I attended the opera. *On sand*. In the desert. In Doha, Qatar. Earlier that day I had cut the ribbon to dedicate the new campus of our pre-medical and medical program on the Arabian peninsula. I was sitting between the Emir and the Sheikha watching an Italian opera company perform a newly commissioned English-language opera about the life of Avicenna. Avicenna, or Ibn Sina, was the tenth- and eleventh-century Muslim doctor whose treatise the *Qanun* had become the most influential text in medical science throughout Western Europe from the 1100's through the 1600's.

At intermission I asked the Emir why he decided to work with Cornell University in this way. He told me that the future of his region depends on their ability to work in close partnership with the great institutions of the West on the challenges we all face together. Challenges of global health. Challenges of educating our children. And by partnering with Cornell, he had been able to begin the process of building an Education

City in Doha, a cluster of campuses from universities like Cornell and Carnegie Mellon that could become a center for the expression of this philosophy throughout the Arabian Peninsula.

On the evening of November 19, Kathy and I attended an Iftaar Banquet to mark the end of the fasting period of Ramadan. The banquet was held in Trillium, in Kennedy Hall. We saw about 1000 students of all different religions. They were eating. And they were talking with one another about the similar but different roles that the practice of fasting plays in various religious faiths.

On the afternoon of December 2, Kathy and I took an elevator down below Alumni Fields. Cornell Professors Maury Tigner and Sol Gruner gave us a tour of the Wilson Synchrotron, the Cornell Electron Storage Ring, and the Cornell High Energy Synchrotron Source. For a quarter century, the storage ring has been used for research in particle physics by scientists from around the world, while the X-rays produced by the synchrotron source have been used for advanced research in materials science and the life sciences. In 2003, the Nobel Prize in chemistry was awarded to Professor Rod MacKinnon of Rockefeller University for research on ion channels that he conducted at the Cornell High Energy Synchrotron Source.

On the evening of January 21, Kathy and I were in Gotham Hall in New York City. We were with hundreds of Cornell alumni who are members of the President's Circle. After dinner we all got to hear Cornell Professor Steven Squyres call in from Pasadena, California, where he is leading the science team of the Mars Exploration Rover Mission. We put on 3-D glasses and watched in awe as Professor Squyres explained to us the images that we were seeing, new photographs from Mars that were about to be released to the public. The photographs were taken by a panoramic camera on a Rover on the surface of Mars, a camera designed and operated by a team of scientists led by Cornell Professor Jim Bell. And in addition to the panoramic camera, the Rover was carrying scientific equipment that had been built by Cornell undergraduates here in Ithaca, New York.

In the months since that night, Kathy and I had the privilege of visiting Professor Squyres at mission control in Pasadena. And we have all seen our understanding of life in the universe re-shaped by the discoveries from this mission.

On February 25, Bill Gates visited Cornell for half a day. While here he participated in a roundtable discussion of the future of internet security with 8 leading faculty researchers in the fields of computer and information science and engineering. And he gave a talk to about 500 students. We forgot to serve the students food. But nonetheless, he was impressive. And our students were impressive. And he was impressed. After his visit, he is reported to have told his colleagues that Cornell is a university that truly understands how recent changes in information science have changed the way students need to be taught about the field.

On March 24, I met in Washington, D.C., with Chinese Ambassador Yang Jiechi. We discussed my trip to Beijing this summer, in which we will be building on China's historic relationship with Cornell through a new set of collaborative programs. A new major in the college of Arts and Sciences – China and Pacific Studies – through which our students will study at Peking University. A new program in our College of Agriculture and Life Sciences that will bring students to Ithaca from the China Agricultural Univer-

sity. Potential new research partnerships between our medical college and the Chinese Academy of Sciences and between our engineering college and Tsinghua University.

On April 23, Kathy and I attended a Tower Club dinner at Pier 60 in New York City. We had the chance to see another group of 750 Cornell alumni happily eating. And we had our first opportunity to meet Happy Reichert of the Class of 1925. Happy is a dynamo who fondly remembers her classes with Carl Becker and Morris Bishop. She is looking forward to her 103rd birthday this fall. She came up to Ithaca to celebrate her 79th Reunion, and she is here this morning with two of her Cornellian nephews, Thomas Kahn and Mark Keane. Happy, could you stand so that we may recognize you?

And on May 30, just a couple of weeks ago, the new graduates of Cornell's Class of 2004 gathered on Schoellkopf Field for their Commencement ceremony. I spoke to them about dirt, and about Jean Paul Sartre, and about Kurt Vonnegut. I spoke to them about the challenges they will be facing as they are called upon to make good ethical choices in a stressful and demanding world where it is not always obvious which choice is good and ethical. I told them that, just as often, they will be warned against having contact with someone else because that someone else is morally repugnant and they might become contaminated or sullied by the association. And I urged them to resist such warnings. Not because there are no perils of association or contamination. But because today's world desperately needs people who are able to manage those risks, escape those perils, and participate in the messy work of transcending differences.

What have I learned from the experience this year of listening, evaluating, and speaking? From these days and the hundreds of other days I could just as easily have spoken about?

Here are a few of the central lessons.

First, Cornell was founded as a revolutionary institution, and it still is a revolutionary institution.

Ezra Cornell's ambition to found an institution where any person, from any background, come to find instruction in any study completely transformed American nineteenth century higher education. The power of that ambition is every bit as significant today as it was in 1865.

In the twenty-first century, the University that was spawned by that idea has a daily impact as far as the influence of humanity extends. It is felt in Ithaca. It is felt in every county of New York State. It is felt across the United States. It's felt in the Middle East. It's felt in China. It's felt on Mars.

Second, the breadth of study required by today's world is mind-boggling. It's about physics. And moral philosophy. And the life sciences. And international diplomatic history. And engineering. And art. And information science. And fighting disease. And feeding our world. And developing a sustainable relationship with our environment. And on and on and on.

Third, the quality of this University is just staggering. In so many domains the fundamental ideas are being developed by members of this faculty. In so many domains those fundamental ideas are being made relevant to the larger society by members of

this faculty. And the faculty and the students are supported by a cast of thousands – from professionals to skilled crafts workers – who have talent and devotion to Cornell that simply defies description.

Fourth, our University is and must remain focused on the needs of our students. We understand many of their needs. They need a lot of food. But they also need to be prepared for a profoundly challenging world. They need to develop the intellectual skills, and the many other human qualities that are essential to success in a world that each day looks different from the way it looked the day before.

Fifth, in surprising ways, the world is turning to Cornell. That is in part due to our historic strengths, which include:

- the range of our interests,
- our commitment to bridge the divide between theory and practice, and
- our commitment to allow curiosity to lead rather than to be channeled within the boundaries of intellectual disciplines as they might be specified at a particular moment in time.

This morning I saw a video in which the internationally preeminent architect Peter Eisenman, of the Class of 1954, described himself as someone whose experience of the architecture program here was profoundly influenced by his immersion in the entire university. And we know from recent developments in everything from architecture to the life sciences to economics to nanotechnology that those essential strengths – range of inquiry, concern for theory and practice, refusal to let disciplinary boundaries constrain the hunger to understand – those strengths are of unprecedented and fundamental importance to every field of human endeavor. And they are being recognized by everyone from the Emir of Qatar to Bill Gates.

And Sixth, among our unique strengths, none is more important than the very special love that our graduates feel for our University. Cornell enters one's soul in a way that no other university does. It teaches us hope and optimism and it makes us brave. It nurtures the conviction that what we do in the world really matters, and it inspires us to take chances so that we will leave that world a better place than we found it. Cornell binds us to one another as a community that transcends all boundaries of time and place. And in turn that community inspires Cornell to continue to evolve to meet the changing needs of humanity.

This past year I called upon Cornellians everywhere to engage with me in a project of reflection, to think about what today's students need, what today's world most needs from Cornell. The response was overwhelming.

In the coming year, we will begin to build on that response, charting a course towards our sesquicentennial celebration in 2015. The state of our University is remarkable. It is still revolutionary. It is still beloved. And I rejoice in the opportunity I have been given to serve as its President.