

Speech to Faculty – Spring 2015 – Andy Koch, Chair of Faculty Senate

Welcome.

I want to begin my remarks today by sharing the thoughts of an eighteenth century Irish-born political thinker named Edmund Burke. Those of you who know Burke's writings may find this strange, since Burke has some ideas that many of us would find distasteful. He was not a fan of democracy. He was not fond of Enlightenment liberalism or the idea of a "social contract," an idea that came to dominate the political thought of his time.

Nevertheless, Burke has something to tell us. For whether or not you agree with Burke's assessment of the common man's perspicacity, no one has demonstrated a greater depth of understanding about the nature, role, and significance of the idea of community for the human experience.

Burke viewed a community as a living whole that has permanence even though it is composed of transitory and different parts. To Burke, the community is an organic presence, more a living body, than a collection of random, isolated individuals. And as the body has various parts that perform specialized functions, so it is with the community. The heart, the lungs, and the brain all perform different activities, but all serve the health of the body as a whole. In communities the different functions of the members serve the common mission of the whole. So what binds its members together is a common enterprise. Each individual task is part of something larger.

To Burke, it is the dedication to this task that is larger than oneself that brings people together and creates the bonds that bind them. This shared task attaches them to a set of social relations that not only support them, but which also defines a significant part of their identity.

In their enterprise members of the community interact and participate in activities of mutual support that generates affection, attachment, respect, and reverence for both the mission that defines them and the institutional structure that transforms their potential into a common achievement.

It is hard to read Burke and not think about the different parts of this community, this community of scholars. We are bound together by our common mission of exploring and expanding knowledge as well as sharing and training future generations in both what we have learned and the techniques we have developed

for the generation of knowledge. We do different things. We employ different methodologies. Yet despite our differences we come together in a shared enterprise.

It is with Burke in mind that I would like to talk to you a little about my experiences over the last 3 years.

After serving as Faculty Senate Chair for almost 3 years it is hard not to arrive at some conclusions. Since this will be my final opportunity to speak to you as a whole, I would like to share some of my observations.

I cannot help but recall that 3 years ago I stood before you and said, regarding one part of our community, "I like administrators." I cannot say that such a conviction has not been tested over the last 3 years. But I can stand here today and say to you that it is still the case. I like administrators. It is a tough job, even in the best of times. You have to make decisions and every time you do, someone is unhappy.

It is worse in this financial climate. It is not easy to be continually faced with nothing but bad options because you do not have the funding to do what you believe is necessary for the good of the institution.

It is also not easy to be told you have to enforce mandates and policies that come from Raleigh and Chapel Hill with which you disagree. And let me be very clear. I have not come in contact with a single administrator here that wants to turn ASU into some kind of business. I do not know a single administrator who is not committed to dealing with our deficient salaries. They are committed to what you are committed to because they share in that common mission that unites all of us in this community.

But let me go further than what I said 3 years ago because I have learned a great deal from my experience.

Let me begin by making two observations. The most overrated attribute among administrators is what I will call "the vision thing." Let me explain why. Visions are, by their nature, revolutionary. That has its appeal. We all want to be revolutionaries on some level. But the "vision thing" can be disruptive and destabilizing in ways that undermine the ability of the community to effectively and efficiently perform the very mission that binds it together.

Visions are also products of individuals. When you look at human history over the last two hundred years ask yourself, 'How many have come along with grand visions?' How successful were they in the end?

Why is it that when someone comes along with a revolutionary political idea it has often led to violence and bloodshed? Burke can help us understand what happened. Individual visions, by their nature, must be initiated from the top down, from the individual to the community. They are imposed through the power that the individual has at their disposal. Their revolutionary character seeks to transform the landscape into the individual's idea of perfection. To achieve such a task the traditions, culture, and practices that have evolved over time must be dismantled.

Edmund Burke warned us that when you undermine the traditions and culture of people you create a sense of dislocation, disorder, anomie, and confusion. You break the bonds of that community and set it adrift. You should never break what is working in order to fix what is broken.

That does not mean that people and institutions should not grow, change, and evolve new forms of practice. Burke tells us that communities are living things and change is necessary to their very survival. But change has other sources than the vision of an individual.

This brings me to my second observation. The most underappreciated attribute in an administrator is the ability to listen. By listening I do not mean something that is passive. What I mean is active listening that is oriented toward solving the problems confronted by the community as a whole. Listening is a bottom-up practice that fosters change from within. Continuity is maintained even as change and progress are occurring. Such change does not have the glitz and glamour of revolutionary upheaval. It is slow and plodding.

However, such a practice allows the community to evolve and grow but does so in a form that is consistent with the values and practices that have developed over time. This type of administrator can listen to the thoughts and ideas of a myriad of people and draw out the common elements and synthesize them into a path forward. This type of person binds the community together with their approach because they understand the true nature of leadership. Leadership is not telling people what to do. It is bringing people with you in a common enterprise.

This form of leadership builds communities. It does not tear them down. Success comes from asking people what they need to empower them in making their contribution to the mission as a whole. It is a positive force that binds people together.

You can accept or reject my assessment. It really doesn't matter. What does matter today is that we need to be united, as one campus, as one community, bound together with a common sense of purpose.

If you have paid attention to the events in Chapel Hill over the last 3 weeks you know what I am talking about. At the very least, the removal of Tom Ross as UNC system president by the Board of Governors has generated a great deal of uncertainty about the direction of higher education in North Carolina. We do not yet know what new mandates and what new pressures will come. What is certain is that they will be coming.

Over the last 3 weeks I have received a flurry of emails from members of the Faculty Assembly expressing concern about the new direction of the Board of Governors is taking. The university is being politicized to a degree that no one has ever seen before. This can be seen in the attempts to dismantle the centers and institutes in the system that serve the poor and working class members of the state. The main target has been Chapel Hill, but the message is for the entire system. The problem, of course, is that we cannot perform our mission to the citizens of North Carolina if we have political operatives looking over our shoulders.

In addition, there is talk of further cuts. But there are limits to how much you can cut an institution that serves the citizens of a state without jeopardizing its ability to do so. The issue is that electoral politics are always short-term in their orientation. Cutting the university makes good short-term politics. The legislature can tell their constituents that they are being responsible stewards of their tax dollars. But we all know that is a smokescreen for what is really happening. The legislature is giving tax cuts to millionaires and telling the middle class that there is no money to educate their children. It is disgraceful and an affront to every citizen of this state.

What they continue not to understand is that education is its own value. It is not a subordinate value. It cannot be monetized in the same way as building a road or a bridge.

So we have to be united as a campus and we have to be clear in our message. We have not been very good at explaining our role to the citizens of North Carolina. We need to be better at it.

We need to explain that within the larger community, North Carolina educators are the very heart of all else that happens. We are the living, beating presence that provides a path for the aspirations of young and old alike.

It is because of what we do that North Carolina children have the opportunity for a better future. It is because of us that they have the science and technology that can serve their needs. It is because of us that the rules of civil society have evolved and that the law of the jungle does not reign supreme in their social lives. Every bit of what they do is built on what we provide. It is not hubris if it is true.

But we cannot count on others to tell our story. The legislature does not understand the higher calling of our mission. The Board of Governors has been politicized, and the General Administration fears the political wrath that will result from an honest critique of state policy.

So the burden falls on us, the faculty, administration, students, and staff. We all share in the mission of this community and we should not be shy about speaking of its importance.

I have left one group out to this point – that group that we hardly ever see that seems to exist at the margins of our community. I am speaking of the Board of Trustees. I can honestly tell you that one of my pleasures as Senate Chair over the last 3 years has been getting to know members of the Board of Trustees.

As you may know, many members of the Board of Trustees are alumni of Appalachian. Many of them have children that attend, have attended, or will attend Appalachian. They feel a part of this community. Because of their affection for this institution they want to give back. They give of their time, but they also give of their treasure.

I cannot tell you how many times I have been at a meeting where there are side discussions of this or that need going unmet.

It never mattered what the need, there were always checks written. And let me be clear. These are checks for hundreds of thousands of dollars at a time.

But they do more.

Members of the Board of Trustees are actively lobbying the Board of Governors and the legislature to have the funding formula that is biased against ASU changed so that we get a fairer piece of the pie. They are actively supporting the Chancellor in her efforts to boost faculty salaries so that we can recruit and retain the best faculty. After all, they want their sons and daughters to have the very best faculty when they come to Appalachian.

I mention this to highlight Burke's point: that while each inside a community may perform different tasks, each makes a contribution to the mission as a whole. The Trustees want to make that contribution in the ways that they can.

We don't see them very often. We should interact more. I am hoping they will come to the March Faculty Club so if you meet one of them, thank them for all they do. They will appreciate it.

In closing let me again return to Edmund Burke. Burke tells us that every community is unique. Each has customs and traditions that have their origins in the unique experiences of the membership. These traditions reach back in time and are brought forward to the present by each succeeding generation. So let me encourage all faculty, but especially the junior faculty, to get involved. Give some service to the institution by becoming a member of one of the many faculty committees on campus. We will be sending out an announcement of all the open committee positions shortly.

One of my goals over the last 3 years was to strengthen the role of the faculty in the governance at this institution. But the structural opportunities to participate are irrelevant without the people willing to share their time and effort.

Thank you for taking the time to listen. It has been an honor to serve you and this institution. I wish you all the best.