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The university and the good life. This theme reminds me how much I, as a teacher, have learned from my students — not only from my graduate and undergraduate students, but also from the elementary students whom I taught for over fifteen years. I take "good life" to mean what each of you as an individual has opportunities to learn and do, and what you in turn contribute to and take from the broader communities around you.

Let me illustrate this with a story from a third grade class I taught more than ten years ago. My purpose is to examine the opportunity that both schools and universities play in the development of individuals and of the societies we create.

So, my story:

On this particular day, the children were disagreeing about whether zero was even or odd. (This may seem strange to you, but they were forever interested in the number zero.) One of the boys, Shea, was listening to the discussion, and a few minutes later raised his hand and said he had been thinking about the number 6. He was thinking it could be even, or it could also be odd. His classmates objected vigorously. Everyone already knew from second grade that 6 was even. The other students tried to show him. FTina used the number line to argue that if 6 was odd, then, by extension, 0 would be odd, too, and that was wrong.

Another boy asked Shea to "prove" his idea. So Shea drew six circles on the board and showed that six was made up of three groups of two. This did not convince his classmates.

So let's stop for a moment and see what we have so far. A group of eight-year olds engaged in fundamental mathematical activity – in making claims and seeking to prove or refute them. Notice that they were doing this in the realm of number theory, one of the more abstract domains of mathematics. The students were absorbed in pure numbers, and in their patterns and structure. (The same objects that fascinated the Indians, the Egyptians, the Greeks, and the Mayans centuries ago.)

Shea's classmates could not grasp why he was making this strange claim about 6. Finally, a girl named Lin raised her hand: " I think I know what he is saying," she said. "He is saying that 6 is made up of three groups of two, and three is



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an odd number so six can be an odd number and an even number." Shea looked pleased. Lin understood what he was saying!

But when I asked what the other children thought of this, Lin raised her hand again. She said she disagreed. "It's not according to how many groups it is!" – – and she walked up to the board. -

The whole class watched as she stood there thinking. She drew ten circles on the board. She looked right at Shea and explained, "So here are ten circles, and if you split them by twos, you have one, two, three, four, five (and she pointed to the five groups of two). Then why don't you call 10 an even number and an odd number?" Lin seemed to expect that Shea would see the fallacy in his thinking.

Shea looked thoughtfully at the ten circles. Then he said, "Thank you for bringing that up. I hadn't thought of it – so I say that 10 can be an odd and an even, too!"

When he said this, pandemonium broke loose.

Lin looked shocked. "What about *other* numbers?! Like, if you keep on going on like that and you say that *other* numbers are odd and even, maybe we'll end it up with *all* numbers are odd and even. ////// Then it won't make *sense* that all numbers should be odd and even, because if all numbers were odd *and* even, we wouldn't be even having this *discussion!*"

What does this short episode from a third grade class have to say about the university and the good life, the theme of today's Honors Convocation? What does it have to do with what each of you is doing here at the University of Michigan?

Three themes stand out, each one central to the very idea of a university, of education, and of the good life.

1. First is the development of *individuals*. The university affords a wealth of opportunities for growth — growth in skills, knowledge, imagination, // habits, tastes, and interests. These children were completely engrossed in making observations about an abstraction, and in playing with the meanings of words. Their interest was not merely passive. They also knew how to pursue that interest mathematically.

Over 85 years ago, John Dewey wrote that to be interested is to "be absorbed, wrapped up, or carried away." We often make the mistake of thinking that interests are



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the *innate* properties of individuals. Actually interests are *cultivated*. Education makes it possible for individuals to find and develop interests.

The university offers encounters with ideas and texts, people and questions that spark new wonder and curiosity. The diversity all around us — of thought and discourse, of the aesthetic and the moral, of questions and answers — is a medium for our own growth as individuals within the university.

2. A second theme in the story, and in the connection of the university to the good life, is the development of the capacity to be part of a *collective*. In this classroom, over half the children were English language learners. They came from over 10 different countries. Of the U.S. students, some were from Detroit, others from rural areas.

Fifty years ago this May, the landmark Court decision, Brown vs. Board of Education, established the precedent that diversity be embraced <u>within</u> public schools. However, although access ensures a more diverse student population, it does not ensure learning. Nor does it guarantee respectful relationships among students as they engage in learning.

Listening to my story, you may well realize that eight-year-olds do not treat ideas —or one another — like this naturally. Inside this classroom, differences were a resource, and support was offered for respecting and using Difference. In tackling problems, they learned to regard one another's ideas with interest and respect. The children learned math. They became clearer about what makes a number even or odd. They also learned something about what it means to <u>do</u> mathematics.

But they learned more than math, too, for the intellectual and the social go hand in hand. Through experiences like this one, the children practiced the capacity to participate in a diverse community.

Schools are necessary to build these skills, and to provide guided practice in using them over time for increasingly complex and varied problems. A university such as Michigan offers an unusual environment bubbling with the resources of diversity. Inside its boundaries, individuals can learn to see the value of working with people who are different from themselves, and they can develop both the skills and the inclination to do so.

In few places is it as possible as it is here to learn the value of diversity, for such valuing does not happen naturally. (*A quick look back on history shows this all too clearly.)*



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In still fewer places is it possible to learn to protect and use diversity as a resource. This university is special because it offers a way for difference to provide the fabric for the collective. The notion of *unity in diversity* gives an elevated meaning to the term "university."

3. The third theme focuses on the special role of public education in the development of the good life. Public universities and schools represent society's investment in the power of education. Their public status affirms the social importance of their goals: that is, to build individuals, and to build their capacity for collective engagement — whether to solve math problems, participate in the arts. debate interpretations, or create public policy. Universities and schools are crucibles for developing citizens who can listen, respect and critically examine others' ideas, and work in common.

The *public-ness* of this university is crucial, for the university is both of and for society. The resources of individuals' development and of the disposition for collective work are capital to be invested back into society. When the University of Michigan mobilized for the Supreme Court hearing, we used the strengths of individuals and collectives to marshal the case. The commitment to diversity as a resource for education was visible everywhere you looked – in the legal briefs prepared, in the seminars held all over campus, and on the buses that traveled from Ann Arbor to Washington.

Together, members of the university community mobilized their different expertise and experience in order to secure the right to the deliberate — not natural – construction of a diverse community.

~~Working for the public good is the opportunity and the responsibility of those of us engaged in *public* education. We represent the investment that society makes in individuals and collectives through the systematic opportunity for joint engagement and common learning.~~

I want to close by returning to the third grade class. On a different day, the children were puzzling about what 1/4 of 12 would be. Some thought that 1/4 of 12 would be 3; others thought it would be 4.

At a certain point in the discussion, one student proposed that they vote to decide the answer. The other students objected.

Kevin said, "Just because somebody agrees more with one person doesn't mean that they're right."



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Kip said. "I agree with Kevin because if we voted, maybe the answer would be wrong, and the people who said some other answer might be right."

These young boys knew that mathematical truth is not a matter of majority rule.

But the children also appreciated the power of others' ideas to extend their own. Shekira offered her classmates a way to think about it. She said, "Well, if you have a problem, all you have to do is try and figure it out yourself, and if you think you got the right answer, then maybe you should discuss it with somebody, and maybe they might be able to change your mind if the answer's wrong."

It is not hard to see that here, inside a public school classroom, engagement with mathematics offered not only opportunities for the development of individual knowledge, skill, and interest, but also for the skills, values, and commitments necessary for participation in a democratic pluralistic society. To honor difference means learning to negotiate it in ways that are appropriate to the context. Education, whether in third grade or within the university is crucial to developing the unnatural capacity to know when the principle of majority rule applies, and when it does not. Socially protected opportunities to learn to mediate and use difference, and to act in the interest of the public good are central.

You may wonder why I chose to talk about an elementary classroom today, when the theme is "the university and the good life." The classroom story, in my mind, makes visible the opportunity for the good life that education at all levels offers. The commitment to the good life, viewed as both an individual and a social end, is the promise — and the responsibility — of each of us engaged in public education.



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