

U of Michigan YOHIA
4/28/98

**FIRST LADY HILLARY RODHAM CLINTON
THE UNIVERSITY OF MICHIGAN CELEBRATES
THE YEAR OF HUMANITIES AND ARTS (YoHA)
AND THE ARTS OF CITIZENS PROGRAM
HILL AUDITORIUM
APRIL 28, 1998**

Thank you very much, President Bollinger and Provost Cantor, administrators, faculty, students, alumni of this great university, members of the Ann Arbor community, elected officials, distinguished guests and friends.

It is a pleasure to be back here in Ann Arbor and back on this campus and back in this concert hall. Not only have many great American artists performed on this stage, the building itself is a monument to the creative expression of one of the nation's finest architects - - Albert Kahn.

So I am very pleased that not only am I a degree holder from this university, but that I feel a part of this community.

We gather today for the continuation of an important discussion that was started here last year about the humanities and the arts, what they mean to us, what they should mean to us and what they must mean to us and to our country.

I was thinking, as I listened to President Bollinger speak, that this year-long series that you have had here on the campus is particularly appropriate because certainly, as we move toward the end of this century, and indeed toward a new millennium, we are going to be thinking more often and more deeply about who we are, where we are going, what we mean to one another, and what our lives mean to ourselves. I want to thank the leadership of this university for helping all of us to begin that discussion.

I would like to thank Lee Bollinger for his many contributions: as a legal scholar, as the President of this University, and perhaps even more importantly as an advocate for the principles and traditions of American public higher education. Through his dedication this university continues to stand for what is best in the history of our country. I know that President Bollinger, among his many academic accomplishments, is something of a First Amendment scholar. I, too, am a great supporter of the First Amendment, but I can't help but think that it might have just passed through his mind that censorship would be in order given the recent UPI college ratings, as opposed to those by the AP. But staying true to his values, you did not hear that from him.

The classrooms and laboratories on this campus remind us of the value of a diverse student body and faculty, and the benefits they bring to a university community. I was very impressed and moved by the opinion piece that was written by the President Bollinger and Provost Cantor that appeared today in the Washington Post entitled, *The Educational Importance of Race*. I commend it to everyone on this campus, and indeed on every campus, because it talks

about, in a very clear way, the challenges as we attempt to bring our university systems into the future with our values and ideals intact.

I want to thank Provost Cantor for his advocacy on behalf of the arts and humanities, and for the time and energy he has committed to helping Congress explore the role of women in our nation's military.

I would also like to thank, as well, Associate Vice Provost Julie Ellison, Director of the Year of the Humanities and Arts, and David Scobey, Director of the Arts of Citizenship Program, for sharing with students, faculty, and the Ann Arbor community their vision of the dynamic relationship between the arts and humanities in a democratic society.

When one thinks about the title of this series, "Arts of Citizenship", it could be just as well stated "Arts and Citizenship" because, to my mind, they are very closely related. The arts play an integral role in determining what we mean by citizenship. Certainly when I use the word arts, I am including arts and humanities. They also tell us something about how we practice the art of citizenship - - what it means to be part of a large, diverse, pluralistic democracy, particularly at this point in history. So this conversation does come at a propitious time.

As I was thinking back on the last 1,000 years, as we are about to end this millennium, I was reminded of all of the dire predictions that were occurring around that time. I don't know if you have ever heard of a prolific and rather controversial monk by the name of Raoul Glaber, who lived in the 10th century and who consistently warned his local citizenry of impending doom. Now, perhaps because of his checkered career - - he was expelled from several monasteries - - he didn't attract much of a following. The earth did not implode as he predicted. In fact, we have a lot of progress that we can look to over the ten centuries following his predictions, even though we still can mark those last 1,000 years, as well, by plagues and genocides and other unbearable human suffering.

However, Raoul Glaber comes from a long line of doomsayers and pessimists about the human condition. The kind of people who are always looking for what is wrong with the advancements that occur, who are always pointing fingers at one another and predicting the end of civilization as we know it.

Yet despite the doomsayers - - and despite all of our own follies and missteps and tragedies, we have a lot to look back on with pride because time's passage also allowed for the discoveries of Galileo and Newton, the art of an El Greco, or Rubens or Picasso, the writings of a Murasaki, a Shakespeare, Tagore, Neruda, the ideas of Locke and Gandhi, and so many more.

We can also look at those who were political activists who helped move the idea of human progress forward. We can look at those who built a strong economy, created inventions and scientific discoveries, all of which unleashed human potential and energy.

We know that for the last thousand years, from Islamic communities spreading north across Africa to Native American Indian tribes right here in the upper Midwest, people created

new forms of art, built cities, designed new systems of cultivation, remapped their worlds, and thought up new ideas.

Fueling all of these scientific, intellectual and artistic advances was, of course, the human imagination. An imagination rooted not only in the knowledge and understanding of the past, but in the ability to dream and envision a future; an imagination that allowed men and women throughout time to say no to the archetypal doomsday monks, and yes to their own ideas of the possibility of a more positive and more possible tomorrow.

Today we find ourselves at the end of another century, and even another millennium. There is a lot that will occur in the next several years, all kinds of retrospectives, people talking about the past, worrying about the future.

It is my hope that conversations like the one taking place here, about the humanities and the arts, will help us think more clearly about what is at stake as we plan our own individual futures and as we think about that larger, public, common good.

There are many unanswered questions about what will happen in the 21st century. Will this century finally yield a cure for cancer? Will we find another Mozart? Will we end poverty, or perhaps even aim at and come near to lasting world peace? Maybe we will achieve some of that, but certainly not all of it, because we will continue as human beings having to strive to overcome the age old problems that have beset us.

Yet we also have a darker view of what might occur. Will the next 100 years give rise to more ethnic and racial hatred, a wider chasm between the rich and the poor, the spread of biological or chemical warfare, or even a brave new world of genetically engineered people who look and act the same?

When I think about the future, I come down, as you might guess, on a more optimistic note than a pessimistic one. I am congenitally, I suppose, optimistic, but I have also seen enough progress in my own lifetime to believe that we can continue to overcome the challenges that divide us and to make progress together.

I have to confess that I am worried about certain trends that I see around me every day. These trends could undermine our conceptions of ourselves as human beings and make it more difficult for us to have a common future unless they are checked by our knowledge of our history, our understanding of ourselves, and our willingness to work together to create a consensus about what we wish for our future.

Now, those trends are self-evident. What does it mean that we have such instantaneous communication and such rapid technological advancement? Well, of course, in many ways it means great opportunities. It means that we can be in touch with people around the world. It means that we have access to more information than we ever dreamed possible. Yet, it also means that we can retreat into anonymity, that we can be less personal in our dealings with one another, and that we can hide behind a computer keyboard and communicate with the world only

at a distance.

It means that we can be so overwhelmed by information that we can't make any sense out of it; that we have no context for it; that we are bombarded day in and day out by factoids that don't add up to knowledge and wisdom, but rather threaten to drown us in irrelevancy. I worry, too, about the need that so many people have to hang on to their own identity as they most narrowly define it. How do they reach out into the wider world when the wider world seems so confusing and so threatening?

In fact, one of the most frightening developments that I have personally been studying and thinking about is the way mass communications played a role in the genocides of Rwanda and Bosnia. People who before had lived peacefully with one another, were whipped into frenzies of hatred and fear because of the messages that were coming across the television, the radio, and even the computer. People who did not know how to make sense of those messages were pushed into action because of what they were being told.

I also wonder about how we will survive as a democracy, and how we will retain a sense of citizenship when there is so much pressure on a daily basis to move us toward a society of consumers and away from a democracy of citizens. The emphasis on our consumer culture distorts our sense of self. It threatens the essence of our pluralistic society, and yet, it seems beyond our control to stop. More and more messages pour out more and more quickly influencing particularly the minds and lives of young people.

Why are more young American teenagers smoking? Well, there is overwhelming evidence that they are enticed to do so; that it seems like a very grown up, rebellious thing to do; that the messages they receive, either directly or indirectly through the wider culture, create an atmosphere in which they think it's a choice that will enhance their sense of self-being.

Why are more American children driven to violence? We are seeing more and more evidence that the content of popular culture does matter. It really does count how many hours of television you watch, and in those hours how many violent episodes, how many murders, how many killers who are not remorseful at the end of the plot you see. If you are a child from a situation that is not as stable as one would like, you are particularly prone to those messages, to that image of reality that comes directly at you through that small machine in your living room or your bedroom.

Why do so many American children judge their worth by the logo on their sneakers instead of the good deeds that they might do or the homework that they finish at night? Well, you know as well as I that the consumer culture driven by our free market economy demands more and more buying on the part of more and more consumers. So many messages are aimed now not just at thirteen and fourteen year olds, but at eight and nine years olds because in order to keep this great engine going, we have to create a lot of unmet wants, a lot of frustration in the minds of people. This is not in and of itself any great cause for worry. We have certainly overcome a lot of challenges in the past. But, combining all of these trends together I think should cause all of us to stop and think, am I being seduced? What am I giving up in my

thinking and in my spirit to the consumer culture, to the machine of technology?

How do I keep some distance? How am I sure that I have the right balance in my life? How do I retain the most precious possession I have, my role as citizen, and enjoy the blessings that I am given because those who came before us understood the importance that democracy places on the role of citizen?

If one steps back and thinks about the images we have of the future, that is also a little disquieting. I did a survey about what we think might happen in the century or millennium to come. The overwhelming popular images are of movies in which desolation has occurred because of war, where road warriors are fighting one against the other, where there are people living under great glass bubbles or in very sterile atmospheres because we have polluted and degraded our environment.

We don't have a picture in our heads of the kind of society that we want, and expect to live in the future. In part, that is because change has been so fast in the last decades, faster than at any point in human history, and we are only now being able to process it.

I have often heard it said that human evolution proceeded over tens of thousands and millions of years, but within this last century we have been stretched, physically, and emotionally, and mentally, and spiritually, unlike any of our ancestors ever have been.

So how do we take all of these trends, and how do we begin to understand what they are doing to us so that we can assert control over them, and what do the arts and humanities have to do with all of that anyway?

Well, I would argue that the arts and humanities still give us the best guide we will ever have to thinking through the problems of today and tomorrow. It is not a luxury to read the great poetry of the past, to ponder Shakespeare's plays, to think about the Greek philosophers, to wonder in our own minds what modern poetry and literature and film are saying to us. Instead, I think it is a responsibility because if we think hard about these challenging ideas that come to us from those who are our scholars and our artists, we will be better equipped in our own lives and in our public life to go on.

One of the people who has been most astute in looking at the consumer culture and what we have done in modern days that undermines our sense of well-being with one another, our obligation toward each other, is the Czech President and playwright, Vaclav Havel. He has written and spoken at great length about how in the pressure of modern culture we are homogenizing our desires and tastes.

Now, one would think that if everybody in the world wore blue jeans and a certain kind of sneaker, as they do on every continent I have visited, if everybody listened to the same kind of music and watched the same television programs around the world - - that that would bring us closer together as a people. That, one somebody watching a show in Bangladesh would feel really close with somebody watching that same show in Bolivia, for example.

What Havel points out, which I think is right, that almost in an unconscious way, if you will, there is a rebellion against this homogenization. There is a rejection of it even while people take more and more of it in. One reads about horrific events in India where people are burning brides because the dowry didn't bring a color television but only a black and white one. One reads about people in Africa, who are living in terribly distressed situations, who are spending every dollar they have to try to put on the accouterments of what they think of as the modern American pop culture.

Yet, beneath that superficial homogenization, we are seeing a great striving for identity and a great need to separate ourselves from one another because human beings have to feel as though they have some identity that is of importance in their own eyes, and in the eyes of those to whom they look for validation.

If we stop and think about the trends that are sweeping the world, then I think it is fair to say that we are moving in a direction where all of the haves - - which include us in this room, people of education and affluence and particularly people fortunate enough to live in strong, stable, functioning democracies - - will be more and more caught up in the world of materialism as we work harder and harder and longer and longer hours to deal with the machines that are taking greater control over our lives.

It is hard to escape. We have 24 hour television channels. We have 24 hour fax machines. You are never out of touch. You never have a moment to stop and think. Decisions are demanded from you all the time. The e-mail messages come and people expect responses to them.

It is hard for the arts and humanities to flourish when there is very little space left for them in the popular culture. That is why we have to do all we can to support them, and to make it clear that they are not a luxury, but rather they are essential to the refueling of the human imagination. If one thinks about our earliest human ancestors, they did not first invent money. They first drew on the walls of caves. They first created figurines that had religious and other significance to them. What were they trying to say? What were they doing? They were finding that special human trait, that attribute of imagination and using it.

I can just imagine a scenario where a young man or woman wanders around not paying attention to the mammoth hunt. And all of the relatives are saying, "You know, he just isn't with it! He is going to get us all killed!" And then back in the cave that night with the flickering fire, while everyone else sleeps, he takes the charcoal and he draws a mammoth. All of a sudden out of his imagination comes an opportunity to share an experience that perhaps someone who had never seen a mammoth before could now understand. We created the arts so that we could advance human beings, so that our imagination could have an outlet. We saw it as a way to communicate in ways that we couldn't, just by doing and being. It is one of our earliest ways of defining ourselves as human.

It is through history and philosophy, literature and painting, music, sculpture, poetry, photography, dance, architecture, design, all of it, that we can reclaim the popular imagination, that we can rekindle our spirit of citizenship and exercise the power of our ideas, experiences and

feelings to promote a brighter vision of the future.

In our country, there is too often an assumption that the arts and humanities are an exclusive preserve of the rich or the best educated or some cultural elite. Yet from our own personal experiences, we know otherwise. How many of us have felt our hearts stir at a favorite song or a painting or a haunting passage in a novel or a dancer's elegant leap?

About a week or so ago, I read a very provocative opinion editorial in the *New York Times* where a classics professor talked about what Thucydides meant to his professor's community college students. He said, "I have taught at some of the great colleges in America, but in these community colleges, in these state universities where young people and not so young ones are enrolled and often working full - - time as well, they come to Thucydides with their own personal experience. And all of a sudden, the world of ideas and history opens up to them."

How many of us have had an experience like that? I remember very well when I was probably in junior high coming across a print of Guernica. Looking at that provocative painting that Picasso had done after the fascist bombing of Guernica, I finally realized that art was more than aesthetic. It was a way of communicating, a way of taking people beyond the boundaries of their own experience and giving them a greater understanding of the world around them. Guernica taught me about the human condition. I had never seen anything like that in my own life. I was born in Chicago. I grew up in a very safe suburb in the outskirts of Chicago. I had never even heard of such a thing as the Spanish Civil War. And yet here it was, a painting that said to me, this is what people can do to each other. These were people thousands of miles from where I lived, but I felt in some way connected to them.

Art and culture have always been a part of my life, not in any practicing way - I have absolutely no talent whatsoever - - but as an observer, as someone who tries to appreciate what I see and hear. In fact, I really attribute my long-time marriage and relationship with my husband to art. Now, that is a headline! I was standing in line at the Yale Law School to register for classes and struck up a conversation with this young man I had seen wandering around the law school. He likes to say that we noticed each other because we each did not attend a certain class very often, so when we showed up it was rather noticeable.

But whatever the story, we began talking and had not finished talking after we signed up for classes. We began to walk around the Yale campus. He suggested that we go to the University museum to see a wonderful exhibit of Rothko paintings and to show me one of his favorite Henry Moore sculptures. We arrived at the door of the museum only to find that it was closed. My husband, being the person he is, convinced the janitor to let us into the museum. And the bargain he struck was that we could go into the museum if first we collected the trash that had filled the courtyard of the museum. So, in we went where we spent a memorable afternoon looking at the Rothkos and looking at the sculptures. Now, that was my first date with Bill Clinton, but it also was my first date with Rothko and Henry Moore. And all three of them have stayed a part of my life ever since.

I hope that every one of you either has had, or will have, an experience like that with

some aspect of the arts or humanities. And it is why I believe it is so important that we do all we can to make sure that the arts and humanities are available in every school in America, in every community in the entire nation. I have to confess that I find it disheartening when members of Congress, or local school boards, or state governments decree that public support of the arts and humanities is a luxury that we cannot afford.

I have seen what it does in the lives of young people whom we do not ordinarily think of as season ticket holders to the symphony or the opera. Just last week I visited a junior high school in an inner city Washington neighborhood whose students are drawn mostly from housing projects nearby. I brought with me our three most recent Poets Laureate. And I was delighted to have them with me to see in action a program that is funded by the National Endowment for the Arts through the Writer Core where writers and poets are assigned to work with these young people.

The students we saw were engaged in what is called a poetry slam. Now, I did not know what that was. If you have never seen a poetry slam, it is a high speed, high-spirited competition in which students face off against one another by reading their own poems and then being scored like ice skating at the Olympics from a group of judges. These students, all of them African-American, all of them from poor homes, recited poems that just made my heart leap. Some of them had poems about their own names, or about the plight of a homeless man in their neighborhood, or the contributions of Duke Ellington. They talked of their pride, their joys, their pain. They also talked about how poetry, and learning how to write poetry to express themselves enabled them to put their anger and pain on paper instead of acting it out. They talked about how writing poetry had given them confidence, a sense of purpose and accomplishment. One boy recited a poem with these wonderful lines: "I am so musical that when I write songs, you sing them for the rest of your life."

Later that evening, at the White House, the President and I hosted the Poets Laureate in a celebration of American poetry. Robert Pinsky, and Robert Haas and Rita Dove read American poets like Emily Dickinson and Wallace Stevens and William Carlos Williams and so many others. We had this broadcast, cybercast, over the Internet, and I think it is archived if any of you are interested.

In the audience in the East Room that night we also asked some non-poets to read their favorite poem. A disabled veteran from a veteran's home, in a wheelchair, read with a wonderful, gravelly voice Robert Frost's Stopping By Woods On A Snowy Evening. He said it kept him going because he, too, despite his serious injuries, had miles to go.

A minister from Boston told how, as a young, rebellious man in high school, he had been taken under the wing of a teacher who introduced him to poetry and literature, and took him off the streets. He read a poem that had made an impression on him as a young man and which he still reads, Henry Wadsworth Longfellow's Psalm of Life.

A high school teacher from Virginia, flanked by several of his students. Brought many in the audience to tears when he recited Dudley Randall's Ballad of Birmingham.

And a little seventh grader, who was part of the poetry slam competition from the District of Columbia, stole the show when she offered a spirited and touching reading of Langston Hughes' Life Is Fine.

Now, whether you watched in the audience or on your computer screen or C-Span or at one of the satellite downlink sites, you had to come away from the evening with a much greater sense not only of the richness of our nation's tradition of poetry, but aloof the way that poetry has influenced us as a nation and recorded what we have done during our passage these last more than 200 years.

It is essential that we continue to celebrate the arts and humanities. You are showing us here at this university how to do it. It is also essential that we take the arts and humanities into places where they are not so commonly discussed or understood. We have seen how the arts can transform the lives of children at risk. We need to do more of that.

And I am concerned that, at a time when we need the arts more than ever, music and art in our schools are being cut back. So many young people no longer have access to music lessons or art lessons during the school day. One of my hopes for the millennium is that all of us who care about the arts and music, particularly in our schools, will do what we can to put them back into all schools so that all students have access to them.

There is another very essential role of the arts and humanities today. At a time when our nation is still dogged by racial insensitivities and unfounded stereotypes, what better way to come to terms with our multiethnic, multiracial way of life than to share in each other's ideas, emotions, tastes and attitudes. Reading Langston Hughes' poem helps us understand what an experience different from our own might be.

I think it is very important that this university pursue the particular goal that it has had of having a diverse campus. And I want to thank again President Bollinger and Provost Cantor for their words because in this op-ed piece they write: "Institutions of higher education have pursued a conception of education that emphasizes the joys, the variety and the benefits of emerging with different experiences and perspectives. This means we ask of every applicant, what will you contribute to the whole; not where do you stand in splendid, isolated comparison with everyone else."

When I read that today, I thought back to an experience I had in 1965 that I have not thought of very much since then. When I grew up in my suburb, it was all white. I attended all white schools from kindergarten through high school. I never had any real contact with black or Hispanic or Asian youngsters my age. I was very lucky that when I was in high school, I had a minister at my church who said very forthrightly to all of us middle class, white suburban kids, there is a big world out there, and you are not even going to understand how to deal with it unless you get beyond the boundaries of your own experience. And he took us down to the City of Chicago where we would have evenings with black and Hispanic youngsters. We didn't become friends, but you know what we did on those evenings? We talked about poetry and paintings.

I will never forget a discussion with a group of Hispanic youngsters where we talked about a wonderful E.E. Cummings poem in which it starts: "Dying is fine, but, oh, baby, death is not" or something like that. Don't hold me to it.

But death, oh, baby - oh, I know what it is.

"Dying is fine, but death, oh, baby, I wouldn't like death if death were good."

And we talked about that. And the experience of the Hispanic kids was very different because every one of them had seen somebody die.

People in our families died in hospitals. They died a long way from where we were. They didn't die at home, and they didn't die on the streets.

And all of a sudden I realized that there were very different experiences that I did not have a clue about.

When I did go to Wellesley, I was, for the first time, attending school with women who were different from me. They were black. They were brown. They came from other places, had other experiences. And I remember going to church one Sunday with a young African-American woman who became a friend of mine. I had never gone anywhere with an African-American before. And we went off campus, and we went to this church. And I can remember talking with people later about what an amazing experience that was for me. She and I became great friends, but I never would have had that opportunity if I had gone to school at a place where everybody looked like me and everybody had the same background as I did.

It opened my eyes in a number of ways. And that is why it is so important that, if we believe in the message of the arts and humanities, we take it to its conclusion, which is that we all have much to learn from each other and each other's rich cultural traditions and histories.

You are doing that in a very practical way here in Ann Arbor in one of the oldest historic neighborhoods. The Broadway Bridge Reconstruction effort will unite people young and old throughout Ann Arbor. You will be exploring local culture through history and writing, photography, design and other disciplines. It is a wonderful example of how the arts and humanities can provoke the imaginations of people in an entire community and how you can literally build a bridge to the future.

You know, my husband and I are very partial to bridge metaphors because we think that they happen to very well display to us, in a lot of different ways, what it is we are trying to do - how we imagine, how we envision what comes next. To that end, we have chosen in the White House to use the millennium as a way to honor the past and imagine the future - - again, that word, imagine. Because we do believe in the importance of imagination.

The founding fathers imagined America. Who could have dreamed what they imagined

only a few years before? Imagination has fueled the American dream in the lives of countless men and women. Imagination is what keeps us going day in and day out. Time and time again, here in America, we have supported the arts because we have understood they are the fuel for imagination.

In 1962, when President Kennedy asked for public support of the arts, he reminded Americans that Abraham Lincoln ordered work to go forward on the capitol dome during the Civil War. And I would add that one of the great sources of solace that President Lincoln had during the Civil War was the poetry he read and wrote, plays that he saw, people who inspired him to keep imagining. Franklin Roosevelt, in the midst of World War II, dedicated the National Gallery of Art in Washington.

And President Kennedy said about them, "These leaders understood that the life of the arts, far from being an interruption, a distraction in the life of the nation, is very close to the center of a nation's purpose and is a test of the quality of a nation's civilization." We are now facing that test ourselves. That is why in the White House we are sponsoring a millennium program that invites speakers to come, like the Poets Laureate, to lecture about topics ranging from America's founding ideas to creativity and science. That is why we are going to showcase American art, so that we can see what we have contributed to this great march of human civilization. It is why we are launching a project to save America's treasures because so many of our nation's cultural treasures, from precious documents like the Bill of Rights and the Constitution to artifacts like the Star Spangled Banner which inspired our nations anthem, are in danger of deteriorating.

Universities have a special role to play in making sure we are all conscious of the importance of the arts and humanities because it is a university provides a safe haven for unconventional ideas and thought. This gives space for people to exercise their imaginations. They are incubators of culture. These are the places where we can test our ideas, our emotions, our experiences, and attitudes which is why we do not need to do it in front of a mirror. We need to do it in a larger community that reflects back to us new ideas, new emotions, and new experiences. And by doing so, we are therefore, able to make choices for ourself as to what kind of people we wish to be and what sorts of citizens we intend to be.

As the Year of the Humanities and Arts of Citizenship program here has shown, you can provoke thought. You can create collective discourse. And you need to continue doing that. The arts and humanities really are such great equalizers for all of us.

In front of a painting like Guernica or a beautiful piece of poetry, we are all in awe. And we all have to reach deep down inside so, together, let us honor the past and let us imagine the future. And by doing so, let us live up to the ideas of our democratic way of life by placing the arts and humanities front and center in the ongoing effort to make America a more perfect union.

Thank you very much.

THE UNIVERSITY OF MICHIGAN CELEBRATES THE
YEAR OF HUMANITIES AND ARTS (YoHA)
AND THE ARTS OF CITIZENSHIP PROGRAM

APRIL 28, 1998

2:00 p.m.

HILL AUDITORIUM

INTRODUCTION

PRESIDENT LEE C. BOLLINGER

PUBLIC ADDRESS

FIRST LADY HILLARY RODHAM CLINTON

This is an unedited transcript produced from the audio tape of the event on April 28, 1998.

WARNING: Misspellings of proper names and other words may appear in this document.

SR

(Standing ovation)

PRESIDENT BOLLINGER: This afternoon, we mark the conclusion of the University's Year of Humanities and Arts, fondly referred to as YoHA.

It is a sign of just how enormously successful this series of programs has been for the University and for our community that our final lecture will be delivered by First Lady Hillary Rodham Clinton.

(Cheers and applause)

Before introducing Mrs. Clinton, I would like to acknowledge the presence of several individuals and groups with us here today.

First, the people on the stage. Nancy Cantor is our esteemed Provost and Vice President for Academic Affairs, Chief Academic Officer of the University. Provost Cantor is a distinguished member of our faculty in the psychology department.

(Applause)

Julie Ellison is Professor of English in LS&A, noted for her scholarship in 19th Century American and English literature, and has served as Associate Vice President for Research, and the Director of YoHA, although as anyone who knows Professor Ellison will affirm, she is somewhat retiring and laconic--

(Laughter)

-- by nature, but with YoHA, Professor Ellison has herself been transformed --

(Laughter)

-- into a contagiously enthusiastic leader.

YoHA has touched many parts of the University through its course community speaker series and through events ranging from student readings of their creative works in the Cafe Shapiro of the undergraduate library to the Ken Burns film series sponsored by the library last December to a host of performances, projects, and events made possible by mini grants.

David Scobey is Assistant --

(Applause)

David Scobey is Assistant Professor of History and American Culture whose scholarly work has focused on urban social history.

It was Professor Scobey who originally conceived of the idea of the Arts of Citizenship component of YoHA.

He has directed this program designed to examine public culture and to bring the University's Arts and Humanities activities into closer collaboration with the City of Ann Arbor.

The Arts of Citizenship have included work on the Broadway Bridge Project and the Talking Bridges Lecture series with sponsored lectures by Lawrence Levine, Ken Burns, and on now to Hillary Rodham Clinton, First Lady of the United States.

David.

(Applause)

My wife, Jean, who has served as co-chair of YoHA along with Mayor Ingrid Sheldon, both of whom are present here today. And I will not soon forget the many evenings Jean would come back from meetings or events with Julie and David and express wonder at the energy, the unusual imagination and the dedication they have brought to enhancing and energizing our academic life and community.

Now is an appropriate time to express our collective thanks to them for their service.

Thank you.

(Applause)

I am pleased to say that the creativity of YoHA will have an ongoing life. Provost Nancy Cantor has announced that there will be mini grants or grants for innovative courses that enable students to engage in direct research and creative projects affecting the community.

These grants will be doubled and applied to all courses throughout the University.

We have also made the Arts of Citizenship project a continuing one with David Scobey as Director.

It will undertake a series of pilot projects involving site specific collaborations with community partners.

There are a number of other individuals that I would like to recognize. We have several Regents with us today: Regent Rebecca McGowan, Libby Maynard, and Philip Power. We have former Regent Veronica Latta Smith, Representatives Liz Brater and Jim Berryman, Attorney General Frank Kelley, Mayors Ingrid Sheldon of Ann Arbor and

Cheryl Farmer of Ypsilanti, Former Interim President Homer Neal, and music provided by the jazz ensemble from the Jazz Studies Program of the School of Music, and Amazin' Blue, the University's oldest coed a capella singing group.

I would also like to recognize Miss Ellen McCulloch-Lovell, who is the Director of the White House Millennium Program.

I would like to extend also a special welcome to our local school teachers and students and to representatives from our local community organizations who have joined us today.

And finally just to recognize Mr. Walter Orth, who is one of our ushers today, is completing 53 years of service to the University.

Thank you.

(Applause)

Hillary Rodham Clinton has a long association and a deep association with the University of Michigan. Indeed, she is a degree holder having received an honorary degree in 1994 and delivered the commencement address.

She also spoke at the Law School in 1992 prior to the election. And at that time, dazzled all of us with her ability to express ideas in a very, very coherent and incisive way.

(Laughter)

That is not exactly what I wanted to say.

(Laughter)

So returning to my text --

(Laughter)

By now we are all familiar with Mrs. Clinton's background. A native of Chicago, growing up in Park Ridge, Illinois; a young student serving in student government, organizing food drives and a member of the National Honors Society. She attends Wellesley College and is the first student ever asked to deliver the school's commencement address.

On to Yale Law School, graduating in 1973, not only an attorney and author as well as a Director on many boards, Mrs. Clinton is also the First Lady of Arkansas for 12 years.

She chairs the Arkansas Education Standards Committee, founds the Arkansas Advocates for Children and Families, and serves on the board of the Arkansas Children's Hospital.

She was named Arkansas Woman of the Year in 1984.

In 1992, the world changed for her and for us. As the nation's First Lady, Mrs. Clinton chaired the Task Force on National Health Care Reform and widely pursued --

(Applause)

And widely pursued her interests in ensuring adequate health care for all citizens as well as access to education, jobs and credit, protection from violence, and a general principle of inclusion in our political life.

Mrs. Clinton's deeply personal commitment to human rights has led her to travel around the world, always insisting on showing up in places where her presence could make the greatest difference, not only where officials would like to show off their accomplishments.

Mrs. Clinton is also one of the foremost advocates for women's issues, not only in the United States but throughout the world, and especially in the third world.

(Applause)

Finally, Mrs. Clinton has staunchly supported the arts and humanities and recognized the need for public funding of these activities.

(Applause)

Most recently, as part of the White House's Millennium Program, which was announced at the National Archives in August of 1997, a program "to celebrate the accomplishments of America in this century, to recognize and initiate projects, and to engage every sector of society in conveying our rich heritage to future generations."

Mrs. Clinton has sponsored a sculpture garden of 20th century sculpture at the White House. A collection of American crafts now tours throughout the country. And the Millennium Program Lecture Series brings some of our most creative artists and intellectuals to lecture at the White House.

Mrs. Clinton has been the leading advocate in Washington for public support of the arts and humanities.

(Applause)

Yet all I have said to this point conveys but the skeleton of the importance of Mrs. Clinton as a social and political actor in our world.

In any era, a few individuals become part of our individual and collective consciousness. There they reside affecting our daily commerce with life and the world. And what they say and do and stand for matters enormously in creating the sense of who we feel we are as a society and as part of a larger world.

Hillary Rodham Clinton is one of those individuals. It will be years, even decades before we will know and appreciate the full impact of how she has shaped our world, our sense of ourselves.

But at this stage, there is one very notable way in which she has fulfilled the responsibilities of this privileged and very special role. Hillary Rodham Clinton has made more vivid than almost anyone else in our society the critical importance and the real meaning of the idea of community and of the ways in which arts are needed to create community.

In a world of proliferating, so-called gated communities, her being exudes the point that this is an oxymoron. Community means encounters with the unfamiliar and the different as well as with the congenial and the like-minded.

Even families are paradigmatic communities. In many ways are people tossed and thrown together, and they create themselves and their strongest bonds as much out of difference as out of similarity.

What child has not wished -- and certainly Jean's and my children undoubtedly did -- having become frustrated with the incompetence of adults, to forge his or her own gated community, only to be taught that maturation means even unwanted involvement with others.

Today there are forces at work in the society that would extend and live out the concept of the gated community to many other and perhaps even all parts of our social life, to the shaping of higher education, and to the arts generally.

Forget the interests of creating a public character, they say, and leave it to the individual to decide.

In this strange and dangerous world, it is of inestimable importance to have a Hillary Rodham Clinton so powerfully present in our collective consciousness saying again and again that there are public values at stake here, that a public character is being constantly formed, and that it is not only, but nevertheless importantly, through our public interactions and encounters that our values and character are formed well.

She stands, therefore, for the ungating of American society.

It is my great honor to introduce the First Lady of the United States, Hillary Rodham Clinton.

(Standing ovation)

FIRST LADY HILLARY RODHAM CLINTON: Thank you.

Thank you very much, President Bollinger and Provost Cantor, administrators, faculty, students, alumni of this great university, members of the Ann Arbor community, elected officials, distinguished guests and friends.

It is a pleasure to be back here in Ann Arbor and back on this campus, back in this concert hall. Not only have many great American artists performed on this stage, the building is a monument to the creative expression of one of our nation's finest architects, Albert Kahn.

So I am very pleased that not only am I a degree holder from this university, but that I feel a part of this community.

We gather today for the continuation of an important discussion that was started here last year about the humanities and the arts and what they mean to us, what they should mean to us, what they must mean to us and to our country.

I was thinking, as I listened to President Bollinger speak, that this year-long series that you have had going on the campus is particularly apt because certainly, as we move toward the end of this century, and indeed toward a new millennium, we are going to be thinking more often and more deeply about who we are, where we are going, what we mean to one another, what our lives mean to ourselves.

I want to thank the leadership of this university for helping all of us to begin that discussion.

I would like to thank Lee Bollinger for his many contributions: As a legal scholar, as the President of this University, and perhaps even more importantly as an advocate for the principles and traditions of American public higher education.

Through his dedication --

(Applause)

-- this university continues to stand for what is best in the history of our country.

And I know that President Bollinger, among his many academic accomplishments, is something of a First Amendment scholar. And I, too, am a great supporter of the First Amendment, but I can't help but think that it might have just passed even through his mind that censorship would be in order given the recent UPI college ratings as opposed to those by the AP.

(Laughter and applause)

But staying true to his values, you did not hear that from him.

(Laughter)

The classrooms and laboratories on this campus remind us of the value of a diverse student body and faculty and the benefits they bring to a university community.

And I was --

(Applause)

I was very impressed and moved by the opinion piece that was written by President Bollinger and Provost Cantor that appeared today in the Washington Post entitled The Educational Importance of Race.

I commend it to everyone on this campus, and indeed on every campus, because it talks about, in a very clear way, the challenges that we face as we attempt to bring our university systems into the future with our values and ideals intact.

I want to thank Provost Cantor for your advocacy on behalf of the arts and humanities, and for the time and energy you have committed to helping Congress explore the role of women in our nation's military.

(Applause)

And I would also like to thank as well Associate Vice Provost Julie Ellison, Director of the Year of the Humanities and Arts, and David Scobey, Director of the Arts of Citizenship Program, for sharing with students, faculty and the Ann Arbor community their vision of the dynamic relationship between the arts and humanities and a democratic society.

When one thinks about the title of this series, Arts of Citizenship, it could be just as well stated arts and citizenship because, to my mind, they are very closely related. The arts play an integral role in determining what we mean by citizenship. And certainly when I use the word arts, I am including arts and humanities.

And they also tell us something about how we practice the art of citizenship, what it means to be part of a large, diverse, pluralistic democracy, particularly at this point in history.

So this conversation does come at a propitious time. And as I was thinking back on the last 1,000 years, as we are about to end this millennium, I was reminded of all of the dire predictions that were occurring around that time.

I don't know if you have ever heard of a prolific and rather controversial monk by the name of Raoul Glaber, who lived in the 10th century, who consistently warned his local citizenry of impending doom.

Now, perhaps because of his checkered career — he was expelled from several monasteries — he didn't attract much of a following. The earth did not implode as he predicted. And, in fact, we have a lot of progress that we can look to over the next ten centuries, even though we still can mark those last 1,000 years as well by plagues and genocides and other unbearable human suffering.

But Raoul Glaber comes from a long line of doomsayers and pessimists about the human condition. The kind of people who are always looking for what is wrong with the advancements that occur, who are always pointing fingers at one another and predicting the end of civilization as we know it.

And yet despite the doomsayers and despite all of our own follies and missteps and tragedies, we have a lot to look back on with pride because time's passage also allowed for the discoveries of Galileo and Newton, the art of an El Greco or Rubens or Picasso, the writings of a Murasaki, a Shakespeare, Tagore, Neruda, the ideas of Locke and Gandhi, and so many more.

We can also look at those who were political actors who helped move the idea of human progress forward. We can look at those who built a strong economy, created inventions and scientific discoveries, all of which unleashed human potential and energy.

We know that for the last thousand years, from Islamic communities spreading north across Africa to Native American Indian tribes right here in the upper Midwest, people created new forms of art, built cities, designed new systems of cultivation, remapped their worlds and thought up new ideas.

Now, fueling all of these scientific, intellectual and artistic advances was, of course, the human imagination. An imagination rooted not only in the knowledge and understanding of the past, but in the ability to dream and envision a future; an imagination that allowed men and women throughout time to say no to the archetypal doomsday monks and yes to their own ideas of the possibility of a more positive and more possible tomorrow.

Today we find ourselves at the end of another century and even another millennium. And there is a lot that will occur in the next several years, all kinds of retrospectives, people talking about the past, worrying about the future.

But what I hope is that conversations like the one taking place here, about the humanities and the arts, will help us think more clearly about what is at stake as we plan our own individual futures and as we think about that larger, public, common good.

There are many unanswered questions about what will happen in the 21st century. Will this century finally yield a cure for cancer? Will we find another Mozart? Will we end poverty, or perhaps even aim and come near to lasting world peace?

Maybe some of that, but certainly not all of it because we will continue as human beings having to strive to overcome the age old problems that have beset us.

Yet we also have a darker view of what might occur. Will the next 100 years give rise to more ethnic and racial hatred? A wider chasm between the rich and the poor? The spread of biological or chemical warfare? Or even a brave new world of genetically engineered people who look and act the same?

Now, when I think about the future, I come down, as you might guess, on a more optimistic note than a pessimistic one.

I am congenitally, I suppose, optimistic, but I have also seen enough progress in my own lifetime to believe that we can continue to overcome the challenges that divide us and make progress together.

But I have to confess that I am worried about certain trends that I see around me every day; trends that could, without being checked by our knowledge of our history, our understanding of ourselves, and a willingness to work together to create a consensus about what we wish for our future; trends that could undermine our conceptions of ourselves as human beings and make it more difficult for us to have a common future.

Now, those trends are self-evident.

What does it mean that we have such instantaneous communication and such rapid technological advancement?

Well, of course, in many ways it means great opportunities. It means that we can be in touch with people around the world. It means that we can have more information than we ever dreamed possible. And yet it also means that we can retreat into anonymity, that we can be less personal in our dealings with one another, that we can hide behind a computer keyboard and communicate with the world only at a distance.

It means that we can be so glutted by information that we can't make any sense out of it; that we have no context for it; that we are bombarded day in and day out by factoids that don't add up to knowledge and wisdom but threaten to drown us in irrelevancy.

I worry, too, about the need that so many people have to hang on to their own identity as they most narrowly define it. How do they reach out into the wider world when the wider world seems so confusing and so threatening?

And, in fact, one of the most frightening developments that I have personally been studying and thinking about is the way mass communications has played a role in the genocides of Rwanda and Bosnia, where people who before had lived at least peacefully with one another were whipped into frenzies of hatred and fear because of the messages that were coming across the television, the radio, and even the computer. People who didn't know how to make sense of those messages, but were pushed into action because of what they were being told.

I also wonder about how we will survive as a democracy, and how we will retain a sense of citizenship when there is so much pressure on a daily basis to move us toward a society of consumers and away from a democracy of citizens.

The emphasis on our consumer culture distorts our sense of self. It threatens the essence of our pluralistic society, and yet it seems beyond our control to stop. More and more messages pour out more and more quickly influencing particularly the minds and lives of young people.

Why are more young American teenagers smoking? Well, there is overwhelming evidence that they are enticed to do so; that it seems like a very grown up, rebellious thing to do; that the messages they receive, either directly or indirectly through the wider culture, create an atmosphere in which they think it's a choice that will enhance their sense of self-being.

Why are more American children driven to violence? We are seeing more and more evidence that it does matter what is in the popular culture. It really does count how many hours of television you watch with how many violent episodes, how many murders, how many killers who are not remorseful at the end of the plot. That especially if you are a child from a situation that is not as stable as one would like, you

are particularly pray to those messages, to that image of reality that comes directly at you through that small machine in your living room or your bedroom.

Why do so many American children judge their worth by the logo on their sneakers instead of the good deeds that they might do or the homework that they finish at night?

Well, you know as well as I that the consumer culture driven by our free market economy demands more and more buying on the part of more and more consumers. So messages are aimed now not just at thirteen and fourteen year olds, but at eight and nine years olds because in order to keep this great engine going, we have to create a lot of unmet wants, a lot of frustration in the minds of people.

Now, this is not in and of itself any great cause for worry. We have certainly overcome a lot of challenges in the past. But combining all of these trends together I think should cause all of us to stop and think, am I being seduced? What am I giving up in my thinking and in my spirit to the consumer culture, to the machine of technology?

How do I keep some distance? How am I sure that I have the right balance in my life? How do I retain the most precious possession I have, my role as citizen, and enjoy the blessings that I am given because those who came before us understood the importance that democracy placed on the role of citizen?

And if one steps back and thinks about the images we have of the future, that is also a little disquieting.

I did a survey about how we think about what might happen in the century or millennium to come. And the overwhelming popular images are of movies in which desolation has occurred because of war, where road warriors are fighting one against the other, where there are people living under great glass bubbles or in very sterile atmospheres because we have polluted and degraded our environment.

We don't have a picture in our heads of the kind of society that we want and expect to live in in the future. And in part that is because change has been so fast in the last decades, faster than at any point in human history, and we are only now being able to digest it.

I have often heard it said that, you know, human evolution proceeded over tens of thousands and millions of years, but within this last century we have been stretched, physically and emotionally and mentally and spiritually, unlike any -- any of our ancestors ever have before.

So how do we take all of these trends, and how do we begin to understand what they are doing to us so that we can assert control over them, and what do the arts and humanities have to do with all of that anyway?

Well, I would argue that the arts and humanities still give us the best guide we will ever have to thinking through the problems of today and tomorrow.

It is not a luxury to read the great poetry of the past, to ponder Shakespeare's plays, to think about the Greek philosophers, to wonder in our own minds what modern poetry and literature and film are saying to us.

Instead, I think it is a responsibility because as we think hard about these challenging ideas that come to us from those who are our scholars and our artists, we will be better equipped in our own lives and in our public life to go on.

One of the people who has been most astute in looking at the consumer culture and what we have done in modern days that undermines our sense of well-being with one another, our obligation toward each other, is the Czech President and playwright, Vaclav Havel.

He has written and spoken at great length about how in the pressure of modern culture we are homogenizing our desires and tastes.

Now, one would think that if everybody in the world wore blue jeans and a certain kind of sneaker, as they do on every continent I have visited, if everybody listened to the same kind of music and watched Baywatch around the world --

(Laughter)

-- that that would bring us closer together as a people. That, you know, gee, somebody watching Baywatch in Bangladesh would feel really close with somebody watching Baywatch in Bolivia, for example.

(Laughter)

But what Havel points out, which I think is right, that almost in an unconscious way, if you will, there is a rebellion against this homogenization. There is a rejection of it even while people take more and more of it in.

One reads about horrific events in India where people are burning brides because the dowry didn't bring a color television but only a black and white one. One reads about people in Africa, who are living in terribly distressed situations, who are spending every dollar they have to try to put on the accoutrements of what they think of as the modern American pop culture.

And yet beneath that superficial homogenization, we are seeing a great striving for identity and a great need to separate ourselves from one another because human beings have to feel as though they have some identity that is of importance in their eyes, in the eyes of those whom they look to for validation.

If we stop and think about the trends that are sweeping the world, then I think it is fair to say that we are moving in a direction where all of the haves, which include us in this room, people of education and affluence and particularly people fortunate enough to live in strong, stable, functioning democracies, will be more and more caught up in the world of materialism as we work harder and harder and longer and longer hours to deal with the machines that are taking greater control over our lives.

It is hard to escape. We have 24 hour television channels. We have 24 hour fax machines. You are never out of touch. You never have a moment to stop and think. Decisions are demanded from you all the time. The e-mail messages come over and people expect responses to them.

It is hard for the arts and humanities to flourish when there is very little space left in the popular culture. And that is why we have to do all we can to support them, and to make it clear that they are not a luxury, but they are essential to the refueling of the human imagination.

(Applause)

If one thinks about our earliest human ancestors, they did not first invent money. They first drew on the walls of caves. They first created figurines that had religious and other significance to them.

What were they trying to say? What were they doing? They were finding that special human trait, that attribute of imagination and using it.

I can just imagine scenarios of some kind of young man or woman wandering around not paying attention to the mammoth hunt.

(Laughter)

And all of the relatives are saying, "You know, he just isn't with it! He is going to get us all killed!"

(Laughter)

And then back in the cave that night with the flickering fire, everyone else asleep, he is taking the charcoal and he is drawing a mammoth.

So all of a sudden out of his imagination comes an opportunity to share an experience that maybe someone who had never seen one before could now understand.

We created the arts so that we could advance as human beings, so that our imagination could have an outlet.

We saw it as a way to communicate in ways that we couldn't, just by doing and being.

It is one of our earliest ways of defining ourselves as human.

It is through history and philosophy –

(Applause)

– literature and painting, music, sculpture, poetry, photography, dance, architecture, design, all of it, that we can reclaim the popular imagination, that we can rekindle our spirit of citizenship and exercise the power of our ideas, experiences and feelings to promote a brighter vision of the future.

In our country, there is too often an assumption that the arts and humanities are an exclusive preserve of the rich or the best educated or some cultural elite. Yet from our own personal experiences, we know otherwise.

How many of us have felt our hearts stir at a favorite song or a painting or a haunting passage in a novel or a dancer's elegant leap?

About a week or so ago, I read a very provocative opinion editorial in the New York Times where a classics professor talked about what Thucydides meant to his community college students.

He said, "I have taught at some of the great colleges in America, but in these community colleges, in these state universities where young people and not so young ones are enrolled and often working full time, they come to Thucydides with their own personal experience. And all of a sudden, the world of ideas and history opens up to them."

How many of us have had an experience like that?

I remember very well when I was probably in junior high coming across a print of Guernica. Looking at that provocative painting that Picasso had done after the fascist bombing of Guernica, I finally realized that art was more than aesthetic. It was a way of communicating, a way of taking people beyond the boundaries of their own experience and giving them a greater understanding of the world around them.

Guernica taught me about the human condition. I had never seen anything like that in my own life. I was born in Chicago. I grew up in a very safe suburb in the outskirts of Chicago. I had never even heard of such a thing like the Spanish Civil War. And yet here it was, a painting which said to me, this is what people can do to each other. People thousands of miles from where I lived, but who I in some way felt connected to.

Art and culture have always been a part of my life. Not in any practicing way. I have absolutely no talent whatsoever --

(Laughter)

-- but as an observer, as someone who tries to appreciate what I see and hear.

In fact, I really attribute my long-time marriage and relationship with my husband to art.

Now, that is a headline!

(Laughter and applause)

I was standing in line at the Yale Law School to register for classes the following year and struck up a conversation with this young man I had seen wandering around the law school.

(Laughter)

He likes to say that we noticed each other because we each did not attend a certain class very often, so when we showed up it was rather noticeable.

But whatever the story, we began talking and didn't finish talking after we signed up for classes. We began to walk around the Yale campus. He suggested that we go to the University museum to see a wonderful exhibit of Rothko paintings and to show me one of his favorite Henry Moore sculptures.

We arrived at the door of the museum only to find that it was closed. And my husband, being the person he is, convinced the janitor to let us into the museum.

(Laughter and applause)

And the bargain we struck was that we could go into the museum if first we collected the trash that had filled the courtyard of the museum.

And so in we went where we spent a memorable afternoon looking at the Rothkos and looking at the sculptures.

Now, that was my first date with Bill Clinton, but it also my first date with Rothko and Henry Moore. And all three of them have stayed a part of my life ever since.

(Laughter and applause)

I hope that every one of you either has had or will have an experience like that with some aspect of the arts or humanities. And it is why I believe it is so important that we do all we can to make sure that the arts and humanities are available in every school in America, in every community in the entire nation.

(Cheers and applause)

I have to confess that I find it disheartening when members of Congress or local school boards or state governments decree that public support for the arts and humanities is a luxury that we cannot afford.

I believe it is a necessity that we must afford.

(Applause)

And I have seen what it does in the lives of young people who we don't ordinarily think of as season ticket holders to the symphony or the opera.

Just last week I visited a junior high school in an inner city Washington neighborhood whose students are drawn mostly from housing projects nearby.

I brought with me our three most recent Poets Laureate. And I was delighted to have them with me to see in action a program that is funded by the National Endowment for the Arts through the Writer Core where writers and poets are assigned to work with these young people.

And the students we saw were engaged in what is called a poetry slam. Now, I did not know what that was.

(Laughter)

If you have never seen a poetry slam, it is a high speed, high-spirited competition in which students face off against one another by reading their own poems and then being scored like ice skating at the Olympics from a group of judges.

These students, all of them African-American, all of them from poor homes, recited poems that just made my heart leap.

Some of them had poems about their own names, or about the plight of a homeless man in their neighborhood, or the contributions of Duke Ellington. They talked of their pride, their joys, their pain.

They also talked about how poetry and learning how to write poetry and express themselves enabled them to put their anger and pain on paper instead of acting it out.

They talked about how writing poetry had given them confidence, a sense of purpose and accomplishment.

One boy recited a poem with wonderful lines like this:

"I am so musical that when I write songs, you sing them for the rest of your life."

(Laughter)

Later that evening, at the White House, the President and I hosted the Poets Laureate in a celebration of American poetry. Robert Pinsky and Robert Haas and Rita Dove read American poets like Emily Dickinson and Wallace Stevens and William Carlos Williams and so many others.

We had this broadcast, cybercast, over the Internet, and I think it is archived if any of you are interested.

But in the audience in the East Room that night we also asked some non-poets to read their favorite poem. A disabled veteran from a veteran's home, in a wheelchair, read with a wonderful, gravelly voice Robert Frost's *Stopping By Woods On A Snowy Evening*. He said it kept him going because he, too, despite his serious injuries, had miles to go.

A minister from Boston told about how, as a young, rebellious man in high school, he had been taken under the wing of a teacher who introduced him to poetry and literature, took him off the streets. And he read a poem that had made an impression on him as a young man and which he still read, Henry Wadsworth Longfellow's *Psalm of Life*.

A high school teacher from Virginia, flanked by several of his students, brought many in the audience to tears when he recited Dudley Randall's *Ballad of Birmingham*.

And a little seventh grader, who was part of the poetry slam competition from the District of Columbia, stole the show when she offered a spirited and touching reading of Langston Hughes' *Life Is Fine*.

Now, whether you watched in the audience or on your computer screen or C-Span or at one of the satellite downlink sites, you had to come away from that evening with a much greater sense of the richness of our nation's tradition of poetry, but also how that poetry has influenced us as a nation and recorded what we have done during our passage these last more than 200 years.

It is essential that we continue to celebrate the arts and humanities. And you are showing us here at this university how to do it.

It is also essential that we take the arts and humanities into places where they are not so commonly discussed or understood.

We have seen how the arts can transform the lives of children at risk. We need to do more of that.

And I am concerned that, at a time when we need the arts more than ever, music and art in our schools are being cut back. So many young people no longer have access to music lessons or art lessons during the school day.

And one of my hopes for the millennium is that all of us who care about the arts and music, particularly in our schools, will do what we can to put them back into all schools so that all students have access to them.

(Applause)

There is another very essential role of the arts and humanities today. At a time when our nation is still dogged by racial insensitivities and unfounded stereotypes, what better way to come to terms with our multiethnic, multiracial way of life than to share in each other's ideas, emotions, tastes and attitudes.

Reading of Langston Hughes' poem helps us understand what an experience different from our own might be.

I think it is very important that this university pursue the particular goal that it has had of having a diverse campus. And I want to thank again President Bollinger and Provost Cantor for their words because in this op ed piece they write: "Institutions of higher education have pursued a conception of education that emphasizes the joys, the variety and the benefits of emerging with different experiences and perspectives. This means we ask of every applicant, what will you contribute to the whole, not where do you stand in splendid, isolated comparison with everyone else."

(Applause)

When I read that today, I thought back to an experience I had in 1965 that I have not thought of very much since then.

When I grew up in my suburb, it was all white. I attended all white schools from kindergarten through high school. I never had any real contact with Black or Hispanic or Asian youngsters my age.

I was very lucky that when I was in high school, I had a minister at my church who said very forthrightly to all of us middle class, white suburban kids, there is a big world out there, and you are not even going to understand how to deal with it unless you get beyond the boundaries of your own experience.

And he took us down to the City of Chicago where we would have evenings with black youngsters at churches and Hispanic youngsters at churches. We didn't become friends, but you know what we did in those evenings? We talked about poetry and paintings.

I will never forget a discussion with a group of Hispanic youngsters where we talked about a wonderful e e cummings poem in which it starts: Dying is fine, but, oh, baby, death is not. Something like that. Don't hold me to it.

(Laughter)

But death, oh, baby – oh, I know what it is.

"Dying is fine, but death, oh, baby, I wouldn't like death if death were good."

And we talked about that. And the experience of the Hispanic kids was very different because every one of them had seen somebody die.

People in our families died in hospitals. They died a long way from where we were. They didn't die at home, and they didn't die on the streets.

And all of a sudden I realized that there were very different experiences that I did not have a clue about.

When I did go to Wellesley, I was, for the first time, attending school with women who were different from me. They were black. They were brown. They came from other places, had other experiences. And I remember going to church one Sunday with a young African-American woman who became a friend of mine.

I had never gone anywhere with an African-American before.

And we went off campus, and we went to this church. And I can remember talking with people later about what an amazing experience that was for me.

She and I became great friends, but I never would have had that opportunity if I had gone to school at a place where everybody looked like me and everybody had the same background as I did.

It opened my eyes in a number of ways. And that is why it is so important that, if we believe in the message of the arts and humanities, we take it to its conclusion, which is that we all have much to learn from each other and each other's rich cultural traditions and histories.

You are doing that in a very practical way here in Ann Arbor in one of the oldest historic neighborhoods. The Broadway bridge reconstruction effort will unite people young and old from throughout Ann Arbor.

You will be exploring local culture through history and writing, photography, design and other disciplines.

It is a wonderful example of how the arts and humanities can provoke imaginations of people in an entire community and how you can literally build a bridge to the future.

You know, my husband and I are very partial to bridge metaphors --

(Laughter)

-- because we think that they happen to very well display to us, in a lot of different ways, what it is we are trying to do. How we imagine, how we envision what comes next.

To that end, we have chosen in the White House to use the millennium as a way to honor the past and imagine the future.

Again, that word, imagine.

Because we do believe in the importance of imagination.

The founding fathers imagined America. Who could have dreamed what they imagined only a few years before?

Imagination has fueled the American dream in the lives of countless men and women.

Imagination is what keeps us going day in and day out.

And time and time again, here in America, we have supported the arts because we have understood that they are the fuel for imagination.

In 1962, when President Kennedy asked for public support of the arts, he reminded Americans that Abraham Lincoln ordered work to go forward on the capitol dome during the Civil War.

And I would add that one of the great sources of solace that President Lincoln had during the Civil War was poetry he read and wrote, plays that he saw, people who inspired him to keep imagining.

Franklin Roosevelt, in the midst of World War II, dedicated the National Gallery of Art in Washington.

And President Kennedy said about them, "These leaders understood that the life of the arts, far from being an interruption, a distraction in the life of the nation, is very close to the center of a nation's purpose and is a test of the quality of a nation's civilization."

We are now facing that test ourselves.

That is why in the White House we are sponsoring a millennium program that invites speakers to come, like the Poets Laureate, to lecture about topics ranging from America's founding ideas to creativity and science. That is why we are going to showcase American art, so that we can see what we have contributed to this great march of human civilization.

It is why we are launching a project to save America's treasures because so many of our nation's cultural treasures, from precious documents like the Bill of Rights and the Constitution to artifacts like the Star Spangled Banner which inspired our national anthem, are in danger of destruction.

Universities have a special role to play in making sure we are all conscious of the importance of the arts and humanities because it is a university that provides a safe haven for unconventional ideas and thoughts, that gives space for people to exercise their imaginations, that are incubators of culture.

These are the places where we can test our ideas, our emotions, our experiences, and attitudes, which is why we do not need to do it in front of a mirror. We need to do it in a larger community that reflects back to us new ideas, new emotions, and new experiences. And by doing so, we are, therefore, able to make choices for ourselves as to what kind of people we wish to be and what sorts of citizens we intend to be.

As the Year of the Humanities and Arts of Citizenship program here have shown, you can provoke thought. You can create collective discourse. And you need to continue doing that.

The arts and humanities really are such great equalizers for all of us.

In front of a painting like Guernica or a beautiful piece of poetry, we are all in awe. And we all have to reach deep down inside.

So, together, let us honor the past and let us imagine the future. And by doing so, let us live up to the ideals of our democratic way of life by placing the arts and humanities front and center in the ongoing effort to make America a more perfect union.

Thank you very much.

(Standing ovation)