
EDUCATING OUR VICES*

PETER M. CICCHINO

*Mr. President, Madame President, Members of the Faculty, Honored Guests,
Fellow Graduates, Beloved Sisters and Brothers of the School of Law:*

As part of a course I took this semester at the Law School, I recently made a speech, in court, in which I was aggressive and argumentative, utterly convinced of the rightness of my own opinion, and absolutely incessant about explaining why my position was the only correct one. Though praised by my teachers, and quite successful before the judge, these are precisely the qualities that my family and friends have been criticizing in me for years.

At that moment, I realized that I have long harbored the misconception that education is about the systematic replacement of vice by virtue. If three years at Harvard have taught me anything, it's that that's not true.

More often than not, education consists not in reconstructing ourselves by eradicating our vices, but in learning how to deploy those vices for our own good and for the good of the communities in which we live.

* Copyright © 1992 Peter M. Cicchino. Originally entitled *What to do with a Harvard Education: Making the Best of Our Vices*, this speech was selected as Harvard University's 1992 Graduate English Address. Peter M. Cicchino delivered the address at the annual commencement exercises in Harvard Yard on June 4, 1992.

So today, I'd like to talk about (not surprisingly) three vices which this community possesses: arrogance, contentiousness, and a sense of entitlement. And how we might use those vices for the service of others.

First, arrogance. Talking about arrogance at Harvard is like talking about Catholicism at the Vatican. So pervasive is the reality one hesitates to comment upon it. Nevertheless, given my theme, I cannot help but observe that this is a place marked by an astonishing degree of institutional – and, dare I say it – personal arrogance. And perhaps with good reason. For though Yale may take consolation in silly little surveys done by U.S. News & World Report, we all know that Harvard remains the undisputed cultural icon of American higher education!

Now some might counsel you to humility. But I will not. Rather, I say use that arrogance. Take that sense of confidence and self-esteem, which Harvard has helped instill, and deploy it to console the afflicted and afflict the consoled. None of us, no matter how radical our politics, will deny having attended this institution. The Harvard name does carry with it some intrinsic social capital. So spend that capital on behalf of those to whom this society does not listen and for whom this society has very little regard.

Which brings me to my second point, contentiousness. In the Koran there is a saying: “Disagreement in my community is a sign of God’s generosity.” By that criterion, surely we are God’s chosen people! Never have

I lived in a place where so many diverse opinions are so strongly held and so well articulated. From strategies for diversifying our faculty to questions of human sexuality, we are ever engaged in argument. That is as it should be. Rather than counseling you to be less confrontational, I say “Go and speak your minds!”

Only those who still believe in the importance of deeper understanding, even apart from wider agreement, are willing to engage in such contention. Only those who have grown accustomed to advocating for a different social vision will be up to the task of reinvigorating popular discourse and articulating genuine political alternatives for their communities.

This leads to my third and final point. It occurs to me that one of the reasons for our arrogance and contentiousness is that, on some deep level, each of us believes that he or she is, in the words of Bruce Springsteen, “Born to Run.” Run businesses, run academic institutions, run the whole damn country! We have a vision of the way things ought to be and a sense that, if given the chance, we could help make them be that way. This is what I mean by a sense of entitlement, the experience, which Harvard has helped cultivate, of ourselves as *actors* in the world, people who make choices about our own lives and, if we are to be honest, about the lives of others.

Of the three vices, this is by far the most dangerous and yet the most important for us not to lose. The organization of material resources and

human community is an essential part of governance. And many of you will govern, either in public office or as leaders in your respective professions.

So today, at commencement, as we leave Harvard, my last bit of advice is that we embrace the responsibility to use what we have learned – yes, even the vices – to the advantage of those whom I once heard described as without voice and without choice. In that way, we can redeem what is worst, and make the most of all that is best, about a Harvard education.

Thank you.