

**EUGEN ROSENSTOCK-HUESSY**

**THE UNIVERSITY**

*Lecture University of California at Santa Cruz, February 15, 1968*

CHAPTER ONE: WHAT IS A UNIVERSITY?

I

1

Friends of Cowell College: I am the oldest student of the University of California here present.

*THE STORY OF ROSENSTOCK-HUESSY BEING THE OLDEST STUDENT*

I was taught by the president of the University of California in the year of the Lord 1909. That's a long time ago.

It was Benjamin Wheeler, and he was one of the most wonderful people I've ever run into. And I feel that with the authority of being a student of the University of California, I may very well say something today to you.

2

And what else could it be, through our new branch of this University of California, but to perhaps get you to agree what a university even today, even during Vietnam and flights to the moon is expected to achieve?

3

This University of California is new.

*THE STORY OF BENJAMIN WHEELER*

When I listened to Wheeler, he would say, "You know, Wisconsin is really quite a place. In Madison, they call it the Harvard of the West."

So you see, this here was beyond the pale. This was not even the West. It was the West-West, the Wild West. And he looked with great reverence even to Madison, Wisconsin.

I don't know if you do that.

But there it was. Here was the president of this great University of California. And founding this university, he was as you may know, the first president of this school. And he came to Berlin, Germany. And he could be expected to be understood. And I'll

try to tell you tonight what has been lost, I think, in most people's heart and even more in most people's brains, what a university is meant to represent, or to act out.

4

*THE STORY OF THE PRESIDENT OF STONEHILL COLLEGE*

I came on the plane here from Vermont. And on this plane there was a very, very reverend. And he was a college president. And he helped me very much in our talk - very nice man -- he said that he was president of Stonehill College.

Now I can assure you, I had never heard of Stonehill College, and I assume you haven't. It's a small college in Massachusetts. Have you ever heard of it?

But there it was. And he was president. And he told me a strange event.

His students had a discussion with him, and they couldn't understand each other very well. And he suddenly burst forth and said to them, "You can't understand me. What do I care for your present-day question? I'm only interested in 1980, what this college shall be like twelve years from now. And you only think how to get your exam."

II

1

I thought that was a very profound remark.

You think that you are younger and that I am old. And therefore you are related to the future quite mechanically. You can't help getting old. The expectation of life is so terribly long at this moment in this country, that life insurance has a hard time. And nobody has to be insured for life. Life insures us, anyway.

And the life expectation has grown, as you know, so that every man born from woman nowadays can expect to get seventy years old.

2

Now this president, however, said to the young, "You are in a hurry. You only want to know what the next course is, and what the next exam is. That doesn't help me. I have to know what will happen in 1980 with this college. Will I then have achieved what should be achieved? I don't care what is today, and I don't care what is tomorrow."

Isn't that a strange sequence, that the old man has to look to the far-flung future, and that you people who, sitting here, thinking you are much younger than I, are much

more obsolete? What you want now is an exam, and a degree, and a perhaps a wife. And -- oh, I won't say anything about the ladies, but a reasonable man of my age, my dear people, has no interest in tomorrow.

But I have a great interest in the day after tomorrow, in the century after tomorrow.

3

So it isn't as simple as you think, that the young are interested in the far-flung future, and the old are as of the moment.

It's just the other way around.

You are only interested in the moment of this college. And I can prove it to you.

There's a strange word in the English language, a very important word. And it has no article, neither in the Encyclopedia of the Social Sciences, nor in the People's Encyclopedia, nor even in the Encyclopaedia Britannica. And the word is "commencement." And it is so corrupt that what at one time was beginning now is supposed to be the end.

After commencement, nobody learns anything anymore. He doesn't need it. Commencement is the end of everything.

4

Now that is a very strange thing. It's the same with "Christmas." When Christmas is over, all the businessmen collapse, and go to Florida, and say, "It's all over."

Well, at one time, you know, it was the birthday of Christianity. This isn't true anymore of commercialized Christmas. It's the end of everything, especially the end of your checkbook. And without checkbook, you can't begin a new life.

III

1

Man is perverting the times.

Most of you do just at this moment. You care much more for your final exam than you care for the future of mankind.

And why? Because man corrupts all the time the future into the past, or into today.

It is very hard to agree on anything in this world. I can agree with my friend, the Stonehill College president, on 1980. And if we agree on what should be in 1980, we really are in agreement on all the important roads leading there.

And these roads come from 5000 B.C.

And for this reason, to agree on the future is the condition for having peace in the past.

2

Now nobody in this country seems to agree on the future. And therefore, the future of the United States is shrouded in darkness and ambiguity.

I'm now serious. I'm not joking.

The world of the universities has detached itself from the human future. And in this detachment, or in this abandonment into its own purposes, and its own exams, and degrees, and emoluments, and foundations, and laboratories, it may have lost the right to call itself a "university."

3

This question has occupied my biography, my life, my actions since -- I may say 1914, since the World War I and its outburst. Then I saw that the universities were quite unprepared to think of the future of the human race. They were only prepared to think of the future of physics.

So they produced the atom bomb.

### *THE STORY OF NIELS D. BOHR*

And they are children. Mr. Bohr arrived in 1939 in New York. A friend of mine received him there, and they gave him a dinner. And they spoke of the bomb already. You see, it was in the making. And one man asked the very pertinent question, "What are you to do when you have produced the bomb?"

"Oh," they said, "we all just invite the Japanese physicists to a meeting on an island in the Pacific and say, 'Gentlemen, here is the bomb,' and then they'll make peace."

4

Physicists are children politically. And they think that if they play with such nice things as bombs, then the laity - generals, and admirals, and so - will listen to them, what they have to say in politics.

It's a total illusion. They are plumbers in the eyes of the generals, the physicists. And not more. And they are not university men in the sense that they're responsible for the future of the human race.

IV

1

And we are abused at this moment. They pay our salaries, because they think that we'll bolster their political purposes. It isn't so easy to be a scholar, as people think at this moment.

Physics of course is a highly supported business.

I'm not in it. I'm not supported.

And it's better not to be supported. It is better not to have foundations coming to one's rescue. It is better not to be a Rockefeller stipend receiver.

2

Why is that so? What is a university? You know how they were founded?

They were founded for a very simple reason: that the larger Christianity grew when it went from Iceland to Persia; then it was impossible to have constant councils. You would not even understand me if we hadn't had this experience of a universal council a few years ago.

This has brought back to the non-Catholic world the reality of the idea that all mankind are really contemporaries that we have to believe the same thing all over the globe. And this universal council, just as it taught a lesson to the pope and even the cardinals, so it has taught a lesson even to the professors.

3

The normal thing of the university was that it was the committee in permanence for the reconvening of councils. The doctors of a University of Paris sat there in

permanency, so that when a council would be convened, they were prepared to deal with the issues.

The same is true of Prague. The same is true of Heidelberg. The same is even true of Oxford, although of course, they never shared with the others any concern.

And they were in Oxford, after all; that's something by itself.

4

But it's not a joke, what I say. But I want you to consider the fact that a university is only a university if the questions of the human race are kept in abeyance there, and alive in these little groups, so that at a decisive moment, they can come forward and speak with authority to the rest of the world, and make them see this in union.

CHAPTER TWO: THE BEGINNING

I

1

All this has been lost. Since the First World War, such an idea of a university is not very popular.

Today I don't know what it is. It is

*a workshop for plumbers,  
a workshop for chemists,  
a workshop for geographers,  
a workshop for people who write dictionaries.*

This is not a university.

2

A university is not a collection of facts; it is not a collection of people; it is an attempt to take this moment, 1968, as just one year in the history of the human spirit.

And now we come to the important point.

And since this is something in between, of one divine moment now, between the end of time and the beginning of time, it is something that cannot live without a clear faith in the future, and a clear respect for the past.

It is not a moment in time without relation to past and future, but it is a relation to everything positive that has gone on before, and everything that depends on you and me to be achieved in the future.

3

The university has the longest breath - just as the president of the United States has the shortest breath. The poor man has to be re-elected in November. You don't have to be re-elected at a university. You must have such a long breath that you are interested in what will happen in 2,000 years from now, and what has happened 2,000 years beforehand.

So between politics and the university, there is an immense distance in the time span which your breath must comprehend, and the breath which the poor man in politics has to take.



4

The president of the United States is not in a position like my Stonehill president. He cannot say, "I'm only interested in 1980, and these students are only interested in 1969; they are children."

The poor man must be interested in 1969 or at least '68, even; and therefore, this is nothing important, that he can deal with.

What is 1968? A moment, a second in time.

II

1

From our point of view, of a member who has the honor of being a member of a university, this is all trash, what he is coping with. New York Times, at best; New York Herald.

Now they have a new weekly in New York, called Knickerbocker, I think. Tomorrow it begins to appear.

But what is a knickerbocker? Not important.

The daily news then, gentlemen, are for a man in a university a temptation; but they are certainly not a clarification.

2

Pardon me for turning around this. I have to speak from the bottom of my heart, and it is not an American heart, with regard to the news.

### *THE STORY OF ROSENSTOCK-HUESSY AND THE NEWSPAPERS*

I had to be weaned from the news. A young man -I too, of course - is intoxicated with the news. I think I have been an eager newspaper reader all my life, and I have always been out for the latest news.

But it is something second-best. It is not important, because tomorrow it's all different.

3

How a university is able to represent at this moment the whole story of mankind - this whole march, you may say - is impossible to answer.

Perhaps I can contribute one thing to it. And that's all I can do tonight.

4

How long do I speak?

III

1

There is a terrible error about the use of the word "past" and "future."

And before I can make my point clear - why a university copes at the same moment with the future and the past, the beginning and the end -- I must make clear what has happened in the last 150 years.

A terrible abuse of all the terms of history has occurred. People today mistake past for being a historical concept. This is an intrusion from the physicists.

2

A great physicist, Mr. Laplace, who died in 1827, made this error, or perpetuated this error. And I must quote him so that you see in a simple sentence how much we all are poisoned by the physicists and the mathematicians.

They have no idea of time. They don't know anything of time, but they measure it all the time, because they misunderstand it.

3

They misunderstand the first word in the Bible, "In the beginning, God created Heaven and earth," and they say, "In the past, He created Heaven and earth."

Mr. Laplace fabricated the terrible sentence: "The past produces the present, and the past and the present together produce the future."

It is a heresy of the modern university of the last 200 years. It's a scandal. It's nonsense.

Because you can only have a future when you have a beginning.

In the beginning, God created Heaven and earth, and since then it has to be continued.

But the past? What do I care for the past?

That's just dust. That's rotten. I can't deduce anything from the past. It's just corpses, it's just dust. It should not be worshiped; it should not be respected; it should be cleansed away.

4

It's the dump of mankind's time, when you call something "just the past."

If it was the beginning, if your parents began the family, you have to continue it. But if they are just belonging to the past, you can say that the past is glorious. But for your own efforts, you can't make the past glorious.

You can make all the beginnings glorious.

You can say, "My grandfather started already the good name of your family, and now stick to it. Make it more glorious."

Then I will abide by this.

### *THE STORY OF ROSENSTOCK-HUESSY'S ANCESTORS*

*As a matter of fact, I am proud of my ancestors. And I have every reason to be.*

But if they were not my ancestors, if they hadn't begun a story, I had no reason to be. They would just be ashes.

IV

1

Beginning is not the same as past. And in this country constantly this heresy is committed, that instead of speaking of beginning, you speak of the past. And then it's good for museums.

### *THE STORY OF THE MOMA*

*Even if it's the Museum for Modern Arts. It isn't modern then; it's just ashes.*

2

This is the through-going error of our time.

It is very hard to find a person who has ever given a moment's thought about this distinction, why the Bible might perhaps have had a good reason to say, "In the beginning, God created Heaven and earth."

Thanks to this one sentence, you and I can still be proud of the whole of creation. And you are responsible so that not one animal, and not one plant of this beginning is destroyed.

And you have the Sierra Club for this purpose.

3

But if it is only in the past, who cares for the past?

In America, certainly nobody cares for the past. It is forgotten. And you will be forgotten.

We also are past. Tomorrow, who cares --?

### *THE STORY OF PROGRESS AND CHANGE*

I just read in coming here, such an eloquent book -- even "a book," it is called, strange book, because it says that change is progress, and progress is change.

Now such an absurdity I've never heard. Why change should be progress, nobody can say. It may be pure loss, because there's no beginning.

I will admit that something that has been started can progress, but something that just changes is absolutely nonsense. And most changes in this country are for the worse.

4

How else can it be?

Anybody who does not see that the beginning is an obligation, is a challenge, is a commission, he cannot continue.

And if we were not here in the hope that we can improve on universities, we'd better go home.

"To improve" means to continue. And it means that this is not past, but it's in the future.

*CHAPTER THREE: THE PRESENT*

I

1

You see, the interesting thing of the word "beginning" is that it changes your knowledge of the future. It is impossible then to welcome change for change's sake. Because we know what we have to continue, what the future must be like, and what it must not be like.

Mere change? Terrible, even in Disneyland I would not welcome pure change.

2

But we are surrounded by this Laplace heresy. The physicists have won.

They say - have you ever heard such nonsense?--"The past and the present produce the future."

3

I tell you what is really true:

the future and the past together result in the present. There is no present except in this hold between the pressure from the future and the pressure from the past.

If you only could hold this against all the wrong editorials and all the wrong speech-makers, you would already be on safe ground, and you would begin to enter the true life of a university.

4

In a university, since God made such a wonderful beginning, even you and I are forced to continue it. And our future is prescribed.

*THE STORY OF THE ABOLITIONISTS*

For example, slavery is out. And the Abolitionists in 1830 knew this. And so there happened something called the Civil War, because the country had gone astray. And the New England slave traders, although they became millionaires on this trade had to give way to the Massachusetts Abolitionists.

II

1

The future is known, as much known as the past. Only the present is not known, because we don't know

*what cowards we are,  
what criminals we are,  
what liars we are.*

Because you and I are unknown - we are the X in the equation - it is not known what the present will be like tomorrow.

2

We don't know what you will do. Will you stand up and tell the truth? Will you?

It probably doesn't pay in your eyes.

Because as my college president in Stonehill said to me on the plane, "These boys only think of getting away with their exam. They want to have a mark. For this, they must sacrifice their honor, their love, their future, their genius, if they only can get away with their next aim, a practical aim."

Get a stipend from Rockefeller. I don't know which Rockefeller gives this. They all seem to give stipends.

3

This is quite serious, gentlemen.

The abuse of the word "past," instead of "beginning," has led to a total abuse of the word "future" and has led to a total acquittal of your responsibilities. If the future is not contained in the beginning, is not waiting to be fulfilled, if your life is not a fulfillment, then of course you can get syphilis, or get drunk, or become a pervert and go hippie. You are just an atom in the universe coming from nowhere and going nowhere.

"That's all past, and the future nobody knows; it's so uncertain. Therefore, let's grow a beard."

4

But unfortunately, you are much better known than you think yourself. We all know what has to be expected from you. And all students who think that they can hide behind the beard, and we don't know them, we know them really very well.

We are all expecting very important acts from them.

III

1

You must help us that when I'm dead, it may be continued what all the world was all about.

*That mankind is one,  
and has one Son of God as his head,  
and we all have to celebrate Christmas as a beginning and not as an end.*

Thank you.



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Because you can only have a future when you have a beginning.

In a university, since God made such a wonderful beginning, even you and I are forced to continue it. And our future is prescribed.

The future and the past together result in the present. There is no present except in this hold between the pressure from the future and the pressure from the past.

You can make all the beginnings glorious.

## NOTE

This is the transcription of a single lecture, with the following changes and additions:

1. Commonplace phrases as “you see”, “so to speak” are eliminated. Where the speaker corrects himself within the same sentence, only the corrected version is kept.

2. Additions:

paragraphs,

chapters with titles scooped from the text,

Roman numbers for the four parts of a chapter,

Arabic numbers for the four parts of the parts of a chapter,

titles for the stories – which are marked by color – which communicate either a personal or historical event,

sentences are marked in bold print, which are as a sum of thought and to be kept as taken for themselves,

indices of contents, names, stories, sentences.

One of the main themes of his life: the university – the perseverance with which he strove to renew the universal history – to a new form of assisting the next Council – ecumenical or what not.

And this true to what he experienced together with Franz Rosenzweig and Benno Jacob – the listening to Genesis 1, 1.

*Cologne, March 9, 2017*

*Eckart Wilkens*