

“Crossroads”
Dr. John Neff
March 2, 2018
The Gertrude C. Ford Center for the Performing Arts
11 a.m.

It is a pleasure to be with you on this auspicious day in the life of the University. Today we take a step in our long journey, passing through yet another crossroads together. We take a bold step today, in the right direction, a step taken not for ourselves, alone, but also for all who come after us.

I speak of our actions, today, as a crossroads. When thinking about the work we have done, are still doing, it seems an apt metaphor.

Cultures around the world have set great significance in crossroads, the simple intersection of paths. Crossroads can be difficult, mysterious, perhaps even dangerous. In Mississippi, Robert Johnson met the Devil at a crossroads, and made a bargain that obtained for him his infernal, but somehow divine, talent. Crossroads have come to represent many things to many people, but for today, simply think of crossroads as points of decision.

At a crossroads, do you forge ahead, do you turn to one side, or the other. Do you hesitate to decide, remaining at the crossroads? Do you choose not to decide, but instead reverse course, and retreat, from your path, from your future?

Many years ago, Robert Frost wrote of meeting such a point of decision:

Two roads diverged in a yellow wood,
And sorry I could not travel both
And be one traveler, long I stood
And looked down one as far as I could
To where it bent in the undergrowth;

Then took the other, as just as fair,
And having perhaps the better claim,
Because it was grassy and wanted wear;
Though as for that the passing there
Had worn them really about the same,
And both that morning equally lay
In leaves no step had trodden black.

Having made his decision, however, it is unclear from his poem whether Frost felt he had made the right decision. His first impulse, in fact, is to return at some future time to see where the other path led, a feeling he expressed even as he knew he would not return, would not take that other path, knew he could not make that decision twice.

Oh, I kept the first for another day!
Yet knowing how way leads on to way,
I doubted if I should ever come back.

I shall be telling this with a sigh
Somewhere ages and ages hence:
Two roads diverged in a wood, and I—
I took the one less traveled by,
And that has made all the difference.¹

But what sort of difference? A positive one? One he came to regret? Or does the regret reside in not being able to make a different, second choice?

Do you realize, as Frost did, that you are the sum of all the crossroads in your life? Each one of us is the consequence of choices made and left unmade, turns to this side, turns to that, correct turns, turns leading to dead ends, steps that left us wandering, steps that moved us forward.

As this is true for us, so, too, is it true for the University. This grand institution is also the sum of its decisions:

To accept the gift of two white men holding title to lands once occupied by Choctaws and Chickasaws, who by then had been removed to places far away.

To build the Lyceum, and classrooms, and dormitories, and an observatory, with enslaved labor hired from nearby farms and plantations.

To invite students, many of them scions of slave-produced wealth, to study here, improve themselves here, become state and even national leaders at this place.

To close the doors of the University in time of war, when young men left to faraway battlefields, and too few ever came home again.

To reopen the University, still maintained by the labor of African American men and women, no longer slaves, but also not completely free.

To open enrollment to white women, and later to reduce the power of fraternities, creating a more egalitarian institution for white Mississippians.

To reject the applications of African American men and women – Charles H. Gray, Pauline Y. Weathersby, Robert C. Leathers, Charles H. T. Dubra, Medgar Evers, and Clennon King, among others – before that decision was taken out of the University's hands by federal enforcement of the admission of James Meredith in 1962.

To expand the extent and quality of instruction on the campus, building a research library, broadening the curriculum, taking the measures necessary to aim at, and finally achieve Phi Beta Kappa, and Carnegie R1 status.

1 Robert Frost, "The Road Not Taken," *Mountain Interval* (1916)

To take the long view on flags, never having displayed a state flag much until 1890, and deciding – after student activism, and faculty agreement, and administrative acceptance – that the 1890 flag and all it represents should not fly on our campus.

We, as a community, are the sum of these decisions, and thousands more.

The making of decisions, the choice of which path to travel, is not always easy.

Fortunately, as we make our decisions at each crossroad, we have with us old and familiar company. At our side and at our beckoning, stand History and Memory, both useful, quite different, at once comforting and troubling.

History is what we know. Memory is what we feel. Neither is certain.

History is fragmentary, incomplete, filled with contending views drawn from contradictory evidence. History is fraught with silences. Some are accidental, some imposed by the strong upon the weak, some intentional, hiding the past, in shame. We cannot avoid the silences – the gaps in evidence – which we are unable, and would be unwise, to fill.

Memory is likewise fragmentary, similarly incomplete, but as it makes no claim to truth, except on a very personal level, its inconsistencies are part of its benefit to us. Memory is not objective, detached, and would be useless to us if it were, because above all memory is emotional. It helps us fit ourselves within a broad stream of personal and shared experience. History provides references to time and place independent of ourselves – conversely, we are the central character in our memory. In memory we are the point of reference; in history, we are often merely observers.

Our history records our decisions, our passages through the various crossroads we have encountered; memory gives weight and prominence to some of those decisions, the ones which now seem to be important, formative.

Working together, history and memory help us understand whether our decisions, which at one time all made perfect sense, still do.

Today we unveil contextualizations of parts of our University's history. We acknowledge our indebtedness to the enslaved laborers who built our campus; we present narratives of the lives of men who influenced the direction of decisions made throughout our history; we provide context for the creation of a century-old tribute to the young men of our student body who left for war as the University Greys, Co. A of the Eleventh Mississippi Infantry Regiment.

Thus as we confront today's crossroad, accompanied by the perspective permitted by history and memory, we also acknowledge that the decisions made in the past are not our decisions today. By contextualizing these important aspects of our campus, we emphasize the distance we have traveled between our time and theirs, all those crossroads through which we have passed.

As an illustration, keep in mind – less than a century ago, individuals at the University proudly placed on one of our buildings the name of a man, a virulent racist, who once advocated to his white voters that, if necessary, he would lynch of every black man and woman

in this state. How many the multitude of crossroads we have marched through since then.

As I have said, we are the sum of all our decisions, good and bad, all of those crossroads.

We do not shrink from this. We embrace it. We do not shield our embarrassment, we offer it up. We do not deny any part of who we have been, of who we are.

As Maya Angelou wrote some years ago,

History, despite its wrenching pain,
Cannot be unlived, and if faced
With courage, need not be lived again.²

We choose to face our past decisions with courage. We own them all, knowing that to do less is to diminish ourselves today, and to hobble our future selves.

We also take inspiration from knowing that although we are the sum of all our decisions, no *one* of them defines us.

It is true, some of our decisions live large in the perception others have of us, but only we choose the ones that define us. Those who misunderstand us, the community which binds us, our aspirations for the University we build together, see only our errors. In this they are wrong.

We choose those decisions, those actions, those errors, that define us. We meet them with new decisions, new actions, correcting past errors. In this we define who we are, and who we will be.

Today we take an important step. It is only a step, but we take it together, with pride, carrying with us our past, rejoicing in our present, and in eager anticipation of all the crossroads of our future.

John R. Neff
2 March 2018