



APRIL 26 2014

THE INAUGURATION OF
MARIKO SILVER
10TH PRESIDENT OF BENNINGTON COLLEGE

INAUGURATION

INAUGURAL CHALLENGE

Jonathan Lethem '86

I'm sorry not to be with you today. I'm addressing you from a distance across the ocean, from the American Academy in Berlin. From here I've been dreaming way back to that enchanted quadrant of Vermont, where I spent too brief a portion of my life. The vantage of this particular European city provides a perspective both global and historical—almost to a terrifying degree. But it might actually be the right perspective from which to write this friendly challenge to President Silver and to the Bennington community that accompanies her into the College's next chapter, in this still-fresh millennium. What I'd like to propose, if it's not too grandiose, is that Bennington is a utopia.

What's that you say? A utopia? How simple then, you might think, to preside over such a thing: just don't screw it up! Competently manage the happily humming utopian machine, keep it pumping out more good dreams and good art and happy shining faces. But no, that's not what I mean at all, because in my definition utopia isn't some sturdy machine. In my definition utopia isn't easy or stable or well-regulated, it isn't always even an uncontroversial good thing. Utopia, in my definition, is a proposition, a whisper of possibility—a small aperture or window opening up in the edifice of the everyday, the edifice of the status quo and of the taken-for-granted. It is a tiny gap opening up in this surface, and a place where a small dream goes to utter itself and be considered: that we can want more. That something might be desired which lies outside the sphere of ordinary deals and compromises, the utilitarian and pragmatic demands of a marketplace that informs us, on a daily basis, that it is our only world.

In fact, in one of my darker moments, I wrote the following words: "Utopia is the show that always closes on opening night." Now, that isn't simply true. Bennington is, I believe, one proof that it isn't. But consider for a minute what that metaphor suggests: a theater. A place where ephemeral gestures are enacted, in front of a crowd that has gathered in the belief and hope that something magical will occur. And every opening night in a theater, entails months if not years of preparation, of rehearsal, requires untold expenditures of both desire and craft, of dreaming and industry. And so, if utopia is the show that sometimes, too often, does close opening night, what I want to propose now is that it still would have been worth it. All that effort, for one momentary performance. One glance into another world of possibility. And the reason it would have been worth it is that the preparation, the rehearsal, the desire and craft, all of this is the utopia, as much as that single show.

The utopian proposition that is Bennington opened in 1932 and hasn't closed since, but I do want you to consider that every single day it goes forward is a kind of miraculous event. Utopia, if you accept my definition, is a tenuous thing, which arises in uncertainty and even in argument—argument about its purposes, arguments about what and who it is for—and the longer it survives, the more it is subject to the accusation that it has tripped or stumbled, that it has compromised or struck a deal without even noticing that it has done so—the accusation that it has precisely survived because it is no longer utopia. And so, the terms of a utopia that wishes to survive longer than opening night is that it must absolutely embrace its disgruntled skeptics and enfold them as participants, embrace them as stakeholders, and demand of them that they make it new—that they hammer their disappointment into new terms, new propositions, new purposes, new claims.

Utopia, in my definition, is also a very local situation. A part of the genius of Bennington's inception was its size. (Perhaps this is also part of the genius, even if accidental, of Vermont itself.) The close precincts and human scale of this pocket utopia increase its resemblance to some of my other favorite examples: a family or a rock band, a local community organization, in a neighborhood struggling with gentrification, say, or the kind of organization that takes over a hotel for a weekend, a conference of scholars on some arcane subject, or a science-fiction fans' convention, or an Elks Lodge meeting. Those things that Kurt Vonnegut defined as a "karass"—some band or tribe of humans marked by their special affiliation, and recognizing one another anywhere. Bennington is a korass, and as the tribe spills out into the world making its imprint, the institution becomes a container much bigger on the inside than on the outside.

The news I'm sorry to deliver—except of course you knew it already—is that this isn't a utopian world. In fact, it's a world that's actively scornful, even hostile, to utopias, even tucked-away pocket utopias

like Bennington. Increasingly so. In fact, when at the start of the 1980s I was applying for admission to Bennington, I was warned by naysayers that the college was regarded as impractical, indulgent, absurd, and unlikely—now, thirty years later, it is the entire liberal arts proposition that such naysayers have declared unworkable. So, as it has always been accustomed to being, Bennington was in this regard ahead of its time: the school was un-pragmatic, unprofitable and non-utilitarian first, and all by itself; now we have the whole of the Humanities for company.

When, in my generation, Studs Terkel addressed the incoming president Michael Hooker, he said, "the two most horrendous words in the American vocabulary are 'bottom line.'" Even then, Terkel knew clearly where the line was drawn, in a war that I'm sorry to say our society is presently losing. The language of business, the corporate paradigm, that of the 'bottom line,' is now seen as rightfully applied to every possible human enterprise. The language of business inserts itself into the life of families, into every aspect of the arts and other non-commodifiable forms of discourse, into the psyche of individual humans. The language is insidious and seductive, most of all in its suggestion that any other frame of reference is absurd and naive, and has already somehow been disproven. That language is the direct and active enemy of utopian possibility anywhere it detects such a thing.

The language of business evaluates a place like Bennington with words like "sustainability" and "scalability." These are fairly sexy words, they suggest a sophistication of analysis, a worldliness that dispenses quickly with impractical things, or has already dispensed with them. These are words that can actually mean a lot of interesting things, if used by people like inventors or architects, but the way they're typically used now is to imply skeptical questions, questions that usually answer themselves: "Can it be made profitable?" And: "Can we do it over and over—turn it into a franchise, like McDonald's, or a series, like the James Bond movies?"

As to the question of sustainability, I think I've already suggested my belief: that Bennington is a proposition both fragile and preposterous, maintained and renewed by both industry and desire, by dreams and craft, by argumentation and adaptation. It's sustainable not on the terms of a machine or a corporation, but on the preposterous terms of an artwork or a dance, or a Darwinian goof like the duck-billed platypus—it goes forward against a tide of skepticism, and nourishes itself in reinvention and improvisation, on the beauty of its own impracticalities.

As to scalability, I'll remind you of one of my favorite anecdotes. When the movie mogul Harry Cohn asked to have a meeting with Gertrude Stein, he very likely hadn't read any of her work. Picture the typical cigar-chomping film executive of the great film studios, who has heard something about a writer's genius and wide influence, and requested to meet her because he hoped to make some use of her work for a 'major motion picture.' Well, what Harry Cohn said to her was, "Miss Stein, what is your secret?" And Gertrude Stein replied in two words. She said, "Small audiences." And that was the end of the meeting.

I adore Bennington's smallness, and yet I want to suggest that it's actually not enough to be only a pocket utopia—that in our somewhat dystopian world, more is required. This is where the challenge part comes in. President Silver, though it might seem enough to ask you to carry this utopian proposition, this "gift economy," forward in its own sacred space, nestled here in the hills at The End of the World, I'll ask more. It is my challenge to you today—and I mean you and the community within hearing—to make of scalability something better than the word's usual use. To make it a Bennington word. Not to franchise this place, to dot the landscape with Benningtons like MacDonalds, but to always keep in mind that the utopian experiment here will ultimately fail if it doesn't seek to translate itself into the wider environment, to become a necessary expression of broader utopian possibility. The possibility, that is, of the things our culture too readily believes are impossible. And that is to say, further, to be willing to be an expression of resistance.

Thank you.

THE INSTALLATION OF MARIKO SILVER

PROCESSIONAL

“Kaki Lambe,” “Goumbe,” and “Drum Suite”

Performed by the Bennington College African Music Ensemble under the direction of faculty member Michael Wimberly

African Music Ensemble: John Andrew '14, Brian Barry '17, Benjamin Ehlers '17, Sean Gordon '17, Sarah Lavin-Burgher '17, Sophia Leroy '15, Erika Lygren '16, Alejandro Mendez '14, Emiline Mesmer '15, Odellya Sohnis '17, Paul Suberu '17

“Yankadi”

Performed by Michael Wimberly

ORDER OF THE ACADEMIC PROCESSION

Delegates from Academic Institutions and Learned Societies

The Bennington College Faculty

Past Presidents of Bennington College

The Board of Trustees of Bennington College

The President and the Chairman of the Board

INVOCATION

Tamar-kali

WELCOME

Alan Kornberg '74, Chairman of the Board of Trustees

GREETINGS

Adam Falk, President of Williams College

Ellen McCulloch-Lovell '69, President of Marlboro College

Stuart Hurd, Town Manager of Bennington

Matthew Patterson, Chair of the Village of North Bennington Board of Trustees

INAUGURAL POEM

Michael Dumanis, Bennington College Faculty

INAUGURAL CHALLENGE

Jonathan Lethem '86

Excerpts read by Will Larsen '17

INVESTITURE OF THE PRESIDENT AND PRESENTATION OF THE SYMBOLS OF OFFICE

Alan Kornberg '74

Angel Brownell, operations manager and conference services coordinator

Bahar Baharloo '14

INAUGURAL ADDRESS

Mariko Silver, 10th President of Bennington College

RECESSIONAL

“Cirque de Sima” by Sima Wolf

“Kidd Jordan’s Second Line” by Kidd Jordan

“Sticks” by Bruce Williamson

“Bourbon Street Parade” by Paul Barbarin

“Star Gazers” by Sun Ra

“My Feet Can’t Fail Me Now” by The Dirty Dozen Brass Bandlko

“lko lko,” originally “Jock-A-Mo,” by James “Sugar Boy” Crawford

“How Beautiful Could A Being Be?” by Caetano Veloso

Performed by the Bennington College Experimental Marching Band, the Drums, Gongs, and Bamboo Second Line under the direction of faculty members Susie Ibarra and Bruce Williamson, and Michael Wimberly’s Sun Ra Class

Experimental Marching Band: Allison Cho Young Eun “Allison” Cho '14, Sonja Einem '16, Kyle Gordon '17, Abby Mahler '16, Singer Morra '16, composer intern, Jeremy Stewart, and faculty members Susie Ibarra and Bruce Williamson

Drums, Gong, and Bamboo Second Line: Sebastian Alexander '17, Hannah Brookman '16, Alana Cooper '15, Brian Dugan '16, Kevser Kesici '16, Samuel Mayer '14, Hans Olsen '17, Julian Parr '16, Santa Wolanczyck '14

Sun Ra: Lily Arnell '17, Benjamin Boas '14, Duncan Bullen '16, Brian Dugan '16, Anais Duplan '14, Joel Fagerberg '15, Evan Gall '16, Mitra Haque '17, Edward Haweeli '17, Jake Landau '16, Kagan Marks '16, Benjamin Neuburger '17, Julian Parr '16, Laurette Siler '14, Harlan Steed '16, Cooper Wall '17, Emily Zars '17

COMMUNITY LUNCH AND PROGRAMS

Following the installation, please join us for a luncheon of locally grown specialties in the historic Commons building and the Student Center and an afternoon of programming.

DELEGATES

1636

Harvard University
Allen Shawn

1701

Yale University
Steven Smith

1742

Moravian College
Karen Johnson Berry

1746

Princeton University
Amelia Silver

1749

Washington and Lee University
Stephen J. Kalista, Jr.

1782

Washington College
Tyler Feane

1787

University of Pittsburgh
Lawrence J. Kaplan, Ph.D.

1789

University of North Carolina
Adam Falk

1793

Williams College
Adam Falk

1794

Bowdoin College
Michael Cary

1795

Union College
Edward Summers

1800

Middlebury College
Penny Campbell

1819

Colgate University
Patrick Buckley

1819

Norwich University
Walter Smith

1821

Amherst College
Gretchen Dwyer

1821

The George Washington University
Dan LeClair

1832

Wabash College
Jeff Marlett

1833

Haverford College
William G. Wagner

1833

Kalamazoo College
E. Turner Lewis

1834

Green Mountain College
Paul J. Fonteyn

1842

Ohio Wesleyan University
Ali A. Chaudhry

1843

College of the Holy Cross
Sarah Stanbury

1855

Bates College
Nathaniel A. Boone

1860

Bard College
Elizabeth Frank

1861

Vassar College
Darra Goldstein

1865

Worcester Polytechnic Institute
Laurie Leshin

1866

Carleton College
Bradley G. Lewis

1866

School of the Art Institute of Chicago
Elissa Tenny

1866

University of New Hampshire
Fran Hall

1869

Trinity University
Bruce A. Story

1870

Wellesley College
Janet Lape Marsden

1871

Smith College
Christina Andrews

1872

Virginia Polytechnic Institute and State University
Lawrence T. Williams

1876

Johns Hopkins University
Lois Chiang

1878

Champlain College
Katie Hawley

1885

Arizona State University
Daniel Sarewitz

1885

Bryn Mawr
Margaret Brown Cassidy

1885

University of St. Thomas
Sara Lagalwar

1887

Occidental College
Jorge Gonzales

1888

Temple University
Mark Rogers

1890

Keuka College
Jorge L. Díaz-Herrera

1891

California Institute of Technology
Martin L. Smith

1894

Massachusetts College of Liberal Arts
Paul Nnodim

1899

Simmons College
Michèle Valerie Cloonan

1903

Skidmore College
Mrs. Samuel N. Hibbard

1904

Saint Michael's College
Mark R. Nelson

1911

Lyndon State College
Joe Bertolino

1919

The New School
Peter Haratonik

1926

Southern Vermont College
Karen Gross

1937

Pepperdine University
Mary Acquaviva

1946

Marlboro College
Ellen McCulloch-Lovell

1964

Union Institute & University
William Lax

BENNINGTON COLLEGE BOARD OF TRUSTEES

Priscilla Alexander '58
New York, NY

Susan Paris Borden '69
Calgary, AB, Canada

Suzanne Brundage '08
Cambridge, MA

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New York, NY

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New York, NY

William Derrough
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Michael Hecht
New York, NY

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Brookline, MA

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Sara Steines
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Penelope Perkins Wilson '45
Malvern, PA

Karen Johnson Boyd '46
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Racine, WI

ROBES AND MEDALLION

President Silver's robe was designed by faculty member **Charles Schoonmaker** and costume shop manager **Richard MacPike**. As is customary, the colored lining of the hood signifies the institution conferring the highest degree earned and the type of degree. Schoonmaker and MacPike also designed the robes worn by the Trustees, which were inspired by the gowns designed and made by Bennington's first graduating class.

The Presidential Medallion was a design collaboration between faculty member **Jon Isherwood** and sculpture technician **John Umphlett MFA '99**. They engaged a wide range of 3D digital processes in the design and fabrication, and developed the concept after learning of President Silver's love of the peony flower.

PRODUCTION

Faculty member **Terry Creach** led the production design with support from faculty member **Michael Giannitti** and drama technical director **Michael Rancourt**.

SPECIAL THANKS

President Mariko Silver wishes to express her great appreciation to the buildings and grounds staff, volunteers, committee members, and others who made this day possible.

芳 直 德 正

徐
平
书

Calligraphy by President Xie Heping of Sichuan University in honor of Mariko Silver's inauguration.

The Chinese characters read from right to left: excellent, integrity, virtuous, elegant.

