

It is clear that today our Cooper Union faces a grave crisis—certainly the most serious in my lifetime and perhaps in the institutions'. The speed and intensity of the response of this community is magnificent and speaks to the structural nature of this crisis.

At its core, the question facing us is: what holds up the Cooper Union? This is no easy question but I believe we can gain insight into it by looking to the foundation of the institution—free speech. The foundation building is literally held up by free speech. The seeds of this foundation were planted by Peter Cooper and Abraham Lincoln, and from these seeds grew a magnificent principle, and the founding principle of this school—free education.

It is not that The Cooper Union holds up free education but that free education holds up The Cooper Union. We are now confronted with a crisis that threatens to collapse this structural principle.

As we struggle to address this crisis, to comprehend it, to navigate it and act within it, I propose that everything we need has been said in this Great Hall over the last 150 years—from Lincoln's 'Right Makes Might' to Frederick Douglas and Red Cloud to the founding of the Red Cross and NAACP. This space contains monumental moments, each grown from the urgent demands of a given period that threatened the fundamental principles of human rights. In each case, the crises caused by these threats lead to a clarification of the very principles at risk. Each of these moments galvanized the meaning of the principles themselves and led to movements that revolutionized the historic trajectory.

I believe the crisis we face today contains just such a potential. We must resist the confusion that the crisis we face is so grave that it demands abandoning our principles in order to survive. We must reject the notion that the urgent eclipses the essential.

The very meaning of guiding principles is found in their capacity to navigate uncertainty; history is littered with disasters born in the missteps of suspending principles in the face of crisis. The hard work of navigating this moment will not be found in weak arguments about Peter Cooper having mixed intentions, or about early fee structures and free education "for the working classes" only. Even if this is true, even if it took 42 years until the Cooper Union offered free tuition to all, this is no justification to go backwards. The vision and guiding principle was clear from the beginning and as we all know—as this room knows—it took 87 years between "All Men are Created Equal" and the Emancipation Proclamation.

Our Founders' missteps are no justification for us to repeat them.

Peter Cooper was a visionary and a practical one. The principle of inclusion, of no barriers to education, not only righted a wrong, but it created one of the most intellectually and creatively vital places in the world. This is no accident of history. Peter Cooper understood that the barriers to education not only were unjust to those that they excluded, but that those barriers impoverished the internal life of an

institution. Barring any segment of the population creates a diminished human geography within the educational community.

In creating The Cooper Union, Peter Cooper invested in the profound idea that removing the barriers to education creates a dynamic crucible of free thought; a space where the widest spectrum of who we are can ask the questions of our time and create the works that bring us forward. This principle of removing barriers, of free education, constitutes the most precise and pragmatic means of addressing the extraordinarily complex questions of any given time. The evidence of a return on this investment is abundant. No one can deny that it has been returned a thousand, thousand-fold through the significant contributions of this community across all human endeavors.

As with many forms of structural invention, the consequences of Peter Cooper's invention in the structures of education are unique spaces—inclusive spaces, spaces of participation and of reciprocity—for people and their works to listen to each other. We can afford no red line within these spaces dividing the 'Freely Educated' and the 'Educated for a Price'. Creating any financial barriers for even a few students weakens the structural principles of free speech, free thought and free education, that hold up this institution.

Like each of the movements galvanized in this room, the internal crisis we face is a symptom of the broader crisis of our time. The gross inequities in resource distribution that characterize our moment are threatening to absorb this shining community into the markets. The broader dysfunction of decisions made by the few—with disastrous consequences for the many—are directly implicated in our internal crisis.

The hard work of navigating this moment, of clarifying the meaning of our principles, will not be found in the neutrality of looking forward only. The questions of accountability, of broken bonds of trust, of hubristic excesses writ large, figure strongly within our current crisis. We must not shy away from these facts. Any solution requires an honest, hard look at the decisions made that lead to the crisis. When the foundations are free speech, there is no room for sweeping things under the rug.

Navigating this moment requires looking at and absorbing the lessons of the past, but it also requires present-tense creativity. When confronted with intractable problems, it is rarely the rush to solutions that solves them, but more the search for the questions; the work of digging deep into the structure of the problem and articulating its root questions.

We have the opportunity to clarify and galvanize the fact that free education is a fundamental right to all people, to clarify our social contract and push forward a movement that recognizes the transformative powers of education as a **human right**.

If Peter Cooper did anything, surely it was to plant the seeds of this movement. Now we have the opportunity to bring them to fruition. There are times when

communities achieve a certain momentum; the spirit of place captures the transformative spirit of a given period. When these alignments occur, profound shifts are possible. I believe that we in just such a moment.

The challenges and possibilities of this moment are extraordinary; they call for creative urgency and thoughtful, considered stewardship. The stakes for what happens are enormous—how we comprehend and act in this moment reaches far beyond the institution itself.

The Cooper Union currently faces an internal crisis that warrants The Cooper Union's Great Hall as the location for its founding movement.

As we all know, "Right Makes Might".

David Gersten

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The Great Hall of The Cooper Union