

Chris Kennedy
U of I – September Board Meeting
Preface to Emeritus Voting
9/23/10, FINAL

The issues that we are considering now demand from all of the same thoughtfulness and concern that we have used in our review of every issue that comes before the board.

Let me comment on the way things are structured in the University.

We have a co-governance structure where the faculty and other groups play an important role in guiding the organization.

The University of Illinois is a community with a lot of parts and dimensions, and everyone has a role to play and a place to play it.

There will inevitably be conflict of ideas and of opinions.

Such tensions should be embraced and taken as evidence that we are a highly functioning organization.

Such debate and sound argument lie at the shared pursuit for the truth that all of us at the University share and is the focus of our work here.

I am aware of the thoughtfulness of the great educator John Henry Newman who believed that a university should be not only a place of sharp discourse but also, ultimately, a place of civility.

During our discussions this summer on the issue of diversity, I was struck by the words of Professor Anderson, who reminded the trustees that we had an obligation at the University of Illinois to not just teach the students subjects like math and English and history and science or to discover new knowledge in these fields, but we also have an obligation to ensure a higher aim, to achieve the broader goal for our shared society, which is to prepare the next generation to live in a citizen-led democracy.

As I mentioned earlier, we all have a part to play and a place to play it.

I have been chosen to play this role as trustee in part because of my experiences in a wide range of fields which ensure that my actions are familiar to others and therefore predictable and hopefully reflective of the expected communal conscience of our state.

There are times like today when we must make difficult decisions and perhaps those that are controversial or simply create a spectacle.

In my decision-making capacities as a trustee, I am not given the luxury of taking a poll on every issue and simply voting with the majority.

Instead, like those leaders of our republic who serve our community in a representative democracy, I must ultimately vote my conscience.

Today we take up the topic of emeritus status.

There are provisions for emeritus status in the University-organizing documents.

The emeritus status is an honorific status.

It is a title that is one of prestige.

It is not earned by right, but it is given as a privilege by the board of trustees.

I need to point out that this is a purely optional act.

While the process of conferring emeritus status may end with the board of trustees, it is important to note that it must begin with the individual faculty member who must request this honorific status for themselves.

Apparently, Mr. Ayres, who has been a teacher at the University of Illinois at Chicago, has asked for this privilege and honor to be bestowed on him.

Our discussion of this topic therefore does not represent an intervention into the scholarship of the University, nor is it a threat to academic freedom.

It is, rather, simply a response to his request.

In my role, I am simply responding to something which has been presented to me.

I am guided by my conscience and one which has been formed by a series of experiences, many of which have been shared with the people of our country and mark each of us in a profound way.

My own history is not a secret.

My life experiences inform my decision making as a trustee of the University.

In this case of emeritus status, I hope that I will act in a predictable fashion and that the people of Illinois and the faculty and staff of this great institution will understand my motives and my reasoning.

I intend to vote against conferring the honorific title of our University to a man whose body of work includes a book dedicated in part to the man who murdered my father, Robert F. Kennedy.

There is nothing more antithetical to the hopes for a university that is lively and yet civil, or to the hopes of our founding fathers for their great experiment of a self-governing people, than to permanently seal off debate with one's opponents by killing them.

There can be no place in a democracy to celebrate political assassinations or to honor those who do so.

We are citizen trustees whose judgments should be predictable to the community that we serve, and I would ask anyone who challenges my judgment, "How could I do anything else?"