



EMBRACING – AND EXPLOITING – CHANGE

WORTHAM HOUSE LECTURE UNIVERSITY OF HOUSTON

BY

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Chancellor Khator, Chair Ray, former Chair Wilson, I'm honored to be with you this afternoon.

I should tell you that every time I visit UH – whether to attend a concert at Moores Opera House or to watch the pass-happy Coogs at Robertson Stadium – I feel a surge of energy and hope.

It's the same one people in this room must feel every day you come into contact with the human electrical power plant – Dr. Khator.

It's the rush you get around energetic, inquisitive young people and some of the brightest, most accomplished scholars, teachers and researchers in America.

The University of Houston is a wonderful place. It's a place of new people, new ideas, new beginnings and new opportunities.

It's a living, breathing metaphor of what I'd like to talk about this evening.

Because whether you're a growing university, an aggressive newspaper or a thriving international city, change is inevitable. You can let it happen to you, or, you can harness the energy and ideas around you to shape the world in your own vision.

What I want to argue today is that both your university and Texas' largest daily newspaper have a tremendous opportunity to shape the changes that inevitably are coming to this city.

When I left my home in Meyerland for the University of Texas more than 30 years ago, Houston was a very different place.

I vividly remember as a youngster going downtown, where black Houstonians were relegated to separate – and decidedly unequal – lunch counters. Where blacks and whites sat in separate waiting rooms at Union Station and where blacks and whites had separate bathrooms.

As a kid, I suppose I was dimly aware that only a few miles from where we lived, black Houstonians on this campus and at TSU were working to break out of the Jim Crow system that had existed for more than a century.

I didn't know about it firsthand: There were only a couple of African American kids at Bellaire High School.

Hispanics lived and worked, for the most part, in a community on the East Side that was virtually invisible from me and my friends. The year I graduated from high school, Hispanics made up about 10 percent of Houston's population of little more than a million people.

For us, Vietnam was still far away. The culture clashes taking place in San Francisco and New York – and eventually Houston's Montrose-Westheimer neighborhood – hadn't reached our comfortable, insular community.

I went away for a long time – from Austin to San Antonio, to New York City, to Albany, N.Y.

Eight years ago, when this prodigal son came home to edit his hometown newspaper, I came back to a place I hardly recognized – to a metropolis of nearly 6 million people, where whites, reflecting the world at large, were in the minority.

Today, 70 percent of the people in Houston over age 60 are Anglo, while 75 percent of the people in Houston under age 30 are Hispanic.

In fact, Hispanics now account for more than 40 percent of the population. (That number leaves Democrats panting, of course, as they desperately await the day when their vote reflects their demographic strength).

Decades after a small cabal of white businessmen regularly decided what was best for Houston – as they had for years – this city has elected two women and an African American as mayor.

The rest of the world may have been shocked that big, brawling Houston would elect a lesbian as its leader but the city took it in stride. And today, I'm introduced by an Indian woman who oversees one of the most dynamic universities in America.

Houston is a different place, a different kind of place. But few would argue it isn't a better place.

Change can be hard, but it also can be energizing and empowering, something I've learned more about recently as a newspaper editor.

Perhaps you've heard that the newspaper business is undergoing a bit of change. I'm afraid that really doesn't capture the way the ground is shaking under our feet.

Let me give you a few examples:

1. Most strikingly is the explosion of free content on the Web, smartphones, the iPad and other digital channels that are making news instantly available, anywhere. So, we're learning to bring you news without paper.
2. We've seen some of our best advertising customers migrate like geese heading south. Think about it. Much of our classified ads for jobs, homes and cars all have shifted to the Web. We're scrambling to adapt.
3. Everyone's a journalist now. Folks are blogging, sharing photos and video and participating in the

news conversation at our own site. They're talking back and forth through social media. Anybody seen Chancellor Khator tweeting?

4. We're experiencing "disintermediation." You like that word? What it means is that the subjects we write about, whether it's Rick Perry, Paris Hilton or the NFL, are taking their stories directly to their audience. Traditional media get left on the sidelines.
5. We're being bombarded by the boutique. Remember the big downtown department stores that offered a little bit of everything for everybody? Macy's is the last one standing in downtown Houston. We're the media equivalent of the big department stores. But we're living in a boutique world, with advertisers chasing the more targeted audiences being sliced up by niche publications and Web sites.

Does it sound like I'm complaining? I'm not! (Well, maybe a little bit.) But we're not fighting these changes; we're embracing them and turning them to our advantage.

1. We're delivering information when and where people want it. You'll read about the result of next month's election in the paper, in blogs on our Web site and in tweets on your phone.
2. We're partnering with people we once thought of as competitors. Delish.com provides content for both our online food site and our weekly Flavor section in the paper. And our investigative journalists collaborated recently with their counterparts at a Texas political Web site to expose abuse in residential treatment centers.
3. We're targeting the niche audiences our advertisers are seeking with more specialized publications, such as our new energy blog site FuelFix, a Spanish language publication that has increased readership by 75 percent, and the definitive guide to Houston high school football we published this summer.
4. We're becoming part of the community conversation through Twitter, Facebook and the dozens of community bloggers who make a home on our site.

The University of Houston also is a veteran at managing change.

From a junior college founded by farsighted Houstonians to a commuter school serving primarily part-time students to a nationally recognized research institution with world-class programs in so many areas – this university is synonymous with change.

All of you know Bill Hobby, who served as interim chancellor back in the 90s. In his new memoir, he quotes a UH student's description of this university. UH, Dominic Corva said, is "exactly what this city needs: a continuing opportunity rather than a one-time shot."

As Bill notes, the University of Houston still specializes in part-time students. It specializes in diversity. It combines excellence with access — even as it seeks Tier 1 status among the nation's great research universities.

But the *Chronicle* and the University of Houston have much more in common than the way we embrace change. We both thrive on the idea that knowledge is power. We educate people to enable them to live better lives – through the formal education that you offer and the continuing education we bring daily to people's doorsteps and desktops.

And that is why we are both so essential to the future of Houston.

While we talk about economic development, crime, transportation – all these issues that find their way onto the front pages of the *Chronicle* day in and day out – we have to keep in mind a basic truth. That is, the most important element in Houston's future growth and quality of life is the education of its young people.

It is, indeed, a challenge.

With heartbreaking dropout rates, particularly among Hispanic young people, we have to figure out how to keep our youngsters in school.

We have to narrow the quality gap that divides Houston's good schools from those that aren't meeting the needs of their students – and, by extension, the needs of this great city.

We have to make sure that this great institution remains a beacon of hope and opportunity that it has been for going on nine decades.

Let me tell you about a friend who has ties both to UH and my newspaper.

Imagine for a minute that you're born in 1987 in Houston's Third Ward. Your mother is single and overwhelmed. There's no dad around and you're asked at a very young age to be the man of the house to your mom and two sisters. You're living in extreme poverty in neighborhoods that often epitomize failure, heartbreak, hopelessness. It's difficult to dream here but you have one.

But then something happens. You enroll at Yates High School and you learn that you're good at reading and writing. A teacher sends you to a workshop at the *Chronicle* and you find out that you have a facility for telling stories when most of your friends can't put two words together.

And then something else happens. The *Chronicle* recognizes your talent and you graduate their program with a \$6,000 scholarship to UH. And suddenly the kid from the Third Ward who wanted to tell stories has a job in the Sports department.

This "kid" is Ronnie Turner. Earlier this year, Ronnie donned a red cap and gown, walked across the stage and accepted his diploma from Chancellor Khator. He's still at the *Chronicle*.

And no one knows better than Ronnie Turner the distance from a Third Ward childhood to a professional position downtown. And no one appreciates more than we at the *Chronicle* that he's made this journey with us.

I tell you about Ronnie for one reason. He is the face of the future. What we need are hundreds of Ronnie Turners – thousands of them. In business, in medicine, in engineering. In them, we invest our hope, our dreams for a Houston able to do business in a diverse, multicultural, multilingual world.

This is a critical mission for the *Chronicle*, this great university, this city in order to succeed.

The Chronicle will succeed, I guarantee you, because we have assembled the largest and most talented group of multimedia journalists in Texas. We'll succeed because they care about this city, they care about their profession and they're driven to create a new paradigm, one that better meets the needs of this growing community.

The University of Houston will succeed for many of the same reasons.

You care about this community, you're dedicated to the pursuit of knowledge and you live for young people

like Ronnie Turner, who walk onto this campus and find themselves.

And finally, Houston will succeed – and all the more so as it embraces change, as it has done from the very beginning.

I mentioned being aware as a youngster of the last vestiges of racial segregation in Houston. That evil system came to an end in this city because students and others challenged the system and leaders decided to responsibly embrace equal opportunity and the rights and privileges guaranteed by this nation's Constitution. It took time, but eventually Houston began to see that its future lay in embracing different cultures in order to do business around the world.

In this, Houstonians have been acting in the tradition of the man for whom this city was named. Sam Houston, at a time of devastating national crisis, urged his fellow Texans to go forward, to embrace change rather than cling to a corrosive vision of the past.

Whether it's the Allen Brothers, who had this ridiculous dream that you could build a city on a malarial bayou, or the folks who, nearly a century later, decided to dig a 40-mile-long ditch inland from the Gulf, or the far-sighted trustees of this institution who said, "Who cares that she's an immigrant? She's brilliant and she's going to lead this university to Tier 1 status." Houstonians are at their best when they embrace change.

That's our charge. That's our mission. And I'm very happy that we're partners in this ongoing adventure together.