"V.E.R.I.T.A.S."

Albert Einstein met Stephen Hawking at the gates of heaven, and they went to have a coffee. "Well done Stephen," Einstein told Hawking. "Scholars will study your theories for generations." "Thank you, Herr Professor," said Hawking. "But I regret that I never got a chance to perfect my greatest discovery." Hawking then explained that by combining Einstein's theory of relativity with his own study of black holes, Hawking had discovered an equation, that allowed him to alter the space-time continuum; in other words, a time machine. "That's impossible Stephen," Einstein said. "You said so yourself but, if you did, think of the knowledge you could share, the suffering you could prevent. Think of the refugees of my generation. You could go back to before the war and warn people."

"You could warn people about the spread of nuclear weapons," added Robert Oppenheimer, sitting at the next table. "You could explain the catastrophic impacts of climate change," added the environmentalist Wangari Maathai, sitting nearby. "You could talk to them about the disenfranchised," "the oppressed," "and the impoverished," interjected Nelson Mandela, Liu Xiaobo and Eleanor Roosevelt, joining the group. "I know," said Hawking. "I am telling you all, I tried. I went back in time repeatedly. I talked to people before they made difficult decisions. I shared the best available data, and reasoned with them, and showed them how to avoid bad outcomes. And it worked. When I left them, history was on a better path, but when I got back to my own present time, things had drifted off course. I kept trying. I couldn't give up—we scholars are a stubborn bunch! Eventually I was able to work out that in order for the adjustments made in the past to be maintained into the present, I needed the machine to make many small adjustments along the way. In other words, it needed to be self-correcting. This, it turns out, requires massive amounts of data on every conceivable topic, because there was no predicting what information or insights might be needed."

"Did you try AI?" asked a thin bearded gentleman in the corner. "Yes Jobs," Hawking continued. "I infused it with the best intelligence, human and artificial. It helped, but then I saw that the small adjustments the machine was making began to accumulate into very negative consequences for the majority of humanity: civil wars, inequality, loss of privacy, erosion of culture and public spaces. It seemed that even the greatest intellectual discoveries, if not properly tended, could have very negative impacts." "Yes, I know," murmured Oppenheimer. "The more I thought about it," Hawking continued, "I realized my equation needed something, some force, which would shape the outputs in constructive ways. It needed..." "Values" said Eleanor Roosevelt. "That's right," said Hawking, "although at first I resisted. As a scientist, I thought there must be perfect neutrality in the intellectual effort. I still believe in neutrality as to outcomes of scientific inquiry—we must follow the data where it leads. But this does not mean we are neutral as to the environment in which inquiry is exercised. The environment is never fully neutral, and to pretend that it is introduces bias into the system; bias not toward truth or correctness, but in favor of whomever or whatever has the most…" "Power" said Maathai. "That's right," said Hawking, "so I did the only rational thing. I introduced values into the core of my intelligent, self-correcting time machine. The first was..." "Freedom" said Mandela. "That's right," said Hawking, "academic freedom and the autonomy of institutions to carry that freedom into practice. But that was not enough, as it left too many people out of the equation. So I introduced..." "Access" said Roosevelt. "That's right," said Hawking, "*equitable* access. This helped to guard against bias by making sure the widest range of ideas was included. But that wasn't enough, because even with full equity of access, relatively few people get to be involved in the intellectual exercise. I needed something even bigger. I needed a concept of..." "Social responsibility" said Liu Xiaobo. "That's right," said Hawking. "The responsibility of intellectuals like us to use our freedom for the public good, and also accountability, the responsibility of managing our affairs in a manner consistent with the public trust."

"Did it work?" asked Einstein. "Did values make a difference?" "Well as I said," Hawking continued, "I never got a chance to perfect it. On my last trip using the [V.E.R.I.T.A.S.] machine,[*] the data looked promising. I arrived back in early 2018 and observed that in places where values and intelligence were given the freedom to flourish, there was an increase in meaningful inquiry. Students in particular were coming to life in early 2018. And public discourse was beginning to push back against falsehood and xenophobia. There were places where things were still off course, where values were not observed, but overall, yes, values made a difference. I was about to publish my results with the world when, ironically, I ran out of time."

"Stephen, you were so close," said Einstein, with tears in his eyes. "Humanity was so close to a better future. And now it's lost." "Well, not *entirely* lost" Hawking said. "When I realized I was running out of time, I used the machine to go back and leave copies of it all over the world. I left them in every capital city, regional centers, and smaller cities. I wanted people all over the world to be close to one, hoping they would figure it out; figure out that the machine gave them the capacity to create a better future, not just for a few, but for all of humanity." "Did they?" asked Einstein. "Did they figure it out?"

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I am Rob Quinn, Executive Director of Scholars at Risk. I want to echo the earlier speakers in welcoming all of you to the 2018 Scholars at Risk Network Global Congress. We are honored to be partnering with the Alexander von Humboldt Foundation, the Frie Universitat Berlin, and all of you on this historic event. Your participation and the participation of over 500 higher education institutions our global network, say to me that you have "figured it out." You understand that the university—higher education—is the closest thing we have to a values-based, intelligent, self-correcting, time machine capable of producing a better future. Today, our present, is our great-grandchildren's past. They may not be able to travel back in time to us, but they will look back through time on us. They will ask what we did, in this time. Today, all of our network members and partners, all of you, are doing more than ever. Last year alone we helped over 400 scholars. We documented over 150 attacks on higher education in 35 countries. We sent over 9,000 appeals on behalf of wrongfully imprisoned scholars and students. We organized hundreds of talks, workshops and meetings advocating for greater protection. But the demand for our help has also never been greater.

Our theme for these three days is *the University and the Future of Democracy.* It recognizes that we still have much work to do. It recognizes that as we meet here, in the center of Europe, we face historic challenges not only to higher education, but to democracy. It suggests that democratic values are under pressure, and that higher education has a role, a responsibility, to develop, explain and defend those values. Your actions, and the actions of your institutions in support of threatened scholars, show that you have already figured this out. So let us use the next three days, to recommit ourselves to each other and to meeting this responsibility. Let us learn from each other. Let us challenge each other: to ask tough questions, to listen, to speak truth, to understand, to do more, to do better. So that when our great-grandchildren look back on us from their time, they will do so not asking about what we didn't do, but with pride and gratitude for what we do, now, together.

Opening remarks by Robert Quinn, Executive Director, Scholars at Risk Network at the Scholars at Risk Network Global Congress, "The University and the Future of Democracy", Frie Universitat Berlin, Germany, April 24, 2018.

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[*] V.E.R.I.T.A.S. = Values-engaged, research-intensive, time and space machine.