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UA3/2/4 Commencement Speech

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I am grateful for the opportunity to come here tonight to this splendid community to speak to this graduating class. This splendid school and your presence here are evidences of your faith in education and of your determination that your children shall have educational opportunity. The provision of such educational opportunity demands financial sacrifice. And yet I doubt if you have spent any money more wisely or in such a manner as to pay greater dividends than that which has gone thru taxation for education. During the great depression I was serving in an educational administrative capacity in one of the wealthier counties of the state. At its worst all my friends thought they were ruined and a good many were. One of them however who I think was wiser than most and who had lost one of the finest farms in the county which he had thought he owned on a safe margin commented to me that all he had left was the portion of his wealth which he had contributed in taxes for the support of schools and contributed to the church. Said he, "That portion will pay dividends for many years to come."

I would congratulate the members of this class for a good many reasons. First of all I want to congratulate you on the sacrifices of parents and others which have made it possible for you to reach this relatively advanced stage in your educational progress, and you personally on the possession of those mental qualities and on the perseverance which have brought you to this goal. There are in Kentucky tonight thousands of boys and girls off up the hollows and on barren hill tops who have been denied your opportunities; many others in the feeble-minded institute at Frankfort and cared for in a state of mental invalidism at home who never had a chance; yet others who were obliged to drop out of school at an early age to assume the burden of support of families dependent upon their labor, and most pitiable of all a very great number who had all your opportunity and yet who lacked the determination to fight the battle out to the point which you have reached. And so I say you are to be congratulated on opportunity and the fact that you have taken advantage of it.

I think too that I should like to congratulate you on being in the United States of America with its equality of opportunity for all whether you come from a wealthy or a poor family, from a mansion or a cabin. I am not forgetful of the hindrances which confront some of you but the great percentage of leaders in all walks of American life who have risen to prominence from the conditions of poverty and deprivation amid which they were born are an undeniable proof of my contention and an eternal challenge to you. The present Governor of this state had far less chance than most of you; the distinguished educational leader who founded and brought to its present condition of service the great institution which it is my honor to head had nothing with which to start except brains and indomitable determination; and a great dream of possible service; it was my pleasure to present one of the distinguished preachers of Kentucky and of America for that matter to a group in Bowling Green on Mothers Day and I said truthfully, "He has known poverty and deprivation and toll and somehow out of it and possibly because of it he has become possessed of the understanding heart" when he rose to speak he said probably some people in the poorest section of the city had wondered about a crazy man who had that morning stood before one of the poorest of their homes with bared head as he had paid homages to the memories of his poverty stricken childhood. I could name you if I had the time dozens of young folks who have gone to school to me who had every right to be discouraged because of the many things they lacked but who are now filling positions of responsibility and service out in life. The feeling that I may have had some part in
their success one of the things that I thank God for and I congratulate all teachers on the chances which come to them encourage and inspire youth to worth while achievement. On the campus at Western I left this morning some eighteen hundred students. Among this group there are course many who have always had things but plenty who had almost nothing and yet who unless my guess will render distinguished service in the years ahead. Not only does America offer this freedom of opportunity to the poor but it is one of the few spots left in the world where freedom of speech and of worship and of the ballot still exist. Here Jew and Gentile live side by side each equally unoppressed; our scholars dare think and express their thoughts; the poorest and for that matter the most ignorant voter criticizes his government state and national at will and is privileged to cast his vote as he will. In a large portion of the world we are seeing heartless persecution of religious groups; productive research and freedom of expression are dead and the highest citizens life is in danger if he dares utter a sentiment hostile to the government. It is time that we wave the flag a bit and give thanks for the liberties won for us by the blood and sacrifice of our forefathers which it is our good fortune yet to possess.

And you know, at the risk of seeming provincial, I would congratulate you on living in Kentucky and in this rural section of it. Life gets hard, I know, on a Kentucky farm but I was in Cincinnati a few weeks ago and again I saw old people who I suspected were dreaming of the green country side from which they had come in quest of the gold which was to be secure so easily in the city but which somehow had never come to them, sitting amid the squalor and poverty in hopelessly sordid tenements while their children played in crowded dirty streets. My heart ached as it always does at that picture and I thought to myself that I had rather be a sharecropper in the meanest cabin in Kentucky where I could hear the birds sing and see the green grass and the flowers and the dogwood and redbud which grow here for the poorest than to suffer the fate of those old people in the city.

I hope you know the famous English poet who was down in Italy and he loved Italy too but when Spring came his heart turned to his native land and he said:

Oh to be in England
Now that April's there,
And whoever wakes in England
Sees, some morning unaware,
That the lowest boughs and the brushwoods sheaf
Round the elm-tree bole are in tiny leaf,
While the chaffinch sings on the orchard bough
In England—now!

Kentucky is like that in the devotion which it inspires. I know not to what region you may go in the future but this I guarantee, that when April and October come you will be homesick for the fields and woods of Kentucky.
I must admit our state is not entirely above criticism, although it is not news that she has been backward in providing a system of education. This has been due in no slight measure to the fact that social leadership was for many years in the state distinctly aristocratic. The leaders of the state had the money to secure the best of professional training for their sons and daughters if they wished it and there was a decided question whether the average citizen would be helped by education. Wouldn't he perhaps under the impetus of education rise to the higher ranks and be a competitor for position against the sons of the land owner or even perhaps, with the aristocracy. The slave-holding system did not encourage manual labor as an honorable pursuit and foreign capital was hardly desired much less sought to develop the great mineral wealth of the state. The resulting level of education was low and the fact is well known that the less education a people has the less it wants; neither do an uneducated people produce sufficient wealth to provide an adequate system of education for all the people did they desire it.

Remember that Kentucky is one of the older states. For a hundred years after entering the Union it was left to each community to decide whether it would maintain a public school. Such as were maintained were poor enough and no citizen of not thought of sending his children to them. Instead he patronized the private schools, one to three of which graced every county under the high sounding name of academy, seminary or college, as the case might be. I pause to pay tribute to the magnificent leaders who conducted many of those private schools and to the splendid work which they did. Many of your fathers I suspect had their training in them and can testify to their excellence. I would not take from these great leaders and their splendid schools one particle of their deserved glory. My point is that their glory had as its natural corollary the poverty and inefficiency of the public school.

I went to one of the one room schools of the hilly section of this county. It was located on a narrow strip of waste land beside the road. It was felt in those days that that land not fit for any other purpose was good enough for a school and that a very little was sufficient. Outside the weather boarding was torn off here and there. Inside the walls showed the ravages of jack knives and the ceiling bore mute witness to skill on the part of the pupils in the manufacture and casting of paper wads. A huge pot bellied stove stood in the center which roasted alive those near it while those at the back of the room shivered in a half frozen condition on cold days. A water bucket with a common dipper stood on a broken desk while the aroma of cold biscuits and other delicacies from the lunch boxes and parcels filled the room. There were no maps, no pictures, no books save textbooks. And yet I must confess that a glamour as of fairy land hangs around it as we see ourselves of yesterday sitting with fast beating heart beside the little girls we fancied and read again in memory the note she handed us one day bearing the poem than which Shakespeare never wrote a finer, "When this you see, remember me tho we are many miles apart. The others have my company you may have my heart."

The trips to the spring for water, the games of antsy-over, skip-to-my-Lou, prison base, clap-in and clap-out, and baseball that we had! Some years since where I was entertained the hostess asked each for his most embarrassing experience. I didn't tell mine but I knew well what it was. It happened at the old school house beside the road. I was the proud possessor of a new pair of cottonade pants. My mother had made them, buttoned them upon me with loving care and sent me forth
rejoicing. I was proud in realization of my elegance. I was at bat. The ball came hard and fast straight at my head. I stooped low to avoid it. There was a ripping sound. I pretended not to hear it. The ball was returned and came again. I struck it and sped towards first base. The breeze confirmed my worst suspicions and as first base lay by the roadside I sped on down it making a real home run bearing the divided remains to my mother. The agony and shame and humiliation have given place to the humor of the situation only after many years and to crown it all my teacher called me up the next day and said, "Paul, you must never leave the grounds without permission." If I remember correctly one of our trustees in Shelby County remarked when they were discussing the building of the Simpsonsville gymnasium that when he was a boy he got exercise walking to school but it seemed the modern idea was to haul the kids to school and then build a gymnasium for them to exercise in. Well I got some exercise by walking some two miles to school and doing various chores about the farm but the recess periods still were never sufficiently long to provide enough time for the games of that day. Perhaps you think in my reminiscence I have left the subject. I think not. I hear from time to time still those who oppose consolidation on the grounds that the one room school produced better scholars and especially better spellers than a modern school. I count myself by experience an authority on the one room school. Its resources were so scanty that for the individual who had the ability to secure information without much help it provided unusual opportunities for individual development through hard work. The few students at the top survived and according to the usual rule of the survival of the fittest often went forth to noteworthy accomplishment. The average and below average group never had a chance. Think back to the one room school that you attended and remember how few ever finished even the eighth grade much less went on to high school or college. The mortality was outrageous. I deny too the oft repeated myth that all the students of this ancient school were good spellers. A few remarkable spellers were developed. Most of the group than at present could probably spell asafetida, chrysanthemum and Popocatapetl but I will wager that the average spelling ability of the words commonly used in writing of the members of this school will far surpass that of any entire school group of the old one room school which I or your parents attended. Larger schools provide vastly greater opportunity and stimulate school attendance. I can cite a one room school in Woodford County which was transported by bus to Versailles. After a year or two we had twice as many pupils coming to Versailles from that district than had ever attended the school there and the County Superintendent told me that more pupils were graduating yearly from our high school from that district than had been accustomed to complete the eighth grade there.

You have had better chances than those of us who lived in my day had. You are better educated. The question now arises as to what you are going to do about it. The aim of education in the final analysis is two fold—that you may get more out of life and second that you may make a greater contribution to the world. It can not be disputed that in the main those with more education hold better jobs and enjoy more of the material blessings of life. I hope that these may come to you. I think that it is perhaps more important that education widen your horizon and opens to you greater possibilities for enjoyment and the living of the fuller and richer life. All that is beautiful and worth while in the past can be yours to
enjoy thru education. Characters from history who have aided in human progress, great personalities from the pages of fiction, all of the magic beauty of the poets fancy, the compositions of artists in the field of music, of painting of architecture are yours to command to the end that you may be confined not in a narrow sphere but that in the poets words you may build you more stately mansions. What a pity if you fail to share in the joys to which you are entitled thru scanty appreciation because of lack of proper education.

I hope that many of you may be privileged to go on to college. I am selfish enough to hope that some of you may come to us at Western. You probably before you enter college should consider whether you are big enough to stand the test and succeed there. The best test for self diagnosis that I ever saw was proposed some years ago by Washington and Lee University. It consisted of only four questions:

1- Are you man enough to get up promptly every morning, get your meals and to school on time every day and go to bed at a fixed hour every night, all of your own initiative, without a word of reminder from anybody?

2- Are you man enough to go off by yourself everyday and study all your lessons till you know them without having any one tell you to get to work?

3- Are you man enough to carry loose change in your pocket without spending it?

4- Are you man enough when another fellow's answer is in easy reach to fail on an examination rather than obtain unlawful aid?

Which being interpreted means that success in college and I would add in life is most likely to come to him who is master of himself, who is able to forego present pleasure for future accomplishment and whose honesty and integrity are above question.

But after all everybody can not go to college. You need not therefore cease your education. I have known splendidly educated folk who never had as much education as you have had now so far as school attendance is concerned but who from books, from sermons and lectures, from conversation and observation plus a good amount of meditation came to be truly educated to an extent that was not equalled by many a college graduate.
All of you regardless of future education have plenty of problems to face. Those of us who are in charge at present are not so proud of the situation which it seems likely we are to bequeath you. I can not undertake to discuss many of the things which are so evidently out of joint but let us consider a few.

We educators for example are persuaded that the child who has the ability is entitled to the education rather than the one with the most wealth behind him. Indeed the protection of society for advancement depends on adequate training for its best potential leadership. The nation can hardly bear the serious loss involved in the lack of some form of adequate equalization of educational opportunity. I am persuaded that this should be given on a national scale as a wise investment which will return large dividends. Education officials insist that there is no child so poor that society can afford for him to lack adequate medical care and health service. It seems foolish to me as an educator to see children provided in school with books, buildings and teachers and then the entire investment in the case of many cases lost due to the children's inability to receive proper dental care.

We have seen considerable progress in a theory which is predicated on the assumption that the wage earner is entitled to protection against unemployment through the setting up of a surplus from prosperous times for periods of depression and that it is the obligation of society to maintain a standard of welfare beneath which no member shall be permitted to fall so long as the total resources of society are sufficient to meet the need. They say with the Eskimo that one member shall not starve alone since the total wealth of the community stands behind each member. The fact that we have shiftless, improvident, lazy members of the social group makes this theory difficult of administration with justice and obnoxious to many thru industry, economy and sacrifice have made wise provision for their future. Still they seem to me to be based somewhat on the teachings of a Man of Galilee who spoke not of property rights but of property obligations and of wealth as a trust to be held strictly accountable to God and administered for the benefit of ones fellows.

In the world we have been prone to use up the money for war which should be spent for education, religion, hospitals and the care of the unfortunate. How much could the billions spent on bloodshed in our memory have done to care for the helpless, to remove poverty and give decent homes, food, and clothing to the needy and deprived? Only in the last few years have we here in Kentucky begun to answer the cry of the feeble minded and insane in our state for a chance.

Again—God in his mercy it would seem looked down on humanity busy from morning to night in the tasks of raising crops making things to satisfy human wants, using a twelve hour day and barely able then to furnish a meagre supply and said, "I will give men machines that will produce more goods in a small part of the time so that my people may have leisure to dream of spiritual things and to hear my voice but instead of men being master of the machines and using them to help all men to an easier life and more leisure we have been in danger of falling a prey to the machines and letting them become instruments for increasing the ancient inequalities.

It would seem that he said, "I will give the soil such fertility that such crops of food and clothing textiles may be produced as to provide a surplus of food and clothing for all but in the midst of naked and hungry people we have宏观ed of low prices for oversupply and seen as the solution to burn coffee, sink coffee in the sea and plow up cotton as the solution. We all know that not over production but under consumption because of lack of proper distribution of buying power is the trouble but so far we have been unable to solve the problem. It seems likely that we shall leave it to you to cope with.
This and other problems without number will challenge you. It is part of the justification for your training as I suggested a while ago that you shall intelligently work at the solution of such problems that democracy may be preserved. It is well that you shall have increased joy in living but it is vitally important that your education shall result in better service as citizens, as home builders, as workers.

There is still hope. Do not lose faith in humanity. Do not ever get in a state of selfishness in which you feel that nothing is worth dying for. When humanity comes to that belief it might as well be blotted out. I challenge you to remember a few monuments. Recall with me a monument in northern Greece inscribed with the words, "stranger go tell the Laecademonians that we lie here in obedience to their commands" which glorifies the death of a small group of Spartans who died there between the mountain and the sea in a vain attempt to turn back the enemy. Sit with me before the Lion of Lucerne and recall once more the valiant Swiss troops that died in defense of a French King. Bow with me in reverence before a monument in Arlington Cemetery before which an American guard keeps watch day and night on which are inscribed these words—"Here lies in honored glory an American soldier, known but to God." These are monuments all to vain sacrifice but in their eternal challenge to us and to those who shall come after us, to continued faith in heroic devotion to a cause that God counts death as glorious victory if for a great ideal, they find their justification. I am persuaded that we should fear not death but fear rather the waste of life.

Dr. Freeman in his great life of General Lee real.tes how on the generals last visit into northern Virginia a mother brought her child to him for his blessing. General Lee of all the things that he might have said chose to say this: "Teach him to deny himself." After a long life of glorious service and such living as had made him the best loved citizen of the South this was the formula which he offered for the successful life, that one should deny himself. I suggest that you read the life of the truly great, that you look about you at the lives of the most worth while members of your community and measure by that standard and see if in your judgment the advice was sound and if so accept the challenge that your life may be useful.

There will come hours of discouragement. A great poet once recognized them --