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Reflections on the Occasion of A Commencement

by

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I clearly recall the warm, late spring evening nineteen years ago when I, as you have done tonight, joined the robed procession of my fellow candidates for graduation to participate in the ceremonies marking the completion of our college work. My recollections, however, are confined almost wholly to the thoughts that coursed through my mind as I gathered with my classmates at the marshaling grounds. My mind swept back in retrospect over the four years of college life. They had seemed an endless time during the many months I had looked forward to acquiring the diploma which I was inclined to view as a passport to greater opportunities in the years ahead. Now they seemed wholly insufficient to their true goal. Prepared for the future? Partially but poorly. Educated? Scarcely at all. There in that hour of presumed fulfillment, I felt perhaps more inadequate than ever before in my life.

Because your thoughts may be similarly directed tonight, I should like to review with you for a few minutes the implications, as I now see them, of my own commencement reflections. Before going on, however, lest we find ourselves appearing simply to be lost in unrelieved disillusionment and self-doubt, let me recall also the saving observation in my otherwise rather lugubrious thoughts that night. Convinced as I was of my own utter inadequacy to be termed educated, almost prepared to decline the degree and diploma to be awarded me, I looked around me. I promptly decided

that if they could accept their diplomas, so could I. With my chin up again and my chest out, I went forward and became officially a bachelor, whatever that may mean.

The primary significance of my own graduation experience is that at that point I began to understand the meaning of education in my life. Perhaps I should say education and life, for I also began to have a better understanding of the nature of the "real life" or the "good life" which I had been assuming was to begin at this point.

Education, I began to see, was not a process which has a beginning or an end, not an experience having fixed bounds. It has nothing to do with degrees or diplomas. Education is essentially the process of enlarging our understanding. Unless we are prepared to assume the imminence of a state where we know all that is to be known, we must acknowledge that our education is not now, and never will be, complete. And as a tool for dealing with the problems of life, education must be repeatedly adapted and modified to meet its changing applications.

At the same time, this business of life - which you as graduates are now presumed in some way to be entering upon for the first time - is not a new phase of existence. It remains the same in essence, still unsolved, still larger than we are. You may be under the illusion tonight that you are at this point "going out into the world". Soon enough you will be aware that although the "outside" world may involve a different set of

routines or a different context for your life, the fundamental issues you will face will remain the same. You will have no new-found magic key to solve them. The quality of your solutions will be in proportion to the quality of the information, the insights and the convictions you have acquired and developed throughout your lifetime. The specific application of judgment to issue will be no easier tomorrow than today.

And so it is that life becomes at no time reduced to formula. Continuing education remains of undiminishing importance.

Let us recognize that the processes of education can be more or less formal, more or less institutionalized, more or less a principal preoccupation, more or less efficient, more or less valid in relation to our dominant needs, but education in its fundamental sense is a process that goes ever on.

You may object that I seem to be equating education with learning, that learning is continuous in human experience but that education is learning which is conscious, purposeful, or directed, and customarily institutionalized and formalized. I could as happily adopt that narrower definition as my own, but were I to do so tonight I would at the same time shift my topic to the consideration of learning. For what I am concerned with is education in its root sense: the process of learning by which man is led out from the shadows of ignorance into the light of greater knowledge and greater understanding. Our

~~schools and colleges are specifically committed to and wholly occupied with this cause, but must properly disclaim any monopoly on the function. Our institutions must in fact be content to hope that they have kindled the sparks of curiosity and insight sufficiently to cause them to burn continually in the minds of our graduates through all the years of their lives, and that the process of education, more fully self-directed, will persist undiminished though the ivied walls have been left behind.~~

I need not labor the point, for tonight you surely know that you have more to learn in the future than you have learned in the past. Granting that, however, what are the conditions which will surround your future learning? And what perspectives will make that continuing learning most valid?

It is beyond my power to predict the future in detail. But this I know: Your adult lives will be lived in the era of the most rapid change known to recorded history. Look back with me only a hundred years. Life was then lived without the benefit of electricity. Transport was still largely either horse-drawn or sail-driven. The steam engine was only beginning to forecast the era of the steamship and the railroad. The internal combustion engine did not exist. Automobiles were unknown. Travel from coast to coast in our land was measured in months and weeks. The principal means of human intercourse and communication then in use were little changed from those

known and used to man even before the Christian era.

In this last century, however, man's increasing mastery of his physical universe has worked awesome changes in our world and in the very nature of our culture. Hours and minutes are the measure of coast-to-coast travel instead of months and weeks. What happens in Europe tonight is known here tomorrow, not next month. Our national borders, once guarded from the threat of other major powers by protective oceans, are now vulnerable to guided missiles which may soon be perfected to travel unmanned from any part of the world at near-indefensible speeds and with destructive capacity almost beyond the imagination which our experience can foster. A hundred years have seen more change than two thousand years preceding. The last twenty-five have seen more change than the previous seventy-five, and have developed the techniques which promise truly to revolutionize the twenty-five immediately ahead.

What does all this mean to you as you think of your future? It clearly means that if you are to keep pace with life you have even more to learn in the years ahead than you have in all your years of schooling. It means that you must maintain open minds, keeping continuously active the admittedly imperfect powers of objective appraisal which you have been developing over the years when education has been your end as well as your means. It requires that you be prepared to find life's issues harder rather than easier. It calls for unwavering

willingness to face these issues as they arise and courage to meet them in their tiring multiplicity without let-down or hesitation, lest the coursing tide of events sweep you away in their flood.

These necessities are underlined well enough by the headlines of our papers today. Hard decisions clearly are facing our nation and the nations of the world. They require adjustments essential to the new norms of life which our technology has brought, but difficult for us to accept in terms of our past experience of normalcy. Our rational processes begin to short-circuit, and we find ourselves suddenly tired of 'emergency' conditions, deciding at the same time that the funds we have been providing for military defense and other moneys we have been appropriating for advancing international understanding through peaceful means are excessive and must be cut.

Now clearly the pressures of international tensions have been little reduced as yet, though we may be coming closer to finding the formulae for their reduction; clearly this is no time to decide the issue solely in terms of whether we want to spend as much of our money through government for common purposes this year as last. The decision, if it is to be valid at all, must be made in terms of the basic issues. It must be decided not just in terms of billions of dollars, important as they are, but in terms of the implications of the alternate uses of those dollars. And the decisions are hard decisions, involving the analysis of many factors

and many variables. Whatever the best answers, they are not to be found simply by the application of arbitrary percentage cuts to presidential recommendations, nor are they to be achieved by the wishful thinking that life would be more comfortable if we could turn back the clock.

The answers to the questions of national budget policy with respect to national defense and international harmony must, it is clear, be sought with the perspective of the educated mind. Our judgments must take into account the facts and conditions which we face today. Our decisions must be based upon informed reasoning. We must be ready to learn and learn again if we are not to betray our own interests.

Of course, the question of the size of our national budget is only one of countless hard questions with which we must wrestle, individually and collectively. It is also only an immediate question for which proper answers can be found in terms of more basic answers to the more basic questions having longer-range implications than a twelve-month spending plan. It suggests that we must relate immediate decisions - in fact, all our actions - to some basic standards, some essential values, if we hope to have our lives and our civilization add up to some result rather than to have the various parts simply cancel out each other, leaving nothing as our result.

Here we are brought back to our second question. What are the perspectives which will give validity or meaning to our

learning? We cannot tonight build a philosophy or a system of values. And were I to attempt to do so, it would not be satisfactory to each of you. At least I hope it would not, for a set of personal convictions on matters of essential values adopted from one man's talk will at best be good only until the next man comes along. But we would do well to remind ourselves that all knowledge, all fact, all decision, has relevance in human experience only as it is related to our basic assumptions about the nature of man and his relation to the universe. At this point, I think you will come to find, learning becomes most usefully historical in its method. For out of the experience of the ages we come to appreciate truly that the freedom of the immortal human spirit to grow toward constantly enlarging capabilities is the most important end of life, and that the insistence of the human spirit upon the maintenance of this God-given right is also the most irresistible and undeniable force in our experience. As we come to acknowledge, in deed as in word, in law as in theory, our own essential respect for the ultimate worth of the human spirit residing in every man, the use and utility of our learning will be made manifest and the meaning of education itself becomes clear.

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