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William Meacham

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The Cult Of Mediocrity

An Address delivered at
The Eighty-Fifth Commencement
of Western Kentucky State College
Bowling Green, Kentucky
May 31, 1962

by

DR. WILLIAM F. MEACHAM

Professor of Neurological Surgery
Vanderbilt University School of Medicine
Nashville, Tennessee

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President Thompson, Mrs. Thompson, members of the graduating class, distinguished faculty, and honored guests:

My presence here tonight because of your kind invitation certainly constitutes an outstanding event in my life. I am flattered and humbled by the knowledge that you would willingly risk the speaking talents of a surgeon such as I instead of allowing yourselves the comfortable security of being addressed by an educator or political figure of reknown, whose erudition must certainly exceed mine. However, I take comfort, and you can do likewise, from Oliver Wendell Holmes, who claims that no speech is as worthy as a like amount of time spent in contemplative silence! While this observation literally cannot be observed here for obvious reasons, it is certain to place the speaker on his mettle, and gives you the privilege of privately agreeing with its philosophy at the conclusion of this address, if you so desire.

As your convocation speaker, I enjoy a privileged and perhaps dangerous freedom to pursue any subject I choose and to say what I please, but very likely, the most important function that I fulfill tonight is that of being the very last source of cerebral reverie that you will be subjected to under the auspices of the college. From now on, with your newly acquired independence, you will have to be responsible for your own sources of boredom!

It is quite impossible for me to proceed with this program without making a public acknowledgment of the very deep sentiment I feel in being, once again, on this placid and beautiful campus. The fondest of memories crowd about me, and I find myself involved in a sort of poignant nostalgia for the days that I so fondly recall as a student, trudging about these slopes. The "Spirit of the Hill" is indeed a vivid reality again! I see striking and tangible evidence of great progress here—new buildings, enlarged enrollment, increased faculty roster, and expanded curriculum, but one thing remains unchanged—the vibrant and palpable spirit that has always been such an intimate feature of academic life at Western. I note also that the basic premise of institutions of learning is perfectly exemplified here—this is a community of scholars. Parenthetically, I should insert that we all arrive in such a community
with an obvious and justifiable interrogation mark appended to the term "scholar," but one which we slowly and laboriously attempt to erase. Tonight, you can exchange the question mark for an exclamation point!

Throughout the land, at this particular time of the year, a peculiar academic fervor grips us all, and for a few short days while they still remain a captive audience, an "open season" is declared on graduating classes everywhere. I hope the announcement that I will eschew the trite and time-worn exhortations will afford you some relief. I do not intend to proclaim that "the future belong to you," nor will I foist upon you a philosophy concerning that favorite intellectual hot-foot, "the torch of learning is yours, guard it jealously and carry it forward!" On the contrary, I have chosen a subject that should concern us all and, if properly reflected upon, may prove a source of personal initiative to a few. I have entitled this theme "The Cult of Mediocrity."

We are gathered here soberly resplendent in the trappings and garb of academic accomplishment. By virtue of your fitness this institution has been able to recommend your investiture in robes denoting some degree of excellence on your part. Since ancient times only a few have earned the privilege of being so invested, so that you are indeed a group set apart.

I have advance knowledge that 404 degrees are to be conferred tonight. This means that 404 individuals possessing 404 heads have proved their ability to exercise the prime function of their cranial contents—that of intellectual activity. The secondary, or minor, function of the cranium is also being busily employed at this moment—that of supporting 404 academic caps denoting your competence in the first category. Let us speak for a moment about the cranium and its contents.

The interior of the head is filled to capacity with a remarkable organ called the brain. It is mostly water, but the clever combinations of fluids and solids can perform as no other organ can, and in the case of humans, it far exceeds in its performance any other brain in the animal kingdom. Composed of millions of cells and complex reflex circuits that defy, thus far, scientific understanding, it works, rests, or dawdles along, as the case may be, subservient to that esoteric and indefinable something called the will. And how does the will operate? No one seems to know, but this much is certain: each of us has partial control of his own. Thus, we can willingly go or stop, we can willfully steal or murder, or we can work or loaf, according to the dictates of our will. No machine contrived by man can approach in its performance the brain's organization of countless impulses sent to it. Ponder this: In the waking state, it is calculated that something on the order of three billion impulses per second—two billion from the visual system alone—are generated and integrated in the nervous system. Now, why such a traffic
jam in the brain? This is the electrical activity required to produce the process of thinking, and almost as much activity is required to daydream as it is to perform hard, factual reasoning. Ergo, such activity should, whenever possible, be delegated to useful purposes rather than fruitless cerebral dissipation. How do we learn in the physiological sense? No one really knows. The mechanism by which electrical impulses traveling about the nervous circuits of the brain are converted into facts is a miracle of physiological planning. How does one store up knowledge—put it away for future reference—and recall it at will, then use it and put it away again? Where does it reside and in what form? Here again, these questions remain as imponderables in our present state of knowledge. It is interesting to note that weight, structure, and form of the brain remain the same regardless of how "intellectual" we become, and in the pathological laboratory an intellectual's brain cannot be differentiated from a moron's. When, through study and repetitive thinking, a fact is learned and retained as an increment of our individual total knowledge, it is possible that a very slight change in some colloidal arrangement of cell protoplasm may occur, or perhaps some alteration of the electrical potential across cell membranes takes place.

But little else is known about the mysterious method of learning and fact retention. From a pool of basic facts that we learn and store away, we are able, by accepting the logical and rejecting the improbable, to arrive at a rational conclusion, or to solve a problem. This is reasoning or abstract thinking. This is what the philosopher, the theoretician, or the abstract mathematician does. This is wonderful, you say. Yes, but this is what we all do—daily and with ordinary and mundane things: we distinguish right from wrong (or should), left from right, too much, too little, just enough! This is the brain at work. Combine a healthy brain and a virile will, and you have a first-class combination. Too little brain, and you have a defective—little help for him except kindness and understanding. Too little will, and you have a physiological disgrace, torpor, slothfulness—a bum, a mediocrity. This is called infirmity of the will, a shameful and insidious disease for which no wonder drug has been discovered. The diagnosis can be made easily—our conscience tries to tell us when we are so afflicted. It can be cured by vigorous initiative, but it becomes fatal when complicated by complacency. We must remember that the same brain that learns and retains facts is also the organ that is responsible for forgetfulness; that the brain that drives us to useful creativeness also permits us to loaf and to daydream.

Man's own intellectual prowess is so designed that it constantly works toward its own defeat unless properly motivated. The human mind that developed the electronic computer has produced a machine that can solve problems in hours that otherwise might require weeks or months of dreary, boring, human intellectual effort. This is good
when it relieves man of sheer drudgery, but dangerous when it is used in lieu of active, creative, intellectual effort. One thing is certain: the mechanical brain cannot turn itself on; somebody has to get up in the morning and flip the switch.

We are, indeed, creatures of comfort. We are easily caught up in a program of short cuts—both physical and mental—of our own making. For instance, who will add a long column of figures when an adding machine is handy? Why push a lawn mower when you can ride one? Why walk five steps to change the TV channel when a remote control gadget will do it for you?

The basic reason for all such devices should be to release man from routine performance as a drone and to allow for additional creative activity, but the danger lies in the acceptance of all the aspects of our mechanistic age as a blanket invitation to cerebral apathy and intellectual sterility. Your only defense is a strong motivation towards a continual performance of individual competence.

We all may agree that a healthy concern must be entertained about the dangers of creeping socialism and creeping Communism, but the social and behavioral change that frightens me the most is creeping lassitude! Since when is it better or more fun, for that matter, to apply for a handout than it is to turn out some good honest work? Whence cometh the philosophy that the desirable thing is to work a little and loaf a lot? Some call it “the good life.” That is to say, perform your minimum routine of labor for six to eight hours, five days per week, well larded with mid-morning coffee break, long lunch period, mid-afternoon coffee break, early departure on Friday, and a late return on Monday. Then, to be certain that your “rights” are not infringed upon, strike for shorter hours or more pay, or both, at least once per annum. I have never heard of anyone striking for more work and more pay—always the other way around. What do we do with all this “free time”—improve our cultural appreciation, or develop a useful hobby, or devote it to civic enterprises? Not on your life—we loaf. In short, the vocation tends to become the avocation (how could it be otherwise with a twenty-five-hour work week?). Our work responsibility is arranged so that it just feeds us, just houses us, and just clothes us, and we are satisfied and complacent—and doomed to mediocrity. Ambition and initiative fail to thrive, languor and lassitude prevail, and before long with a little urging from an aching back (from too much lounging in a hammock), it is easier to go on relief than it is to work, and almost as remunerative!

I notice a full-page advertisement in a current periodical: “How I retired to Florida at age forty-five on $300 per month.” Can this really hold public appeal? It may be that if we all connive together and use our brains in concert, we can find a way to retire (always to Florida)

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at the age of twenty-five on nothing per month. We are getting close! Witness the beatnik. What a travesty on human intellect that a cult could develop in contemporary times that advocates, one: no work; two: no shaving; three: no washing; four: no anything. I see nothing salutary in a program advocating Beer, Bop, Bongo Drums, and Boredom.

Self-preservation and self-development are common aspirations among all people. If everyone enjoyed the unrestricted use of his faculties and the free disposition of the fruits of his labor, social progress would be ceaseless, uninterrupted, and unfailing.

But there is also another tendency that is common among some people. When they can, they wish to live and prosper at the expense of others. This is no rash and uncharitable accusation. The annals of history bear witness to the truth of it. Listen to Frederic Bastiat, noted French economist and statesman: “Man can live and satisfy his wants only by ceaseless labor... but it is also true that a man may live and satisfy his wants by seizing and consuming the products of the labor of others.” This is called plunder. Now, since man is naturally inclined to avoid pain and discomfort, and since, to some, labor is painful, it follows that men will resort to plunder whenever plunder is easier than work. The term “plunder” may seem harsh, since it is most often associated with unrestricted military aggressiveness, but passive plundering is evident whenever we benefit from the labors of others and contribute little or nothing in return. Such a person is a social parasite, and paradoxically enough, it is not only currently popular, but legal!

No one can deny the importance of social improvement in the common lot of man, but this should be accomplished by affording opportunities for labor, for creative expression, and for personal initiative, rather than guaranteeing basic security by a financial handout. When the latter method is utilized we see a noticeable deterioration in initiative, energy, productivity, and personal integrity. I am appalled at the dreary spectacle of increasing numbers of frank malingerers and dead beats passing through my office feigning illness or injury for purposes of financial gain. Such persons are prime examples of moral and intellectual mediocrity leading to outright dishonesty and human decadence. This is the cult of the “get something for nothings,” and, I might add, growing numerically in preponderous fashion.

Imperial Rome, for centuries master of the world, foundered because of a total failure of moral persuasion, and not from military weakness. No civilization can long remain dominant wherever human behavior permits moral values to become secondary to pecuniary aims.

“The United States is now experiencing the trials, tribulations, and penalties of an era of the half-done job. An era in which there are
constant attempts to legislate all facets of enterprise to the level of mediocrity.” It is the age of plumbers who may come to fix a leaky pipe, someday, maybe; of lackadaisical salespeople who attend upon the inquiring customer at their leisure; of educators who insist upon a fixed pay schedule for all teachers, so that achievement goes unrewarded; of students who take only crap courses; of doctors who sponsor fixed fee schedules which reward the poorly qualified equally with the well-trained, and of lawyers who encourage punitive civil suits for every accidental breach of human behavior (after all, it’s the insurance company who pays). There appears to be a stampede away from the goal of first-rateness and responsibility.

Now, you are here because you wanted an education. This is good. You worked for your goal and you have achieved it, thus far. No one made you do it. This is brain and will working together. If it had been otherwise with any of us, it would be hard to determine whether we weren’t educated enough to know we weren’t dimwitted, or whether we had just enough education to realize we were stupid. You have obviously escaped such a trap, and in so doing, your salutary accomplishment is here and now being publicly acknowledged, a matter of great pride to us all. This is individualism and is to be encouraged. However, the cloth has two sides—so, do not let your individualism carry you to the brink of absurdity. Here is a case in point—this is not apocryphal.

“The story is about a young man who formerly lived with his parents—in a public housing unit. He attended public schools and was nourished every noon via the school’s ‘free lunch program.’ He then went into the Army and kept his GI life insurance—which annually refunds almost the total premium cost.

“After he left the Army, he enrolled in a state university and worked at the state capitol to supplement his GI education checks. Soon after he graduated, he married a public health nurse and bought a home with a GI loan. He then obtained a Reostruction Finance Corporation loan and went into business on his own.

“Their baby was born in the city hospital, and a few months later our hero bought a ranch—with assistance from the veterans’ land program. He obtained emergency feed from the government. Later, he put the ranch in the soil bank and used the payments to clear the mortgage. Then the government paid 70 cents for every 30 cents he paid to put the ‘soil bank’ land in grass.

“Our friend’s parents live with him on the ranch and collect Social Security checks. The Rural Electrification Administration has supplied electricity; the government helped him clear his land; the county agent showed him how to terrace it; and the government built him a fish pond.
“About a month ago, he wrote his Congressman the following letter:

Dear Sir: I wish to protest these excessive governmental expenditures and attendant high taxes. I believe in rugged individualism. I think people should stand on their own feet without expecting a handout. I am opposed to all socialistic trends, and I demand a return to the principles of our Constitution and the policies of States’ Rights.

“We always admire a rugged individualist!”

Having now achieved one goal, you are squared-away to face another. Contrary to what you might have heard, the world does not really “await you with open arms.” This is poetic license. You face a society of free men who are highly competitive; who hold tenaciously to their own hard-earned rewards, relinquishing them grudgingly to those of you who display ambition, initiative, tenacity, and a dash of temerity. To the timorous, to the lazy, and to the unambitious, there is a place for you—within the already swollen ranks of mediocrity. It is our fond hope that should any of you, perchance, become so categorized, you will endeavor, at least, to be a first-class mediocrity and not a mediocre mediocrity.

This, ladies and gentlemen, is not a trap set for you by a designing, scheming fate (on whom it has often been blamed), but a reflection of your own will. It is not unlike the problem of how best to co-exist with a tiger; from the viewpoint of the tiger there is only one way—inside the tiger! And this is where the lack-lustre personality would be. But, for the bold and the venturesome, co-existence is possible when he, by his own efforts, secures the tiger in a cage.

Now do not mistake me. This is no plea for you to place an egotistical ambition in the forefront of your thoughts. There is no need constantly to seek personal aggrandizement. It matters little whether you achieve local, national, or worldly fame. The punch-line here is to so conduct your performance, regardless of the discipline you choose, that you aim for the accolade of “First Rate!” This is true regardless of how minor and how provincial your station in life may be.

How does one know when this goal is met? One may never know. But this much is true—the designation must be made by others, never oneself. Self-adulation is not permitted here.

A good diagnostician would tell you that the prime symptom experienced on the path toward first-rateness is a kind of constant restlessness, producing a feeling of having failed to accomplish all that one really should. By the same token, the expressway to mediocrity is associated

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with a feeling of sedated complacency and perfect tranquility. This becomes an addicting narcotic to the will.

It will ill become you later to awaken to your state and to bemoan your fate; to cry out to all and sundry, your unhappy state; to recount your “tough breaks,” and to grieve over lost opportunities. The world may, and so will I, refer you to the lines in Macbeth, Act V, Scene 5:

It is a tale
Told by an idiot, full of sound and fury,
Signifying nothing.

I could not, in my opinion, more aptly close this address than to quote from the lines of “My Creed” by Dean Alponge:

“I do not choose to be a common man. It is my right to be uncommon. I seek opportunity to develop whatever talents God gave me—not security. I do not wish to be a kept citizen, humbled and dulled by having the state look after me. I want to take the calculated risk, to dream and to build, to fail and succeed. I refuse to barter incentive for a dole. I prefer the challenges of life to the stale calm of utopia. I will not trade freedom for beneficence, nor my dignity for a handout.”

Now, to him who can practice the simple philosophy expressed in these few tenets, one thing is assured, the world and all about him will agree—“There goes a Man!”

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2. Alponge, Dean: My Creed Junior Achievement Newsletter, 1962
5. The Rugged Individualist General Practitioner, 1962