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UA3/3 Know Thyself

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"Know Thyself", said Socrates more than 2,000 years ago. Today as you near the end of a summer session at Western during which so many of you have increased your competence as teachers and more than 200 of you have approached the threshold of graduation, the admonition of Socrates is as timely as though it had been exclusively designed for 1957.

I say this because some would have the world believe that we are a nation of conformists and that our program of education is producing a silent multitude of college graduates who are willing to claim faceless and voiceless roles in a world where individual thinking is made a sacrifice to ease and comfort.

These generalizations, in themselves, are not too bad, as we are all agreed that without criticism, progress must surely cease. They are bad, however, when they become part and parcel of a stereotyped recitation of "experts" who accept thinking of other "experts" without going to the trouble of personally evaluating what they are reciting. They are bad if you, as the end product of extended association with American education, allow them to go unchallenged within your own individual personal mind.

It is interesting how, at times, mere assumptions or part-truths suddenly blossom into statements of absolute fact. Let me give you an example. During the past 12 months I have heard speakers say, or I have read, that Russia is training scientists so fast and so well that the United States has been left
far behind in this critical area of education. My guess is that you have heard or read this same indictment. We have heard the ratio described as being twice as many, three times as many, and even five times as many. The charge may - or may not - be true. That is not the point as I use it here. The question I want to raise is - 'How does it happen that we readily admit that we know so little about ten thousand other things happening behind the iron curtain, yet we accept without question and proclaim as gospel this isolated and questionable comparison - that is, if we do not think?'

The same type of mental question mark should be provoked when it is implied that our system of education is producing multitudes of college graduates afflicted with mental anemia. If American education be thus marked by stultification, how did our nation achieve its present position of power and prominence? Are the ships and planes landing in our ports today loaded with brains and ideas from abroad? Is the almost unbelievable progress of this country, both culturally and technologically, the product of some master education system outside America?

These questions lead to the heart of this address.

Each of us is biologically equipped with a most extraordinary tool which, when used to its fullest extent, can adequately and soundly shape our own analyses and which can extricate us from any such snares of undesirable conformity as may be mean us. I use the word undesirable to imply that all of the ramifications of the word conformity are not necessarily evil.

The gift to which I refer, the greatest physical gift which God has given to man, is the brain -- a fascinating and mysterious device with which
to do our thinking. This relatively small but miraculous organ provides us with the power to seek and determine, to accept or reject, and to evaluate and analyze. You, as successful college students, have proved that you are blessed with certain brain power, which identifies you with expanded mental development and superior thought potential.

As you have disciplined your mind with the cataloging of the innumerable data of academic attainment, you have, in this process of education, increased your intelligence. This means that you have increased your aggregate capacity to act purposefully, to deal effectively with your environment, and to be artistic and creative in your thinking.

Let me repeat the words creative thinking, for it is with this fascinating art that any one of us can find not only the solution to innumerable life problems, but can experience unlimited gratification in personally and silently testing that which otherwise might be taken for granted. It well may be that within the walls of this monastery of creative thinking we can all learn, as Socrates said, to "Know Thyself".

We refer to much of our generally accepted thinking as reasoning. The difference between reasoning and creative thought lies in outcome and procedure. Thinking is usually called creative if the outcome is original. Originality, however, has both a personal and social definition, for many a man has put in much creative work on an idea, only to discover that someone else, or even many others, had done the thing before.

As to procedure, the chief difference is that reasoning follows a rather straightforward course, through well-marked channels, whereas creative
thought travels a more exploratory route, progressing toward a goal but stopping along the way to commune with the challenges of the unproved, and to take advantage of the logic of experience and accepted principles.

We are told that creative thinking actually consists of four phases -- preparation, incubation, organization, and revision. This description was designed for creative thought which ordinarily results in such a climax as may be registered on paper, stone, or canvas -- in other words, that which might be employed by a Beethoven, a Rodin, or a Michael Angelo.

Creative thinking is generally associated with creative artists of this type; and for some reason or another, we have come to associate creative thinking with the earlier half of the normal life span. Neither assumption is valid, because creative thinking is within the power of all of us and regardless of our age.

It is true, of course, that Christ Himself lived only thirty-three years. History records innumerable age cases of a like nature. Keats died at twenty-six; Schubert died at thirty-one. Alexander the Great had conquered the world at thirty-three, and so on. On the other hand, Milton did not begin Paradise Lost until he was fifty. Goethe began the writing of Faust at fifty-seven. Victor Hugo wrote Les Misérables at about sixty. Handel's Messiah was composed at fifty-six, and Wagner produced his best music between the ages of forty-six and sixty-nine. Edison and Marconi were still making significant inventions when they died at advanced ages.

Such illustrations should bear evidence that a person is capable of acquiring or retaining the ability to think creatively during any part of his
life. As to creative thinking being a special gift of any particular group, I recommend that you discover the fallacy of this assumption by enjoying the adventure of employing creative thinking as your own personal habit. One does not have to be a painter, a poet, a scientist, or an inventor to be creative in his thinking. The most humdrum problems of every-day life, as well as the most important decisions of life, cry equally for creative thinking.

This quality of thinking can never be found by chasing after it in a crowd. It must become personal. It cannot come to one suddenly just because of a decision. It, like everything else worth having, must be worked at. It must be earned. It can be acquired, however, by everyone of us if we will but earnestly seek it.

The same thinking processes employed in producing a masterpiece, acclaimed by the world, can be made equally applicable to the simple and the ordinary.

First -- Prepare. We should fortify ourselves with all pertinent information available.

Second -- Incubate. We should not arrive at a conclusion too soon.

Third -- Organize. Let our thinking acquire form and design in harmony with the preparation.

Fourth -- Revise. Refine it and polish it. Be critical of it.

In other words, we should practice thinking.
A champion athlete must condition his body. So far no substitute has been found to take the place of practice. The same principle holds true in many of the arts and skills at which individuals become masters.

Why then in the most dynamic aspect of life would it not be reasonable to assume that we cannot think to our best capacity unless we practice thinking? If you will agree that thinking might be developed, expanded, and refined by constant practice -- and I believe that you will agree, let me then suggest that you consider the practicing of creative thinking in your own day-to-day personal life.

One does not have to produce a visual or vocal masterpiece to have met success in this wonderful art. It can be achieved in the most unbelievable places in the workings of the mind with much of its accomplishment remaining forever unseen or unsaid.

But there is more than just adopting a plan and practice. Prejudice must first be scourged from the mind. Emotion must be quietly set aside. All mental bias must be eliminated when each act of thinking is set into mental motion. If such a setting is provided and with a plan and sufficient practice, this vitally needed, highly desirable, and wonderful ability to think creatively can emerge.

'Then what?' you might say. Please let me tell you what.

Somewhere along the route of this journey with the mind awaits a power, a beautiful, new, usable power -- not only to aid us in the problems of self-management, but to help us more adequately to live in and with an everchanging world.
This power of creative thinking can separate the truth from the trash.

It can develop courage for a person who is afraid.

It can develop conviction for a person who has none.

It can produce superior personal standards and can fortify one to live by them faithfully and happily.

It can produce serenity -- perhaps the most desired achievement of them all.

Let us illustrate. A creative thinker in the manner of which I speak can prepare, incubate, produce, and revise a simple thought pattern on a commonplace subject -- let's say, a single point in a personal code of ethics, or a single point in the analysis of a way of life.

In the first instance, a person becoming creative unto himself can produce in his thinking an unshakeable adoption of the principles of honest dealing in all aspects of his life. He has then placed upon the canvas of his soul his own picture that plain, old-fashioned integrity is a thing to live by, and will not be sacrificed at any price. Creative thinking? Yes, for an ideal has been personally created. Conformity? No, for the ease of conforming certainly lies in other directions.

In the second instance, let me use as an illustration the processes of creative thinking as applied to a choice between the principles of democracy and communism. As an American -- and as one who is vitally interested in the American way of life -- suppose that you conclude for yourself in thought of
finished form that the preservation and strengthening of the American system of self-government, and that respect for the dignity of the human being, is a personal duty and obligation. Creative? Yes. What a creation you have given yourself! For it is yours, arrived at after your own careful deliberation.

Four years ago a young, pretty freshman girl brought to me, at Christmas, a gift. It was a little green ball in a little plastic box. I have kept it on my desk ever since. I have it with me here.

Inscribed on the gold band on the ball are these words: "Do unto others as you would have others do unto you". All of you are familiar with those often-printed, often-recited words.

Now suppose that you or I apply to their proposition all of the analysis of reasoning, then turn it loose in the mind on a journey over the highways and byways of creative thought, finally accepting it. That is, accept it in a sense that a personal voice within speaks out - "To this I shall aspire". Original? The Bible's Golden Rule original? Yes! - for you yourselves have thought it, even though millions have thought it before you.

Today, July 24, 1957, here in Bowling Green, in Kentucky, and throughout our nation there are as many unknown worlds to be conquered as at any other time in the history of America. The challenges which face us are staggering in their proportions. A fascinating automated, electronic, atomic age is here. With all of its stature, however, it probably is only a foretaste of what lies ahead. America, the center of creative thought in the many fields of technological development, is creating its own culture. We should make it the best
in the entire history of the world. Such a culture will grow proportionally as we think our way through the problems and challenges of producing a better world. May I mention only a few?

Health -- particularly coronary and mental diseases, cancer, leukemia.

Want -- lack of food, clothing, shelter, medicine, opportunities for education.

Human Relations -- the placing in true perspective of moral and spiritual laws and values, peaceful coexistence of various groups within our own country, including race, creed and occupational, and the peaceful coexistence of the nations of the world.

There are countless others, all overwhelming in their challenges, and all beckoning to you whose good fortune it has been to reach the higher plateaus of learning. In statesmanship, in business and finance, in law and medicine, in art and music, in literary, scientific, and other intellectual endeavor of all kinds -- unknown worlds, both existing and coming into existence, cry forth for explorers who can think creatively.

An equal, or even greater, number of unknown worlds also remain to be conquered in your personal life and mine. Perhaps the number-one challenge in that respect is that we produce the thought-ability to control ourselves in living with the very things which we create. These many individual and personal worlds must be conquered by you and by me if we are to live adequately with and contribute to what can be a new and brilliant culture.

The answers which we individually and discriminatingly accept should be
answers based, not alone on what someone else has thought or proclaimed, but upon personal verification and adoption arrived at through the miraculous creative power of our own practiced, searchful thinking.

"Know Thyself"? Where is there to be found a better way than by knowing thy own mind? How better can one know his own mind than to develop it and expand it, demanding from it lucid, dependable, dependable thinking?

In conclusion may I again suggest that this magnificent achievement is possible for any and all of us.

If it is achieved, surely then it shall be possible for us to know that —

Having thought the beautiful, we can accomplish the beautiful.

Having thought the good, we can do the good.

Having thought the truth, we can live the truth.