

Rights, Privileges, Honors and Immunities

Hunter College Commencement Address

22 June 1953

James H. Case, Jr.

How many recognize the derivation of my title?

You will hear these very words in a few minutes
when your degrees are conferred upon you.

Confession -- an annual fraud is about to be perpetrated.

No attack upon the integrity of your President.

Who am I to attack? I do the same, though
surreptitiously because in Latin.

Once every term had meaning.

Rights

A "bachelor of arts," at 18, after 4 years
of study, had the right to go out for a
walk by himself. Essentially, he had the
right to be considered a real part of the
University.

Students elected the rector, generally
ran the show, banded together to
regulate the faculty and could ruin
a scholar by boycott.

Privileges

A bachelor had the privilege of beginning his
study for the master's degree -- which,
as it sounds, conferred the right to be
a master: i.e., to teach.
(Thus the term commencement.)

Honors

Various, according to place and time -- to
policy of the Pope and power of the
secular ruler.

Generally accorded high prestige.

Immunities

Exempt from some local ordinances.
Freed from jurisdiction of civil courts --
trial by university authorities.
(English universities have vestiges of such
immunities today.)

Now, however, formula lacks substance.
What new rights, privileges, honors and immunities
does the degree confer?

BA degree plus 10¢ confers right to ride in
the subway.

Better hurry to exercise it
(Subway hardly a privilege at
any price)

What new rights, etc. do you think you ought to
enjoy over other citizens?

Right to better jobs?

Privilege of simply watching the human comedy
about you?

Some dubious honors may be thrust upon you
Known as intellectuals (subversive!)

Hope you have some immunities developed
at Hunter.

Immunity to tricky and meretricious claims
false alarms (Joe)
vicious untruths
ignorance, prejudice, hatred

Hope these immunities are well developed
but total immunity comes with long
development of powers of resistance

Invite you to join me in educational reform

More honest and realistic. More challenging.

For "rights" read "advantages"

" "privileges" read "opportunities"

" "honors" read "obligations"

" "immunities" read "responsibilities,
involvements, and
commitments"

I shall speak of these four:

1. Advantages - four years devoted to development
of intellectual power

Four years at Hunter

faculty, president, Ordway Tead as
chairman of Board of Higher Education

Capacity for varied tasks

Degree, as symbol, advantage in getting jobs

2. Opportunities

Women in 1953, in N.Y.C., in U.S.A.

Your families-to-be

Love, intimate understanding,
thrill of sharing life

Children, happy because wanted,
loved, cared for

Useful -- satisfying

This city

Some day soon it must be run
effectively and decently

New citizens to be assimilated
through understanding

Housing, education, courts, etc.

This country

American Way of Life cleansed of
cheapness, bad taste, greed,
waste; purified of inequities,
injustice, until it draws
nearer to the American Idea
and Ideal.

The World

Spirit of modesty, reasonableness,
compassion, generosity and
courage

3. Obligations

Not labor the point, but your families
and the whole community have sacrificed
to invest in you.

A real debt to repay

The obligations to yourself

4. Responsibilities

Justice Jackson at Buffalo:

"I think it was H.G. Wells who said that history

is a 'race between education and catastrophe.'

We cannot escape some anxiety in this era of

scientific destruction lest education and
catastrophe become partners instead of competitors.

"It is one of the paradoxes of our time that modern society needs to fear little except man, and what is worse, it needs to fear only the educated man."

This sobering warning an antidote to or necessary complement of "You are the hope of the world."

Personally, I think this is a ghastly thing to tell anybody -- particularly when it is true

I am not happy about it either

Fact: You can do more mischief than any previous generation -- or more good Trueblood ("The Predicament of Modern Man")

Four possible states *for the world*

Unifying ends

Divisive ends

Adequate means

Inadequate means

Now true that means are adequate

This is your responsibility

(Peroration -- full text)

Members of the Graduating Class:

This is it, and I wish you luck. I wish you some, but not necessarily all, of the things you now believe you want. I wish you good jobs, happy marriages, many children, and vacations with pay. I wish you promotion and bonuses. I wish you pleasant places to live and chicken every Sunday.

I wish you imagination to see the needs of your country and the world; understanding to devise ways of meeting those needs; vitality and daring to take the risks without which safety can never be achieved. I wish you patience, generosity and resolution in dealing with problems and with people. I wish for you particularly a personal commitment to some undertaking big enough to be worth the skill and brains and drive you can bring to it — and that is a very big and a very significant undertaking indeed.

In short, I wish you the capacity to realize all the advantages and opportunities that come from and go with your college experience and the character and wisdom to discharge with distinction all the obligations and responsibilities that also attend you as members of the 1953 graduating class of Hunter College.