

6/15/59

This is Bill Benton's commencement talk for Hunter College this week. It is the last commencement at Hunter for George Shuster, who is retiring as president after twenty years. I think you will want to share Bill's tribute to George Shuster in the concluding pages.

John Howe

Address by The Honorable William Benton  
Hunter College Commencement  
New York City, June 16, 1959

## PUBLIC SERVICE AND THE LIBERAL ARTS

We are gathered to celebrate one of the Classic rites of spring. This is a feast day at Hunter College for more than a thousand families whose sons and daughters are today admitted to adult society. It is an ancient and honorable rite. You young people who are receiving degrees are the symbol of a tradition which grew from the higher arts reserved for liberales, the free citizens of ancient Rome. Since Roman days, men have acknowledged that the liberal academic disciplines can free them from ignorance, superstition and prejudice.

So I congratulate you, each of you; I congratulate you on the hours you have stolen from TV and the movies to devote to your education. You are today making the down payment on the price of admission to the company of educated men and women. Because I respect this ancient ritual, I now come to remind you again that learning is a life-long work, and that the wise among you will continue to pay the installments as long as you live - and to do so happily and usefully - even if you are so ill-advised that you do not devote yourselves to Britannica's new 54-volume set, the Great Books of the Western World. (This is my commercial!)

Last week the Associated Press began a news story with these two sentences: "Self-discipline - duty - tolerance - morality - faith. Those words echoed across college campuses yesterday at Upstate New York commencement exercises." Two weeks ago the New Yorker magazine

ran a cover of an outline of a young man's head in cap and gown; but there was no face, no indication of eyes or nose or mouth, merely a perfect blank under that cap and above that gown. The etching of your future life, of which every day is the commencement - the etching upon your faces of the decades of self-discipline - morality - faith - or of the reverse - today this is still to be drawn by artists and by trials and tribulations yet unknown. Let me express the hope that the artists will be tall, dark and handsome.

For my own theme today I shall pick a man who is the right kind of artist, even if his hair no longer curls. Indeed, he is the living symbol of my text. I point to him, and I say to you, "Go thou and do likewise." He is why I am here as your speaker. My devotion to his character and his career is the reason I came here to stress to you the relation between the public service and the liberal arts. He is Dr. George N. Shuster and this is his last commencement. He retires today after twenty energetic years as Hunter's president. As your fathers will agree, these years have required more than energy; they have called for an understanding of women. For Dr. Shuster they have been twenty years of women.

You young women - and men - represent our nation's seasonal crop of brainpower. The productive decades of your lives now stretch out invitingly before you. Unless you are radically different from the vintage generations our nation has raised up before you - and you don't look like a Beat Generation to me - at least very few of you have beards - you will be divinely discontented with the world into which you graduate. That is as it should be and as it's often been. What makes your generation different from all others is the degree of

promise and peril it faces. No young people in human history have faced these opposite twins in the measure you now do. And the nature of the promise and peril is such that the promise can best be realized, and the peril best averted, not merely by technical achievement but by the qualities of mind and character developed through the liberal arts.

In modern times these arts have come to be identified with general education - with the humanities and the social and natural sciences, as distinct from the applied arts. In our educational system we strive through the liberal arts to accomplish two great ends - first, to introduce young people to the accumulated wisdom and experience of the human race, and second, to help them learn how to think clearly and independently. The ideal liberal arts curriculum is that which most successfully induces its students to apply their brains vigorously - and rigorously - to the main substance of human learning, problems and opportunities. There has never been greater need for such students than now.

In the dizzy world I foresee, freedom will be in constant jeopardy and wisdom must be a constant counterweight. Originality and resourcefulness, combined with understanding of and respect for enduring values, will be much more important than knowledge of techniques. The techniques of one decade may become the museum exhibits of the next. Every new breakthrough out into the cosmos, or down into the living cell and the atom, can make a whole syllabus of techniques obsolete. But wisdom won't become obsolete.

Last month, at the meeting of the Committee for Economic Development in Boston, I was astonished and disturbed to discover

that 16% of all A.B. degrees being given in the United States are for majors in business education. I remembered the wasted hours and weeks and months and years I spent at Yale enrolled in courses in banking, accounting, and other business subjects. Nobody in New Haven told me that the same hours spent studying literature, history or even astronomy would have made me a better business man. This I learned later in life.

There have been two recent attempts to guess how much time it takes for the sum total of man's information to double. One estimate gives 15 years as the period required, at our present pace, to multiply by two our entire stock of information. Another study says that information in all the natural sciences multiplies by two in 15 years but that two or three times as long is required to double the amount of information in the social sciences and the humanities.

Manifestly a man cannot educate himself by collecting more and more information. As an encyclopaedia publisher, I ought to know. I don't have anyone working for me who has even attempted to read all of Britannica's forty million words. (This is not a commercial.)

In Communist lands future scientists and administrators are being graduated this month too, getting their certificates and their "kandidat" diplomas. They owe allegiance to closed societies and they propose to make these societies universal. Their rulers spend less of their national income on comforts. They invest a far higher proportion on their future - for example, on education and research. They export needed skills to underdeveloped countries, with political doctrines thrown in at no extra charge. In political warfare, thus far they have been more original and more resourceful than we have.

One of the central differences between ourselves and our Communist adversaries is that our traditions commit us to belief in the utility, indeed the sanctity, of dissent - and theirs do not. They are ruled by an elite of ruthless and able men; let the rest of mankind follow and obey. Ours is a democracy with faith in the freedom and the dignity of all men - and faith that out of dissent and diversity will come progress. This is our faith as free adults.

Liberal education teaches us this faith. It is anything but a hothouse for dilettantes. It's no bed of roses for after dinner intellectuals. Neither is it designed to lay on a finishing school gloss.

Can a single one of the 86 Americans in our Hall of Fame be fairly described as a conformist? If there was one trait they held in common, it was independence of mind. They differed. They fought. They thought for themselves. They were the makers and builders of America.

Thus I have confidence that many among you will learn successfully to compete against the Soviet Gospel according to Pavlov - however seductively and hypnotically it is enmeshed in the cabalistic writ of Marxism-Leninism. You will win if you have learned the lesson the liberal arts can teach you. If you have learned your lesson, other men and women throughout the world will learn it from you.

Many among you will proceed to advanced studies for teaching, research and the learned professions. The large numbers who will do so help prove that the Western world is moving ahead in its respect for learning. In my time at Yale, the man with an A.B.

diploma who went into graduate work was looked on - in the words of George Edgar Vincent, then President of the Rockefeller Foundation - as a fellow who didn't know enough to go home when the party was over.

I hope, too, that many of the most gifted among you will prepare yourselves to go into public service and into government. Our political life has never had the dynamic, mature development of personnel that has occurred in technology and the healing arts. It urgently needs more talent, more vision and courage. This is the world of politics, that area of our life which must necessarily be pragmatic, empiric and always imperfect.

Einstein once said, "Politics is more difficult than physics." The world, he said, is more apt to die of bad politics than of bad physics.

Political leadership is surely one of the most difficult arts ever practiced by men - if you will permit me to call it an art. And for better or worse, in our democratic western societies we can only depend for our safety on our politicians - those specialists in the art of the possible, those compromisers, those choosers of the lesser evil, those followers and leaders of public ignorance and public insight.

Thus my prayer to you today, to you as young men and women - and yes, even to you parents - my message today is: cultivate politics and cultivate the politicians; make forthright demands upon them for what you know is right - and instruct them as you can. I urge upon each of you some active role in the public life

of your community and your country. The Olympian questions of your world's future will be political.

You who are to become scholars, prepare for a life of partnership with the politicians. You who are to be politicians, prepare for partnership with the scholars. I plead with all of you: go into politics, at whatever level you can, beginning at the community level and aiming ever higher, even at the national.

I have five small bits of advice. Perhaps the first woman U.S. Senator from New York State is a new alumna here today to heed them.

1. Join a party and then get on a party committee - either party - in your community. Do it now. You'll be welcomed, if you're a worker. Sooner than you think, you'll find your political influence multiplied tenfold or a hundredfold.
2. Know what you want, in terms of your community's future, and go after it through your party. If you want better schools - or better city colleges - push for them. Don't make a speech at your first or your tenth meeting about the founding fathers or about efficiency in government. Be specific and concrete about candidates and about issues - and state what you're after and why and how.
3. Be persistent about your political objectives. I know of no field where the old maxim "Keep everlastingly at it" pays off more surely than in politics. But be good-natured too as the other fellow sometimes turns out to be right.



4. Run for office as soon as it is practicable to do so. President Truman once told me "No man can ever really understand American politics until he's run for office." Don't be afraid to make promises, but only make those you can keep. A man's word in politics counts for more than in academic life or in business.
5. Expect, and ignore, unwarranted abuse. This is one of the penalties of public service. But it is far outweighed by its rewards.

In public service, whether it be limited to community activities, or extended into a full career service, or whether it is an aspiration to the high elective offices of the state and nation, you will find deep satisfaction that can be achieved in no other way. I discovered in the U.S. Senate that no experience I had ever had was without some value applied to some problem I had to meet. The intellectual and moral challenge in the public service gives a man or woman the chance to call forth his greatest capacities and capabilities, and through them to work toward that goal of man on which most western philosophers have agreed: that activity which develops your highest powers.

My personal Hall of Fame in the field of public service includes the man whose imprint has made Hunter College an infinitely richer place. His name is George Nauman Shuster. He is a great liberal artist, and because he is a great liberal artist he is the perfect public servant in any assignment he undertakes.

I have known George Shuster best through our joint efforts to organize and develop American participation in UNESCO, the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization. I am greatly pleased that he has now agreed to serve as the United States representative on the Executive Council of UNESCO.

I have worked with George Schuster also as a member of the Commission on the Freedom of the Press, as a director of Encyclopaedia Britannica Films, of which I have the honor of being chairman, and now as a member of the Board of Editors of the Encyclopaedia Britannica itself.

But these are merely a few among his galaxy of public services. He was High Commissioner for Bavaria after World War II when Mrs. Benton and I visited him and Mrs. Shuster in Munich. Later he served as chairman of the Committee on Discrimination in Washington.

George Shuster has given his associates and readers new insights into long-standing, even eternal, problems of man and society. His wit has given old truths new bite by using words with wings.

Few of us can hope to be George Shusters. But we can seek to emulate him by living up to the highest roles our neighbors and our country entrust to us. Even though the United States may be storm tossed and wracked by trials ahead, your America will still be grounded upon moral imperatives of which President Shuster is a shining symbol.

Hunter College suggests today, in conferring its degrees upon you, that there can be little doubt about the promise of your

abilities. I pray that these potential abilities will be goaded by the example of President Shuster as well as by the great problems pressing in upon us. Let us hope, all of us parents here today, that the qualities kindled by the liberal artist who retires today as President of Hunter - will glow within you as long as you live.