

COMMENCEMENT ADDRESS AT HUNTER COLLEGE  
BY  
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I am honored to be here today for your last Commencement as a single Hunter College. It may well be not only the last commencement for Hunter as such, but the end of this kind of an occasion at which we, the older generation, have the temerity to stand up and address the graduating students. Perhaps this kind of commencement will survive after all, as a vestigial symbol of the university of the past. I, for one, look forward to the university of the future, an institution in which the constituency exercises the major role in governing that institution.

And yet, in 1968, a commencement invitation sorely tempts the speaker to an analysis of what is wrong with today's generation of college students. I don't find it easy to resist the temptation except that I feel the wrong patient is being submitted for examination. Illness on the campus is part of an epidemic sweeping society. Campus symptoms are more dramatic because they show in the elite of our society, who live and study on well landscaped, overbuilt pieces of the Establishment. Not only can questions be raised as to whether it is the college student or the society that is the patient but one can even question whether the symptoms are those of an illness, or the growing pains of a major surge forward in mankind's long period of development. Change is easily seen as illness when it hurts.

Can we sort out together some of the things that hurt because there is growth in our society and others that hurt because there is also illness.

That more members of our society want the right of self-determination

is a sign of growth. In 1215, King John, on the plains of Runnymede let loose a force on Western society which, after a long, faltering beginning, has begun to accelerate very rapidly. The Magna Carta gave the English nobility its first rudimentary opportunity at self-determination. The history of government in all Western countries has been a filling out of this basic grant to accomplishing more representative government. In the 20th Century the right of self-determination has moved from the governmental sphere to other aspects of life. Workers, through union membership, have demanded and received the right of influencing economic rewards, conditions of work, retirement benefits. Much more recently the community has been expressing its need to determine what will happen to its land, its buildings, and its social resources. The poor and the welfare client have quite properly asserted their own voice in influencing decisions alleviating their poverty. Students are perhaps the last significant group of our society to set forth their demands for self-determination. The time will come in colleges when students associated with alumni will determine how the university's endowment will be invested, students associated with faculty will plan the curricula, students associated with deans will develop student life and discipline. The individual student alone will determine his pattern of growth in the new, highly participative environment.

It is also a sign of increasing maturity in our society when even some of those who have, feel guilty about those who have not. Sensitive people cannot be happy when others are in misery. For them, success is pallid when others are limited to failure. The society is beginning to reject a Protestant Ethic in which success results only from individual effort when so many have been so damaged as to make effort impossible. Whether knowledge

of the discrepancies between the haves and the have nots gives rise to guilt or merely a feeling of unrest and distress, it is a healthy response to an unacceptable reality. The young and the idealistic are particularly susceptible. Today one wonders not why Columbia students and faculty are objecting to a private gym in a public park, but why so many college students before them failed to be concerned.

A stepped up pace in the demand for self-determination and an increased acceptance of responsibility for one's brother's misery are wholesome signs for the society's ultimate development, even though along the way they may produce painful symptoms. But there is also much that is sick and wrong in American society - principally our domestic failure to eliminate poverty, disease and indignity, and our international wrong-headedness. Nothing describes our failure at home as authoritatively as the Report of the President's Commission on Civil Disorders, in these words:

"Our nation is moving toward two societies, one black, one white -- separate and unequal."

"Discrimination and segregation have long permeated much of American life; they now threaten the future of every American."

"To pursue our present course will involve the continuing polarization of the American community and, ultimately, the destruction of basic democratic values."

On the world scene, our sickness takes a different but no more acceptable form. Through an endless series of escalations, the consequences of which were never understood, we find ourselves destroying a nation we are pledged

to save, deserted by our friends, distrusted and hated by the Vietnamese, and bloodied in a war whose moral basis no one can describe. The illness is real and nauseating.

But the hate that seethes through our land with its consequence of violence, is no useful response either to the pains of growth or the misery of illness. Rather we must all agree that it is now time in America, on the campus and in the streets, between individuals and within groups, to put aside anger - even though we have not yet achieved a just society; to avoid display, although, sadly, so much of the Establishment seems not to be paying attention; and to accept discipline, because it must be apparent to us all that violence and chaos are now on the way to destroying our society, even though their purpose may be to change it.

But even as we form those good resolutions, we must understand that violence, disorder, chaos, have never been offered as goals - as worthwhile ends in themselves. Not by the students at Columbia, nor by the Black Nationalists, certainly not by the ghetto rioters in our city streets in past summers. They are only means chosen by desperate, deeply frustrated or anxious men, chosen in a setting where it seemed to them the only effective means to change the society. Nobody wants violence and disorder. But not everybody wants a just society that would make agitation unnecessary.

Senator Kennedy's brutally tragic death has caused all of us to look inward at ourselves and our society and to ask what is wrong. The young people, here today, ready to take over the world we have made for them, have more at stake than most in making sure that the right answer is found for the question

"What is wrong?" A necessary part of that answer surely is - there is too much violence and hate in America and the world today. In Vietnam, among Americans and Vietcong; in the cities among black and white; on the campus among young and old. But to say "there is too much violence" is only a dangerously partial answer that would hide the deeper illnesses that beset our society and diminish as well our capacity for growth. Let me use a homely example to make the point. Serious illness often generates fever. The fever must be reduced because it can have its own destructive effect in the body. But obviously, reducing the temperature doesn't cure the disease; it may indeed only mask the continuing destruction wrought by the basic illness. Violence must be reduced or it will destroy our society, but we cannot ignore the more basic illness that causes the violence in the first place.

How we reduce the symptom may be as important as whether or not we reduce it. Violence can not safely be treated by repression. We cannot, in treating violence, also suppress dissent. Room must be left for impatience. We must even allow for pain as necessary social surgery is performed. We cannot devote so much time and effort to the symptom that no energy or motivation is left for treating the underlying sickness, and assuring the necessary growth. And in this effort, facing a society as troubled as ours, patriotism demands dissent. Only the grossly insensitive can avoid it. The concerned can not question the fact of dissent but we must question its form. At a time when dissent can so quickly slide into violence, no one can be held guiltless for the consequences of his behavior.

There will always be some dissent that expresses itself in loud protest and demonstration, growing into disorder and sometimes producing chaos in its wake. Our society can survive such demonstrations; the question today is, can it be improved by them? There are many among us who now demand not so much that dissent be loud and painful but that it be effective in producing change. Some have already found new more effective modes of dissent.

Thousands of college students have forced the pursuit of peace and shaken the political establishment by channeling their dissent into political activism - in a constructive drive to create a new political order by supporting candidates of their own choice, regardless of political party. In doing so they have found in themselves and in their group in society new strengths for producing changes and a satisfying maturity for assuming responsible social roles.

Others, equally dissatisfied with dissent for its own sake, have found places on the firing line of today's social wars - in the large cities, working to produce the changes they seek - in the streets, amid the bureaucracy, at the side of urban leaders who believe as they do that change is needed. Yesterday 3,000 college students from more than 100 colleges around the country began their summer of dissent by joining New York City's Urban Corps. Their dissent will influence the Police Department and the Welfare System, the Hospitals and the Recreation Program, the thinking and the values of New York City's Establishment. Theirs is a dissent of action, not words, building, not destroying.

I can no longer accept the right of anyone to speak for humanity or against society without first demonstrating what he himself has done for people.

Dissent of the deepest humanistic sort must first qualify itself in a relation with a single, troubled, precious human being.

The strength of a society ultimately lies not in its capacity for mass protest and demonstration but in the dignity and self-esteem felt by each of its members. And dignity and self-esteem thrive in the matrix of a warm, human relationship. What is needed today, from each of us is a hand reach out to someone across the fence, an offer to share our strengths and our time, a willingness to sit and listen. Two thousand infants left for adoption, 900,000 people on welfare, thousands of hard core unemployed teen agers. Find one to begin your contribution to the healing of our society. The action begins in the give and take of two people working together and extends across the whole society. Unless those two people find each other, the words of a quiet little English poet may prove all too prophetic for us:

"Ill fares the land

Where wealth accumulates

And men decay."