

Hunter College

OF THE CITY UNIVERSITY OF NEW YORK / 695 PARK AVENUE, NEW YORK, N.Y. 10021 / OFFICE OF THE PRESIDENT / 570-5151

SPECIAL 1970 COMMENCEMENT February 14, 1979

ADDRESS BY PRESIDENT JACQUELINE WEXLER

Before I speak briefly, but I hope warmly and forcefully to the symbolic graduates tonight, I want to welcome the parents. I have always believed that the really unsung heroes at commencement exercises were the parents, the families, the wives and husbands, who stood behind those who went to school. Never were parents so important, and never were parents so supportive, and never were parents so long suffering as those of you who missed with these, your grown children, a commencement exercise in 1970.

My husband is in the audience. We didn't quite miss a commencement exercise that year. Our daughter was graduating from the University of Pennsylvania. In the midst of that commencement all the graduates got up and walked out. My husband turned to his buddy with whom he had graduated from Penn two decades before and said, "My God, there goes \$20,000." And so to all of you, those wonderful, loving, supportive, sensitive, long-suffering parents, God bless you. I think the fact that it is your children here tonight has something to say for Hunter. It has even more to say for the way you loved them and led them that they are not cynical and that they came home to their alma mater tonight. In that spirit, I greet the parents and the families of the graduates who are here tonight.

It is at this time that the President is commissioned to give a charge to the graduates. This is, of course, a symbol. Symbols can be empty or symbols can be fulsome. A valentine is that kind of symbol. It is, if one looks at it cynically, a way for Hallmark and all the competitors of Hallmark, for the floral shops and the candy shops to make a lot of money. And so they use the symbols and some of them are indeed sounding brass and tinkling cymbals. But for those of us who got valentines today from someone who loves us, it is just another way of saying Amen, Alleluia; I meant it all the time. It is within that kind of symbolism that we mean to have this little family gathering tonight, with warmth, with simplicity, and with some

degree of pomp and circumstance. We do believe in symbols. Perhaps in the end it is only symbols that save us all. You came to Hunter at a time when it was relatively peaceful. You went forth from Hunter when it was almost torn asunder as was your nation, as were the institutions that so many of your colleagues attended at that time. I would like to read briefly the conclusion of a piece done by Dean Weyl who had to be symbolically represented by the one he would have chosen to represent him tonight, his wife Sonia. Professor Claireve Grandjouan brought us the piece, published in the Envoy in the fall of 1970. Dean Weyl was talking about tearing down and building up. He was talking about the differences between the people who tear down and the people who sow seeds and nurture and bring back. He concluded by saying:

"It may take decades to build up such a place, but it can be destroyed with a sweep of the hand. Capricious interference with access to the premises, injury to persons or equipment, suspension in one of numerous ways of the freedom to learn and to teach, holding up to public ridicule standards of honesty and integrity, as well as individuals who have made them their concern, - all have been found capable of instant lethality in their effect on these nurseries of the new. We have not yet had a chance to count how many of them we lost last spring and what it will take in time and effort to make up for that loss. The important thing for the moment is the fact that if one of these days the last one should fold, - and it could do so without its being particularly noticed, we should indeed wake up and find Hunter College all used up.

There are now a few in our midst who have this for their aim. Different from those who would look upon the demise of the College with genuine consternation, should it turn out to have resulted from their actions, they wish to achieve exactly that outcome. They can be identified, in the end, only by the relentlessness with which they address themselves to the paralysis of each and every place that might still engage in making fresh, clean, and new things. So, if you support and hope for the survival of a university in the city, rather than wishing to jeopardize it, look out for the future of such centers in the midst of our fabric: Get to know them, belong to one of them. And in thinking about this College, in taking action on matters that affect it, ask yourself what it will do to it as a place where to look for the fresh, clean, and new."

Joe Weyl, who suffered some of the greatest indignities during that time, was himself a person who was devoted to the new. Hunter College is a college with a heart. Perhaps in some symbolic way, it has a special heart because it was born on Valentine's Day 109 years ago. I have served it now for this part of the second

century of its life. I have served it with these, my colleagues, in a time and in a situation that I have often described as a canoe in a typhoon. The student-political unrest was the first storm. The fiscal and political disasters were the next. But we became tough in those days. We became tough, but not hard. We became pragmatic, skeptical, but not cynical. I believe that as we confirm your degrees tonight; as we confirm you, this symbolic small group who represent so many, we are conferring a degree which is better and stronger than you could have counted on in 1970 when all hell was breaking loose. Hunter College has preserved its standards and cared about its people in what more and more is almost without exception a faceless bureaucracy. That is what we dream for this institution. I think your presence here says that you, like the members of your faculty here tonight are a very hearty people -- tougher and more seasoned than when you graduated nine years ago. But you are also lyrical -- daring to be optimistic, daring to say there is a place for symbol and there is a place for sentiment. Cynics may be the worst of untested romantics. They're really afraid to hope in the face of reality. But those of us who dare to hope and dare to invest ourselves in the face of reality are those who will renew, who will build up, and some day, when some of your children's children are here in better circumstances, in better days, it is you and we together who will have believed a better world into a better future.

God bless you for coming. We love you in a very special way. May your presence here renew for all of us the belief in yesterday, and the hope in tomorrow. Good night.

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