

Synopsis of remarks by Harold M. Anderson,
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Permit me to make my salutations to the dignitaries and to address myself to the most important element of this assembly, the graduating class.

You are about to assume a new relationship to your surroundings in what you have frequently been told is an ailing world. Its ill health requires no exposition by me. You have observed it in your homes, in your college, on the way to and from your classes and in your hours of recreation. You have heard it talked about and diagnosed. You may even have heard panaceas recommended for its cure--most of us have been bored by the description of curealls for a sick community. Perhaps you have been alarmed by what you have seen and by what you have heard; older citizens than you are have been frightened by some of the symptoms of disease that fell under their eyes, or that they heard of; and more have been frightened by some of the plans that have been put forward to overcome the malady.

These curealls sprout in strange soil and flower in high places. Long ago we lost track of their number and the benefits they are to confer on us. It is just as well. When your adherence is sought for a scheme to legislate morality and right thinking and prosperity into everybody, to make the knave honest and the wastrel prosperous by Act of Congress or ordinance of the Board of Aldermen, examine it in the light of the nation's experience with Prohibition. In that instance the evils of intemperance led eventually to an effort to suppress the traffic in alcoholic beverages that apparently enlisted the moral and political support of the vast majority of the people. The full power of the national government was put into that effort, but it failed--failed ignominiously. When you are told that human nature can be corrected by an enactment of a legislature, remember that colossal blunder, and ask yourself whether the misguided zeal that produced it is not responsible for some of the bewildering proposals now before us.

In particular, you have unquestionably been warned that your next steps in this disordered world will be taken under the most disadvantageous circumstances.

As I see it, the facts are not unprecedentedly disheartening as they are represented to be. The truth is that this world has never enjoyed that robust good health to the attainment and maintenance of which your physical instructor has urged you. Since the golden age the world has been a chronic invalid, suffering from wars, pestilences and famines; and every graduating student has had a hard problem to solve on leaving the class room. It is true that in appearance the problem today seems unprecedentedly hard, but that is largely because the professional economists, to whom we are all obligated to render homage, have adopted a whole lot of new words, or words used in new meanings, to describe our plight. Some of the combinations they let loose on us are positively appalling; at least they are appalling to one who has grown up in the society of other words. Don't let them frighten you. Your immediate task is not to restore the world to health, but to adjust your position in it. No doubt you can do this. You may not be able to do it in an ideal way, or to master at once an ideal position. A great many gifted women have struggled through many years to order their lives in an ideal way, and at the end, after doing many good works, have passed to their reward without satisfying their ambitions. One reason for this is the fact that ideals change. Environment and opportunity modify them. In one whose spirit remains high, whose fortitude is upheld, the ideal is not static; it advances along with everything else. The principles on which it is based do not change, but the conception of the most desirable form they should take, does change.

Among the many striking phrases that have come from the lips of President Roosevelt there is one you should remember when efforts are made to destroy your confidence in your ability to meet the demands made on you. Mr. Roosevelt said "All we need to fear is fear." That is worth keeping in mind. There is no reason to fear what is past; it may call for regret, or repair, but it is over and cannot be recalled. It is folly to fear the future. It is wasteful of energy to fear the present. Meet it as reason advises. Don't be ashamed to retreat; a successful retreat may be a campaign won. Don't hesitate to fight if that seems indicated. The worst that can happen is defeat, and defeat in a good cause--I take it for granted that your causes will all be good--is not dishonorable.

Self confidence is an admirable thing. One way to build it is to be honest in admission that you do not understand and cannot understand every thing that is going forward in the world. Nobody understands every thing. If you wish authority for this statement, listen to the concluding paragraph of a letter printed the other day by the British scientific weekly Nature. It had printed an erudite letter on an abstract subject from Herbert Dingle of the Imperial College of Science; two learned men had taken issue with him. Dr. Dingle closed this phase of the discussion with a letter in which he said:

"The difficulties of mutual understanding in these matters are illustrated in an amusing way by the letters of Dr. Jeffreys and Prof. Levy. The former admits that the views I expressed are prevalent but thinks they may not be mine. The latter regards them as not only not prevalent, but also essentially my own private analysis!"

I have said no doubt you can adjust yourselves, each in her own way, to the requirements of the situation in which you find yourselves. I mean that literally. You have youth, you have strength, you have disciplined minds, you are acquainted with the realities of life. You know what is worth while, what is merely pleasant, and what is detrimental. You have been engaged in earnest competition. You have not won your degrees-- they are proud degrees-- without learning an elemental fact that so many less favored women, and men, never learn or, compelled to learn, seek to dodge. You know that work is the key to success. Do not forget it. You know that adaptability smooths the rough road. Let me tell you an incident for the truth of which I vouch:

The daughter of a more than well-to-do family entered a coeducational university in the class of '35. She was well supplied with money at the beginning of her course. As she progressed, her family lost its money, and at the close of the academic year in 1934 her father reluctantly told her that he could no longer pay her expenses in college. He was one of those fathers, indulgent and devoted, but blind to the fact that children grow up. He was astonished by her acceptance of the bad news; she was disappointed, but calm. And she said to him, "Father, let me see what I can do." He was reluctant, unbelieving, but he had the good sense to acquiesce. This girl, who had had every reasonable luxury during three years of college life, went to the Dean and told the fix she was in.

The Dean had heard such stories before. He did not paint a rosy picture of the job before a senior working her way through college. She was game. She fitted her shoulders to the burden. She worked at whatever came her way. She waited on table. She tutored. She ran errands. She did many other things. And she kept up in her studies so that this month she receives her degree--and the Phi Beta Kappa key. She has the satisfaction not only of having attained an ambition, but incidentally she has contributed something to the instruction of a parent.

This incident gave me great gratification because of a collateral circumstance. In the diagnoses of the world's ailments, you will frequently hear that the oncoming generation--your generation-is set down as falling lamentably below the standards its predecessors set and upheld. As one who has known several generations let me tell you in all sincerity that this is not so. My calling is one which brings its practitioners into contact with men and women of all ages; it keeps the memory alive. It stimulates its followers to take account of all sides of all questions. It does not encourage illusions or delusions--they mean libel suits, and libel suits cost money, even if we win in court; and my judgment is that your generation has no cause to seek in the past for standards to replace those you have acquired in your homes and your schools.

The past was not all rosy, and those who grew up and were trained under its benign influence sometimes conveniently forget. They are like soldiers returned from the wars. At first they remember only the inconveniences of their marches, their watches, their battles, the failures of some of their fellows, the days they went unfed, the nights they had no blankets, the payless pay days that are a fixture in all military establishments. But as time passes these things recede in their minds to subordinate place, and they recall the fine comradeship of arms, the company jokes, the regimental rivalries; and they hold reunions and to hear them you would think that war is a fine, romantic excursion, which it is not and never can be. So when you are told how superior the past was to the present, how much better its men and women were than men and women are now, how much abler, how much more devoted, how much more resourceful its young women were, be polite--but restrain your credulity.

War, as I have said, is not a fine, romantic excursion. It is the last resort of tortured or misled peoples. There are many efforts now to prevent its recurrence. They deserve every encouragement, and they receive it. Sometimes their advocates go to extremes and support measures the judicious cannot endorse. To refuse to approve all the means suggested to eliminate war does not mean to advocate it; it means only that we have human nature to consider. That was an arresting phrase used by the Lord Chief Justice of England recently when he said:

"It is idle . . . to talk of the wickedness of killing, because if and when the next war comes men will think only of the nobleness of dying."

You are exchanging the work of the college for another kind of work. Do not be afraid of it, but do not hold it in contempt. Many strange doctrines are preached now by some of the economists of whom I spoke a few moments ago, but all their doctrines cannot obscure or mitigate the fact that work is necessary. Some of us like to think it is noble and that is excellent; but noble or not, it is necessary.

Much depends in the right perspective. From old we know that some do not see the forest because of the trees. Likewise we know that many mistake the shadow for the substance. In these days, when communication between individual and individual and between State and state, is so marvellously accelerated the air is vibrant with many sounds. Distinguish among them, and do not allow yourselves to become enrolled in that numerous company which falls into the capital error of mistaking excitement for importance.

Work is necessary in private life and it is necessary in public life; and you cannot escape public life even though you wish to escape it. You may not parade for presidential candidates or ring door bells for aspirants for the Board of Aldermen, but directly and indirectly--I hope directly-- you will pay taxes. You cannot evade them, no matter under what form of government you live. As a matter of fact, I am convinced that you will live as citizens of a democracy. Prediction as to public affairs is perilous, but at this moment I can see no sign of willingness on the part of American citizens to exchange their democracy for a monarchy, or a soviet, or a dictatorship. Certainly they will not exchange it because there is anything inherently wrong in the democratic form of government. It is elastic, adaptable, responsive. In fact, the only peril to democracy is in the democrats, and you, as alumnae of Hunter College, have a peculiar obligation in the maintenance of democracy in strengthening the fibre of democrats.

It is unhappily true that there are some citizens who do not pull their weight. They have a notion--bred perhaps of laziness--that the boat is so large and the oarsmen so numerous that they aren't needed at the sweeps or that their loafing will not be noticed. They want to ride free, looking at the scenery. But democracy is not a scheme of government designed to bestow privileges on some; it calls for the cooperation of all. Those who make the trip must add to the power. If they do not, they are faithless to their heritage and traitors to posterity. Nor is the task before them too exhausting.

The most important contribution a democrat can make to democracy is not necessarily the loudest sound of which the human throat is capable. A loud speaker performs a useful service in an auditorium so large as this, but it does not displace the orchestra whose sweet strains it transmits.

It is not necessary for a citizen to go to Washington, to appear before a committee of Congress, to picket the White House, to do his part. The historic and philosophic frame of our government is laid out on the assumption that each who receives its benefits shall share its responsibilities. The principal opportunity for good citizenship is in the home, in the neighborhood, in the ward, in the city, and the principal contribution we can make to good government is self-government; orderly behavior, obedience to the obvious requirements of life in urban surroundings, compliance with the orders of the authorities. The person protected from without by the bright shield of democracy owes first to keep the inside of that shield clean. He that has a tidy back yard is as likely to be hailed as useful as the genius who knows how to solve the perplexities of European statesmen--and the genius who does that will be found to have a tidy back yard.

Loyalty and quick response to the requirements of your friends are in no way to be decried. Cultivate and practice them. But distinguish between emotional upflare and solid, useful purpose. Do not follow in the footsteps of that good man who, hearing that his best friend had been assailed by a man named Little rushed into the street and, not finding anybody named Little, assaulted a man named Small. That is carrying friendship too far.

In all parts of the world, unfortunately in this hemisphere as well as in the other, there are men and women who have come to a dismal state because they have not the courage to open a door that bars their entrance to a room of which they know nothing. They have knocked and received no answer. They think the room is unoccupied, but there may be somebody in it. They may be welcome, but then again they may not be welcome. There may be nothing dangerous in the room, but perhaps there is a dreadful monster waiting to assail whoever opens the door. Of course, the floor beyond the threshold is likely to be sound, but perhaps there is a pit there. Maybe a spring gun has been attached to the latch, and will end the career of the one who lifts it; of course, this is fantastic, but it may be for fantastic things happen. So it goes on; and the falterer stands outside, growing more nervous, more distract, with each upsetting thought. Do not join that company; open the door, confident that within the room you enter there will be reward for your virtues, wage for your labor, and opportunity for your zeal.