

COMMENCEMENT ADDRESS

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OF THE CITY OF NEW YORK

DELIVERED AT THE GRADUATING EXERCISES OF  
HUNTER COLLEGE, WEDNESDAY MORNING, JANUARY  
27, 1937, AT CARNEGIE HALL

I greet the Class of February, 1937, on the occasion of their Graduating Exercises. I congratulate the members of this class on their good fortune, in being graduated at a time when the horizon of their opportunities is wider and more promising than it has been for graduates in nearly eight years. When you were admitted to the freshman classes of Hunter College, the view of the world around you was a dismal one indeed. The economic and social life of our country was in a state of chaotic dissolution and we were without adequate leadership in the great emergency. Today, thanks to the leadership of our great President, we are well on the road to a solution of the many economic and social problems that grew out of the rapid advance of the Machine Age.

There is much that we in America should be thankful for. We owe thanks for the preservation of our democratic form of government in the period of great stress, happily just ended. We should be grateful for the maintenance of our liberties in the time of great trial just passed. We must utter praise for those who, in the trying time, have not failed us, in keeping open the institutions of higher learning in the country.

The City of New York has provided a higher education for all its citizens who qualified as to scholarship and could pursue the courses at the City colleges with profit, throughout the period of the depression. In fact, the enrollment in the City colleges grew in the years of the depression, to the limits of the capacity of our plants. <sup>on the campus</sup> In the school year 1933-34, total college registration throughout the country dropped for the first time after a continuous and steady increase for over forty years. A movement to enlarge the facilities of the City colleges was given impetus during the depression, when Federal funds were made available to build new buildings. Hunter College benefited greatly from grants of City funds for its building program, and thanks to these grants which were made available in the midst of the ~~recent~~ economic debacle, the campus in the Bronx now has a number of fine buildings to accommodate students who seek a higher education. In a time of the worst economic crises in all our history, the City of New York, maintained without serious curtailments, all of its institutions of higher learning. It did not deprive anyone who was qualified, of the benefits of receiving a higher education. These benefits accrue to all residents of this community as of right, and not as a favor. I know that there are some narrow and short sighted individuals who from time to time mistakenly try to impress our students and the general community with the point that the recipients of a free higher education are receiving some sort of charity at the hands of the taxpayer. Nothing could be further from the truth in this situation. No student in any of our colleges is the object of charity. The Board of Higher Education of the

City of New York, is not a charitable agency. It fulfills a constructive educational function by providing facilities for the higher education of the best qualified boys and girls of our City. It thus insures for the City, as long as the City is financially able to support its institutions, a constant stream of well educated, specially trained young men and young women prepared to play their parts in the skillful work of our City and in all the life of our community. The City of New York has maintained and will, I hope, continue to maintain institutions of higher learning, as a vital and necessary part of its entire educational system. This metropolis in our great democracy, could not lay claim to an enlightened community intelligence, if it failed to afford higher educational opportunities to all its citizens who might benefit from them. Self-interest, interest in the higher welfare of all the citizens of New York, requires the maintenance of Hunter College and the other City Colleges and an open door policy for all those who would enter and can benefit from study in these institutions. Students at our City colleges, should receive the same consideration and attention that is given to students of privately maintained colleges and universities, except that the standards of study and scholarships must be held at a higher level. For our students are in the main serious minded individuals, who eagerly seek an education in order to improve themselves. They seek the tools with which they may achieve economic independence and their rightful place in an adult society. Our students are fully aware of the world about them and in no sense, are they humored or babied.

There has recently arisen a school of severe critics of the American college. They base their attack upon the college principally on the supposed isolation which it achieves for its students from the problems of adult living. Some have said that the American university prolongs the infancy of its students. This certainly cannot be said of our City colleges. The very character of our colleges tends to make our students conscious of the physical and social environment, into which they must enter upon their graduation.

Our students are in the midst of the teeming city life. They retain their family and community ties, throughout their period of attendance at colleges. Many of them take up employment in the city in their free time, during the school year, and in their vacation time. They travel to and from school in the crowded city subways and other conveyances. They avail themselves of all the opportunities for work and play in this large metropolis. They participate in the social, cultural and economic life of New York City. They are mature men and women when they leave our colleges, ready to step into their places, when these are available for them. Our colleges, manned by distinguished faculties, offer the students an opportunity to analyze and to understand the life that is all about them and more, we make a definite effort to help in the integration of the individual into our society. Our courses of study, our special efforts in vocational guidance and our extra-curricular programs have for their goal, this very integration of the individual, his adjustment into the normal life of our vast community.

It is well to remember however, that there are two important factors in this effort which are largely beyond the control of the

college. They are, the state of society, by which I mean its economic and social health and the personality of the student. It is unnecessary here to dilate upon the opportunities for normal economic and social adjustments of the college graduate, in a period of expanding economy and in an era of good feeling. Society is ready to welcome to its board all newcomers, when that board is heavily laden. A progressive and developing society eagerly seeks new recruits and can maintain itself, only by the infiltration of a vigorous and productive youth. I believe that we are now approaching an expanding economic era and that society is out of the doldrums of inaction and is much in need of energetic, intelligent, trained young people who can carry on the tasks of our times. However, the first to be chosen for the important work that lies ahead, will be those, who by their nature, or by their will, or by both together, will have achieved a certain identifiable quality, which for want of a better name, we call "personality".

It has been reported that at The Alfred University, the faculty has recently begun to rate "students on six personality traits". The ratings are for honesty, judgment, initiative, industry, cooperation and appearance. However, nothing is said about educating in these traits. I doubt if these personal attributes will adequately identify the desirable personality. I recall that Professor John Dewey said in his little book, "Human Nature and Conduct", "it is fantastic to idealize personality just as personality aside from the question what sort of a person one is". The wisdom of this thought which was set down by Dr. Dewey in 1921, is most apparent today, when we see the various dictators

inflicting their ideals of personality upon the suffering nations in whose people they have crushed every vestige of liberty and freedom. When a nation yields itself to the personality of one man, the personality of every other individual in the nation is lost. Dr. Dewey points out the diabolical results of undesirable personality, when he says, "To make others happy, except through liberating their powers and engaging them in activities that enlarge the meaning of life, is to harm them and to indulge ourselves under cover of exercising a special virtue." I like to think that you, the new graduates of Hunter College have been spared the exercise of any special virtues upon you by your teachers. I believe rather, that they have truly had for their objective, an effort to influence your personality in the terms of Dr. Dewey, who has defined as a worthy goal, "a growth of morals which will be serious without being fanatical, aspiring without sentimentality, adapted to reality without conventionality, sensible without taking the form of calculation of profits, idealistic without being romantic." I believe that everything at Hunter College has contributed to achieve these important ends. I do not ~~much~~ care about how much you have been taught at Hunter, if you have been given a grasp of the realities and you are able to make a moral adjustment such as has been described by Dr. Dewey.

While I believe with Will Rogers, when he said that "every-body is ignorant, only on different subjects", I cannot escape the definition of personality as a self-consciousness and self-activity of an advanced type, motivated by understanding and reason. "Self-consciousness varies according to the intellectual development and

the term "personality", is usually connected only with the self-consciousness of an advanced type, not for example, with that of an "animal", according to one writer on this subject.

Now I think that the students at our city colleges are extremely conscious of the things around them. Sometimes however it seems to me that <sup>some of them</sup> ~~they~~ are not motivated by a complete understanding and well ordered reasoning, no matter how alert and aware they may be. I have tried for many years in my official capacity as the Chairman of the Board of Higher Education to achieve a sympathetic understanding of the many problems of the students and the faculty. In studying these problems I have often remembered the sage comments of Robert Louis Stevenson in his little essay "Crabbed Age and Youth". I advise you all to read it and to quote from it for the benefit of your elders, especially such passage as "The follies of youth have a basis in sound reason, just as much as the embarrassing questions put by babes and sucklings." Or again you might refer to Stevenson where he says, "It is better to emit a scream in the shape of a theory than to be entirely insensible to the jars and incongruities of life and take everything as it comes in a forlorn stupidity." Stevenson also points out in this essay that "Some people swallow the universe like a pill; they travel on through the world, like smiling images pushed from behind." In a final burst of exasperation with young conformists Stevenson writes, "For God's sake give me the young man who has brains enough to make a fool of himself." As for myself I would not advise any young man or young woman deliberately to make a fool of himself or herself, or for that

matter to strut in the role of the martyr. But if your personal integrity demands a certain course of action or expression, providing you are honestly sure that the course and its objectives are for truly moral ends, by all means go and make a fool of yourself. Then you will really demonstrate "what sort of a person" you are.

The Eskimos tell their children a fable about a proud mouse, who bragged about his bravery and courage. It seems that one day the mouse woke in an Eskimo hut, to find the entrance to the hut ablaze. It was scared out of its wits as it watched the blaze grow larger and larger. Finally, coming to itself, the mouse thought that it must do something soon, or else it would be consumed by the growing fire. It therefore decided to brave the flames by rushing out of the hut opening. Plucking up all its courage, the mouse ran through the opening to the hut and continued on its way for some distance before it dared to stop to examine itself for any burns or other damages to its fine fur. To its surprise a careful self-examination revealed no burning or scorching of its body. Its miraculous escape when going through the flames aroused its curiosity, and so it looked back at the hut, only to find it standing there, untouched by fire, but golden in the full glow of the morning sun.

To some of you, in your innocence, the adult world into which you are now emerging, may seem all ablaze. It is ablaze, not with consuming fires, but rather with the warmth and splendour of the friendly sun. It is not for you to stand in awe and to



fear the world. You must immediately venture into it. Your bravery, your courage, your understanding and your integrity will enable you to do the necessary work of the world. At this time of your coming of age, you bring with you into your adult life, the best higher education, which our City could provide for you. Now you go and make the best use of it in coping with the "deep problem of life." Our society is badly in need of help at this time.

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**ARCHIVES  
HUNTER COLLEGE**

I feel a particular fondness for you, the Class of 1937, as you are the first class with which I, as Chairman of the Board of Trustees, have had a close personal relationship. You have invited me to your luncheons and parties, we have had a happy mutual understanding, which I am confident is a fine omen for the future happy relationship of Trustee and student, a relationship which is hard to define, difficult to establish and so important to the welfare of Hunter College. Mutual good will gives the proper opportunity for understanding; and only in an atmosphere of real unity between student and community which, after all, we represent, can we faithfully do our work. You have made me feel a member of your family and it is with real regret that I see you leave. I hope you will come back often and always remain loyal members of the Hunter Alumnae.

We have tried and have succeeded, I think, - in spite of the difficult physical conditions which the burning of our own college, and life in scattered office buildings has entailed, - to provide you with the beginnings of an education, which only life and your own dynamic spirit can complete. Our faithful and skillful staff have given you the tools. Now you must use them.

Education should endow your judgment with vitality. Dr. Ernest M. Hopkins, President of Dartmouth College, stated recently that the real problem of higher education is "creating in the undergraduate's mind a faculty for judging what seems to be the truth. This is a great problem", he said, "for it is very difficult to tell the truth even when you see it." I hope that you will go into the world more able to see truth because of your education. Dr. Harold W. Dodds, President of Princeton University,

has said that "the future of democratic ideals rests upon higher education." He is right, of course, for true democracy can only make progress after a constant process of re-examination. Direct action with its appeals to emotion, and use of force is rarely the result of thought except on the part of those who expect to benefit thereby and their benefit must of necessity be brief and unhappy. I think that if you are wise you will weigh these democratic ideals of ours and I am confident that you will find them the best obtainable. Mr. Dooley said, at the end of the last century, "This country is the best country in the world and the best of it is we know it." I do not think we know it as confidently as formerly, but if we examine the other countries we will soon realize that it is true. A little more of the pioneer confidence would be very helpful.

It is the custom at graduation time to tell our young people who are graduating that they have received an education and at that time attempt to state the value of that education. I think that such an attempt should be made as an introduction to college rather than a valedictory. But even our educators are fumbling in the task of defining the very work which they are doing. Dr. Hutchins has said in his "Higher Education in America" that the most striking fact about the higher learning in America is the confusion that besets it.

In spite of all the confusion the numbers of those who ask for higher education are increasing every day. That I think, per se, is a proof that the community perceives its general value. The psychologists tell us that only those High School students whose average marks are over 75

can really take advantage of opportunities for higher education, but those who can benefit should certainly have it. In the City of New York we must expand our facilities to meet the need. And eventually, we should also establish a Junior College.

Dr. Butler has recently reiterated that "Education is the gradual adjustment to the spiritual possessions of the race with a view to realizing one's own potentialities and assisting in carrying forward that complex of ideas, accounts and institutions which we call civilization." That seems a little easier to understand.

You will notice that Dr. Butler's emphasis is on the spirit and not on the technique. Both of us, the Trustees and the Public at large, will agree that in public colleges we must have vocational courses and we must have vocational guidance. When the students graduate they average twenty-one years of age and enter a real world to earn a living. Nevertheless, the permanent value of a college education cannot be measured by the students' earning power after the first few years of graduation; it must rather be in the mental and spiritual growth of its graduates, due to a wider knowledge, a growth which continues through the years, as has been said, a true realization of potentialities. The benefit to the community lies in contributing to it a group of citizens with the beginning of understanding and the knowledge of how to obtain further knowledge through the use of the library, scientific, sociological and historical techniques, etc., and the ability to analyze a changing world.

If, as educated citizens, you are to carry forward that complex of ideas, accounts and institutions which we call civilization, if you are to contribute to what is called civilization and keep it alive, I hear

you asking, "Can you give us a clearer idea of what it has been?" If you look it up in the Encyclopedia Britannica, you will find that they have dodged the realities of a definition, although they give pages to a brief summary of the world's history of civilization since the Rough Stone Age.

We fought the last war to save civilization, but few of us knew what it was. I was in college at the time and I assure you that the students never asked. We did a great many things which we never questioned to help save the world for civilization. I am confident that the students of today would never have been so simple. We were cold and we were hungry. The funniest thing we did, however, was the whole college, consisting only of girls, turning out on the hockey fields and doing elaborate army manoeuvres. For the life of me, I couldn't about-face properly. It caused me a great deal of unhappiness, and now, as I look back, I wonder what I was about-facing for, as I certainly was not going to march to the field of battle in army fashion.

As it is hard to know what civilization is, perhaps it would be wise to examine two or three admitted highly civilized periods in history which might give us a standard of values. These high points in civilization would be admitted by all. The fifth century, A.D., is one of these. Most critics will call the period of Plato, Aristophanes, Praxilites and Aristotle highly civilized. The fifteenth century in Italy is another. There the physical arts of the renaissance, Physics, Medicine and Anatomy, Geometry, Zoology and Botany flourished. France, from Fronde to the Revolution, in what we call the Grande Siecle from 1660 to 1789, is yet another. Let us try to determine why these countries were so very civilized, what they had in common. It seems to be a habit

of self-consciousness and of reason. In Athens, the Athenian civilization produced intellectuality and estheticism. The Italians of the renaissance honoured their great writers, such as Petrarch and Bocaccio, painters, Mantegna, Raphael, Michael Angelo, philosophers and scholars. At the same time there were active politicians, such as Caesar Borgia and Lorenzo the Magnificent. The eighteenth century, on the other hand, was not creative, although highly civilized. Knowledge was, of all, the most desired. Mathematical, philosophical and scientific investigation came first. Great honours were paid to Voltaire, Buffon and others.

According to Clyde Bell, highly civilized societies are polite. They are also reasonable, since from reasonableness comes open-mindedness, a willingness to listen to what others have to say, and a distaste for dictatorial methods. A great civilization is realistic, an individualism born of reason and a sense of values; it is cosmopolitan, the sympathies transcending the immediate communities, and it is tolerant. With a clear understanding, that reason alone has the right to constrain liberty. The Athenians tried to be tolerant. The Italians of the renaissance believed in open discussion, and the French of the eighteenth century enthroned reason.

It would seem that your education should have given you more than ideas, memories and facts. It should have given you reasoning power and a sense of values. Our American Government was founded on the results of the philosophy of the French eighteenth century. It, therefore, has the inheritance of a great civilization. It should be highly civilized, therefore, reasonable and free. We have found, alas, that to merely set up the perfect government by reason alone, is not enough. It takes more than paper perfection to insure freedom. But we should not despair; we have the makings of a truer freedom than the world has ever known. Of course, we have

our upsets. When a child is thrown from a horse the wise parent sees that he gets on and starts again immediately. He soon regains his confidence. Building an ideal civilization in a raw new country is bound to have more than one upset. It is the will to go back, to start again which will ensure the achievement of the goal. As I told the graduating class of last spring, and as I repeat to you, America is still a land of opportunity, but opportunities which you must make yourself with invention, ingenuity, a will to work, and a firm belief that you will succeed. It is a civilization which you must perfect as educated citizens with reasoning powers and a sense of values.

Conditions all over the world show us how quickly we can descend from civilization to barbarism. Revolution and counter-revolution point the way away from reason and resort to force. There is no security in force; it breeds reprisals. Like a pebble in the pool of water the evil results are shown in ever widening circles. Even over here we hear of secret meetings where plots are made to destroy our freedom. And none who have read it can forget the awful lesson of Sinclair Lewis' "It Can't Happen Here", wherein he shows so plainly that it might happen here.

And so I ask you, the Class of January 1937, children of the people of New York to whom this great city has given the rare privilege of a fine higher education, not as a gift but as a right, to go out as educated women and to help our community to a reasoned and balanced life, a highly civilized life in a world where such a contribution is increasingly needed.

I promise you that we, the Trustees and Administrative Committee of Hunter College, of the Board of Higher Education, will continue to try and build you a fine college; we are asking the Mayor and the Board of

Estimate for new buildings to provide the proper physical equipment for Hunter, the largest women's college in the world. In our staff relationship we shall respect tradition and the principles of academic freedom; and we shall, in return, expect competence, loyalty and truth. We shall insist on appointment and promotion made on a basis of merit.

As Dr. Hutchins has said in his recent book on "Higher Learning", "the public may properly look to the trustees for the intelligent management of the institution without imposing on the board the duty of operating it in detail." I can promise you that we will do our honest best without undue interference to insure a good faculty and a fine college.

So, Seniors of 1937, I bid you good-bye as Hunter Seniors, and welcome as members of our adult community. I wish you good luck in what I hope you will help to make a brave new world.