

137

COMMENCEMENT ADDRESS

**ARCHIVES
HUNTER COLLEGE**BY MARK EISNER, MEMBER OF THE NEW YORK
BAR, CHAIRMAN OF THE BOARD OF HIGHER
EDUCATION OF THE CITY OF NEW YORK,DELIVERED AT THE COMMENCEMENT EXERCISES
OF HUNTER COLLEGE OF THE COLLEGE OF
THE CITY OF NEW YORK, WEDNESDAY MORNING,
June 16, 1937, at 11 o'clock at
CARNEGIE HALL.

- - - - -

I am happy to stand here before another graduating class of Hunter College and to bid the graduates a last fond farewell on behalf of the Board of Higher Education of the City of New York. Our best wishes go out to you all, on this happy occasion in your lives. It should indeed be a joyous occasion, for on this day, you are granted a degree by this great institution of higher learning. Today, you are accredited as having satisfactorily completed a prescribed course of studies in the largest and most serious women's college in the world.

This degree, which is soon to be handed to you, is an achievement to which very few women of the generations before you ever attained. Only some fifteen percent of the total number of men and women of your own generation are privileged to attend an institution of higher learning. One in every eight of these young people is receiving a degree at this commencement time. I judge that there

are between fifty and sixty thousand young women throughout our country who will have received their degrees at the end of the current school year.

This large number of women graduates from our colleges and universities, marks an important advance in our concept of the place of woman in our society. It also marks an important step forward in our appreciation of the values of education. About two hundred and fifty years ago, Daniel Defoe, wrote in his "Essay upon Projects", "I have often thought of it as one of the most barbarous customs in the world, considering us as a civilized and a christian country, that we deny the advantages of learning to women." When finally, in the middle of the last century, after much struggle and strife, some small measure of education was afforded to women, it was a curious kind of education. It was what was so aptly named, a finishing school education. It was guaged to a society that made idæ ornaments of its women. Just as the higher education which was given to the men was calculated for the most part, to improve them in the arts of passing their time in gentlemanly pursuits.

In 1865, Herbert Spencer wrote about the education of his time, "Not only in times past, but almost as much in our own era, that

knowledge which conduces to personal well-being has been postponed to that which brings applause." It is interesting to note that in this same work, Spencer says, "In the Greek schools, music, poetry, rhetoric and a philosophy which, until Socrates taught, had little bearing upon action, were the dominant subjects, while knowledge, aiding the arts of life, had a subordinate place...".

I think that by and large, we have in our times, seriously taken to heart Herbert Spencer's admonition about the character and content of our education. In fact, the American school system has been moving in that direction ever since it was founded. Our schools of higher learning, although slow in getting under way, have offered more and more courses of useful studies. Herbert Spencer's aim has, in part, been achieved by the great American school system, for nearly all our education strives to prepare for complete living.

I know the spirit of Hunter College, I know its fine traditions of serious study and its devoted and progressive faculty. I know that in the time which you have spent at this noble institution, you have been well-prepared for living. Naturally, you are most concerned at this time, to know if adult society has a place for you,

for your efforts, for your training and for your talents. Many of you are often indifferent to all else, for you reason correctly, that there is no living in a vacuum; there can be no living without something interesting to do each day of your lives and by this doing, earning the wherewithal, to subsist and more to enable you to purchase the rich goods of the world.

I am confident that our society will and can find a useful place for you all. It is not a perfect society, for what society ever has been perfect. It may take some time before you are absorbed in worthwhile occupations and among the most worthwhile occupations, I include wifhood and motherhood, but there is a definite place for everyone of you. If you do not find it today or tomorrow, do not become disconsolate, do not throw the blame for your failure upon our society, do not yield to the seductive call for a new and different society. Remember, that of all the Utopias ever conceived in the mind of man, none has fulfilled itself. In every age, throughout recorded time, there have arisen men who have projected a picture of a better and ideal society, but in all times, those for whom the picture was painted, never saw it take form or participated in the

society which it promised.

From the very beginning of recorded time, man has striven, by various means to achieve a better society and he has made considerable progress in that direction. However, all those who have outlined Utopias have condemned their followers to sad disheartment and utter disappointment. The Utopias somehow, always involve factors which take no account of the human being and his follies and foibles, his behaviour and his conduct under a new set of conditions and circumstances.

The imagination of man can project itself into a perfect society. But man himself, has not succeeded in building this society. Every age has had its dreamers who have dreamed great dreams. Usually these dreams were induced by the abject state of society, attendant upon some serious crisis. The ancient Hebrew Prophets, the leaders of early Christianity, the Greek and Roman philosophers and thinkers all sought to organize society according to a perfect pattern to improve the sad lot of man. These Utopias are still to be achieved.

When in the middle of the Fifteenth century, Sir Thomas More witnessed the transformation of England, from an agricultural to an industrial and commercial economy, he reacted by writing out a plan

for yet another one of the many Utopias. His Utopia first recounts the many social and economic evils of his time and then glibly proceeds with a series of remedies that would result in a moderate society, in which all but the very learned would devote only six hours daily to labor. History does not record that Sir Thomas made any "efforts to apply, as a politician, the doctrines he had advanced as a philosopher", even though he occupied important and responsible posts in his government over many years.

Long before More's time, the poets and philosophers of the eastern world, inspired by religious zeal, the writings of the ancient Hebrew Prophets and by Plato's "Republic" and other similar writings, sketched their conception of the ideal society. In the Middle Ages, the Italian and Spanish poets outlined a plan for the perfect society. In the second half of the Sixteenth Century, Campanella wrote his brilliant and justly famed "City of the Sun", in which "he formulated for the first time, a complete Socialistic system on a scientific foundation." This, as you must know, he wrote in pure abstraction during a long period of imprisonment, some say more than twenty years of it. Despite the perfect formulae here presented, after some four

hundred years, we are very far from achieving the "complete Socialistic system." Rousseau's "Social Contract" and Bacon's "New Atlantis", even though they represent less extravagant plans for a society, are not yet attained by a long way. For the most vital part of any society is not reason, or imagination, it is the everyday metabolism of man himself.

I hope that you have been given the instrumentalities with which to recognize this fact, in your course of study here. I hope too, that you have been made to see the wisdom and practicability of our democratic society, which has gradually developed over the years the most perfect social form, calculated to assure human liberty and personal freedom, yet achieved in actual practice. American democracy is indeed a cause to which all humanity might well dedicate itself. It does more than any known system of society to open vistas of opportunity and to enhance the dignity of every human being. It is the best answer yet found to Rousseau's question, "Whether taking men as they are and laws as they can be made, it is possible to establish some just and certain rule of administration in civil affairs."

I hold it to be your privilege to find your place within our democratic society. It is to your best interests to stand up affirmatively for our democracy, which affords you opportunities entirely dependent upon your own ability and capacity, your own character and attainments. By your training at Hunter College, a democratic, publically supported institution, with high idealism and faithful devotion to the cause of human freedom, you have been well qualified for complete living in our democratic society.

151

HUNTER COLLEGE OF THE CITY OF NEW YORK

**ARCHIVES
HUNTER COLLEGE**

Commencement Address by

Mrs. Walter S. Mack, Jr.
June 16, 1937

Graduating Class of June 1937: You are the last class to have studied in the historic old buildings of Hunter College. Your successors are going to see something very much finer than you have been privileged to see. What can be done with brick and stone and mortar will be done by the architects who are now fashioning the new buildings which are to rise on the Hunter site tomorrow. We welcome suggestions from all. But a building is only a shell! What you and I are interested in is the content of education, not its external shell.

This is the time of year when a million college students are putting away their books and getting ready to disperse for the summer. College students are one per cent of the nation's population and fifteen per cent of their contemporaries. In 1917, before our entry into the war, the colleges of this country had 250,000 students. To day, they have 1, 250,000. Graduating classes of 1937 will be 150,000 strong. The character of higher education has changed. College students are no longer the blue stockings of their generation, the exceptional highbrows. They are the normal bright boys and girls seeking a full life and finding it through higher education.

You will say, "How have things changed?" Well, in the first place you are happier and gayer. You are not expected to take college as your whole life. It is quite natural for you to go to college and you can continue as members of your own communities. You have more dates because the boys are no longer afraid of you. You are not considered highbrow. You are more sophisticated; you dress better. Your appearance, you realize, is an asset and you make the most of it. You have a greater interest in world affairs

than the girls of twenty years ago. You read the papers, discuss current topics, take polls of your own and pass on events as they go by.

Because you are less set apart from the community, your life centers less on the college, and vice versa, the college has less control of your life. Before the War the colleges definitely tried to interfere in the lives of students. For instance, they forbade smoking at Vassar and Wellesley and all the other colleges, not because of fire regulations, but because they did not approve. In Wellesley we had to be home at ten o'clock and we could not drive in an automobile on Sunday, and it had to be a pretty strong-minded bean who would walk six and eight miles in order to give his girl a cup of tea. Cocktails? I should say not! Who ever heard of such a thing! Prohibition brought that. Now students come and go as they wish.

We have seen great developments in twenty years. I hope that you will see greater ones. In twenty years we have seen extraordinary changes in our physical frontiers and in the map of the world. Creative science has overcome many barriers. The aeroplane has made time and space now seem as nothing. The Zeppelin flew across the ocean in two days, the same distance which twenty years ago, the Olympic crossed in a week. The radio has revolutionized industry. A new art in advertising and a real culture have developed bringing the finest music and lectures to all for practically nothing. And the motion picture, which was practically unknown, has become the talkie and has made the drama, as well as politics not only available but accessible to all. Education itself is being revolutionized. All this in twenty years. And, I venture to say to you, it will change as much again in twenty more years. You must be prepared, not through the skill you have acquired, but through the mental ability you have developed, to cope not only objectively but subjectively with this changing world.

And in twenty years we have seen the World War, a lost generation in the world of jazz and bitterness, a great depression and its aftermath of eddying political movements. You too, will have your wars and depressions. I hope they will be less violent. We have not had a chance to evaluate; it must be your duty to do so.

We have seen the growth of communism and fascism, the bitterness and the evil that this has engendered. It must be your duty to temper extremes with reason. Do you remember the old fable of the hart and the tortoise? The race was not to the swift. The tortoise, you remember, looked neither to the right nor to the left but proceeded quietly on his way and was the first to achieve his goal. And it seems to me that there is a lesson for us in this old, old story. To achieve real happiness for this country, we must hold to true democracy. We must depend upon you, the leaders of the future, to look neither to the right nor to the left, neither to conservatism nor radicalism, but to keep steadily ahead in the even tenor of your way. May you guide our country through its difficulties, making the adjustments necessary for its continued growth and development but preserving its individuality as a great democracy where the majority vote is accepted as the will of the people and where individual liberty is valued above all personal and even material success. At one stage, the majority may respond to leadership; at another, it may listen to pressure groups, but ultimately it sifts the facts and resolves them into truth. And what is most important in a democracy, is the freedom to do so. The wishes of the majority usually represent the norm, the average between extremes, the extremes of the right and left. And leaving the decision to the majority is the democratic, the peaceful, the sane, the middle way.

You may say, "Why the middle way? How dull! Democracy has failed. It's too slow. There is too much red tape. We want it all done in a hurry."

If you say that, we have failed to educate you. For history teaches that you may start with Caesar but you will certainly end up with Nero. Our democracy was founded on personal liberty. You and your families will be free and innocent until you are proved guilty. Don't listen to those quacks who claim they have a short-cut to successful life. Whether you are a scientist or an artist, education should have told you that there are no short-cuts.

Washington, Jefferson, and Lincoln have given us a state as nearly approximating the ideal as any that the world has known. While the extremes of wealth and poverty attract front lines in the newspapers, the great middle group, who outnumber them many times, are rarely heard from. This middle group is the balance wheel of our American life. I urge you to join them in their struggle for the middle way.

You see on one side of you fascism, where the cry is that in the name of youth and nationalism, a unified state must be created. Beware of quackery. On the other hand you hear the call for a class front for communism. Beware of mass pressure with its petty persecutions which inevitably lead down the same road as fascism.

Democracy is on trial. The great war and the depression ~~that~~ have been the greatest tests that it has had to stand since it came into our political life. Our own democracy in the United States is threatened. We, too, have a struggle between the right and the left. They seem to be equally inclined to abuse of power. This, too, is a test of democracy. Can we preserve ~~with~~ our liberties, the right of free speech, the right of free assembly, the right of a man to work, the right of a man not to work? Can we preserve all these rights and yet avoid trouble? Can we preserve all these rights and yet protect the consumer? We must learn to do so. Beware of loose talk of rights where

justice to all has not been considered. You have a large freedom. Don't abuse it.

And you, the Hunter members of the graduating class of 1937, who have been happy shuttling in the subway from one class room to another, happy not because everything has been done for you but because you have had to rise above inconvenience, you should have learned, not the temporary values, but the permanent values. I hope that you have developed in Hunter College these qualities which will make you happy and competent citizens. I hope that you will justify the tremendous faith that this country has in the benefits of higher education. I hope that in facing life, your emotions will be tempered, your actions considered and that your wisdom will be great. May you be far-sighted and creative.

Let us trust that you will go out and take a strong position in the fight to maintain freedom and that you will clearly see that we must all work shoulder to shoulder in order that America may reach its ultimate development; not in the fascist or the communist but in the democratic, the middle way.