

Hunter College of the City of New York

Baccalaureate Address of Dr. George N. Shuster, President of Hunter College
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In speaking to you today, I am conscious of violating an ancient maxim of the University of Paris to the effect that young people ought not to be burdened with lectures during the summer time. And yet it seemed well that your College should revive a hallowed custom, thus permitting its President to extend to you and those you love the felicitations of the faculty. He may also add, for his own part, that he is very sorry to see leave these halls so many whom he has half fancied were children of his own, in whose comeliness and progress he took not a little satisfaction. Finally he would bid you take with you a few words that should be, if he could make them so, like a page of a letter from a friend.

This Commencement is a solemn act -- indeed, it writes a finis in the book of your early youth. - Suppose we take our starting point there. Looking for the first time upon a child born of love is a matchlessly beautiful experience. The child brings into focus all the deepest urges of humanity and at the same time challenges all the forces which could give reality to human aspiration. To its well being there are devoted immediately every energy of science and every resource of watchfulness, as if history had gone on during immemorial time for no other purpose than to ward off from this helpless thing disease and trouble, loneliness and fear. There broods over the babe also the mystery of maternity, which we shall never fathom -- the accumulation in him of all those traits and instincts, attitudes and humors, which a never-ending procession of forebears have frugally husbanded to be his legacy. He is all the past there is and all the future there will be. And like his race he lies upon the bosom of God.

Then the child slowly matures, through antics and tantrums, aches and fits of laughter. He runs the familiar gamut from little fool to little angel. And so when civilization is sound, it is governed by a profound sense of collective responsibility for the child. Then it fosters the family and the school, the safe city and the vigilant church. And when civilization is not sound, it begins to doubt the need for these institutions. You can leaf through the chronicle of recorded time and see that this is always so. Accordingly it is surely correct to say that the reason above all reasons why the education of woman is a sacred trust is that upon her training there will depend the future of the child and therewith of civilization.

But what is to happen when the child is grown? Is our man and woman to be caught up in turn by the currents that seem to eddy round the child, or are he and she to find that society is equally bent on their mature welfare? I am not thinking now of such banal matters as the choice between a career and a family. For none of us, married or unmarried, can ever escape from the impact of humanity's concern with youth. The childless man like Stevenson perforce steepes his imagination in the universe of children's fancies. The nun has the Madonna's Child for her own. All this the profound insight of Wordsworth discerned; and his poetry, greater than any other verse in English save that of Milton and Shakespeare, is built round the theme. No, what really challenges us now is that society's care seems to stop abruptly at the point where life is said properly to begin. Youth comes to a sudden end, and thereafter it is assumed either that laissez faire concepts will rule -- in short that each person is on his own, and devil take the hindmost, -- or that through the application of some abstract recipe of change, perhaps the elimination of international bankers or the socialization of industry, the state will automatically engender a cooperative society.

The failure of modern civic institutions to find a solution for the problem of the hiatus between preparation for living and living itself is the basic cause of the tragedy which now dooms the whole world to sorrow almost too great to bear. During the nineteenth century the partial emancipation of the common people from economic serfdom brought with it the development of solicitude for youth. Maternal health, child clinics, education for all in accordance with their talents, recreational activities of the most varied kinds -- these were goals to some extent attained. But in reaching them mankind seemed only to have intensified the struggle for economic advantages. Wealth, either in the sense of private fortune or in the form of social welfare grants, was sought after with unparalleled greed. Men nowhere felt themselves in secure possession of a common culture -- that is, of values on which the inner happiness of each and all could be sustained. The dominant philosophy was economic determinism, whether it was the doctrine of the American middle class pragmatist or the dogma of the German Marxist. We ended eventually in the collective repudiation of all logic and reason. Men starved in the midst of unrivalled plenty. Whole generations were rendered penniless by inflation precisely because they had been thrifty. And so on.

One could approach the problem from diverse points of view. One could argue that the whole trend toward emancipation and solicitude had been wrong; that education and comfort should be reserved for the select few; and that, above all, culture could never be democratic because the masses would trample it underfoot. This was the view held by some of the most influential thinkers of recent times. Nietzsche, Wagner, Burckhardt, Gobineau and others looked at the welfare state with venomous hatred. One might also hold, on the other hand, that cultural interests above a certain minimum level ought to be suppressed, because they led the human animal to disport himself in class conscious fashion. And then, finally, one could

dream of creating a new culture and of training youth for its part in the evolution of that culture.

This last is the essence of National Socialism. And so volatile and powerful is the dream that there is now no place on earth from which that dream can be banished. The Hitlerite is a menace not because he has an army but because that army is driven by an idea -- an idea so dynamic that there is nothing left to oppose it save the idea of the law of love, which has found its expression in Judeo-Christian tradition. And what is it **very** briefly? That is you have a certain kind of blood, you also have a certain kind of soul; and that those who possess this soul have produced everything worthwhile in the world, first of all by suppressing others not in possession of it. The blood, the race, is therefore the priceless treasure, and must be scrupulously safeguarded and transmitted. Weakness must be stamped out -- and therefore the Nazis not only kill off defective children but also themselves bomb and destroy institutions for sick and mentally defective children. The strong alone must be multiplied. German women must have children, but Czech and Polish mothers must not have their children. And once the Teutonic sons have grown to manhood, literally nothing must stop them from carrying out their mission to curb and control the inferior peoples of the earth. War has become an act of purification. It is to rid human society of non-Nazi dross.

It is interesting to see how youth has been fitted into the scheme. Boys and girls of no more than five years are organized into platoons and batallions. The tasks assigned to older children are hard and harsh. They smash the windows of persons disapproved of by the regime; chant ribald songs outside the residences of bishops and ministers of the Gospel; and above everything else hound the non-Aryan back into the ghetto. All these escapades are carried out according to a carefully devised patriotic ritual and to the tune of blood-curdling songs. What matter if the things coveted by an older time -- leisure and books, food and warm lodging, prayer and recollection, education and research, are no more?

We have seen this idea grow in power and overrun a great part of the civilized world. What have we to set against it? Some outmoded offshoot of Marxism, the Communistic paradise for example, dedicated to a flat and stale mediocrity which is not even efficient? Well, we know that two months after the Nazi dictator began his march on Moscow, the surviving residents of the Kremlin would be giving the Nazi salute. No, there is nothing to support any longer save a dynamic democracy which takes up the struggle for the emancipation of the people at the point where it was lost during the nineteenth century. This democracy must first of all have faith. It must cease trembling before some imagined "wave of the future," as silly folk shiver at legends of the femme fatale or the comely Don Juan whose rapturous smile nobody can resist. Then it must have a culture. Thinking that life can be divorced from the intellect and its ideals, whether those be courageous or altruistic, thus becoming a kind of bathing-beach addition to the eight-hour day, is dooming the nation to inertness, flabby muscles and mortal danger. Finally, it must have honesty and efficiency. We shall have to stop confusing rabble rousers with political or economic leaders. Having done these things, we shall begin to be ready for the showdown with Nazism which must inevitably come. For even if it did not come in the form of a bomb, it would arrive in the guise of an idea.

We shall not be ready until women have seen the truth and known how to transmit it to their families. For just as Nazism is in large part the creation of disillusioned, dissatisfied and loveless women, who transformed a suppressed allegiance to the law of love into a fanatical admiration for the law of hate, so our democracy will live or die according to the fiat of the American woman. She must learn how to project her children into a livable future. She must do less coddling and more planning, less knitting and more thinking, less fussbudgeting and more budgeting. Let her bravely make the obviously correct deduction in which countless

millions of harassed Europeans will concur -- that the "wave of the future" is American democracy grown strong, conscious and resolute. And what do I mean by Consciousness and resolution? That we see clearly, unflinchingly, the tasks which are to be done. That we insist upon the preservation of the free individual through his transformation from a predatory anarchist into a person helpfully associated with others in economic and cultural enterprise. That we resolve that industrial energy is something not to waste but to use, and that by wise and cautious engineering it is destined to become the source of benefits more widely distributed than men have yet imagined. That community culture is to be achieved through neighborliness, expressed alike in the law that no race, no creed, no group is to be held in bondage and in the affirmation of the common right of all to the imagination and the spirit. That we highly resolve that these things shall be done, not by others merely but by ourselves also. And that we stem the drift to an anonymous government and an anonymous civilization by constant personal watchfulness and unswerving integrity. Then we shall have made America not for Americans only but -- even as its founders desired -- for all the suffering and aspiring peoples of the earth.

Yes, these will not be easy tasks. Yours must be, if you and we are to survive, a hard and disciplined generation. But thank Heaven that this is so. The mushy years which lie behind us constitute not merely the weakest and least fruitful period in the nation's history but also the least happy one. It was a time of disease and disintegration for the individual, the family, the school, the church and the common social institutions. Yes, it was even an era of economic and financial decline, characterized by weak leaders and even weaker consciences. You reach maturity in an hour of cleansing and of steadying. You will not be tempted to intoxication on unprincipled gambling and on squandered opportunities. You will be on your feet in a world that stands on its feet. The years through which you will live will be those not of an absurdly imagined twilight of civilization but of the

release of the human mind from bondage to grossness and bluntness and staleness. Believe me when I say that we envy you, for yours is the greatest opportunity any generation of Americans has known. You can refashion this beautiful land, in the body and in the spirit.

Emerson, speaking to the young scholar, said in 1837: "Free should the scholar be -- free and brave." And today I can only repeat, out of a deep conviction of the providential destiny of our country in the recreation of civilization, "Go forth bravely in your freedom." And may God give you the victory.

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