

Baccalaureate Address given by President Shuster  
June 20, 1943

When your class met in Freshman assembly four years ago, I quoted some words from Horace to the effect that wisdom no less than beauty is the goal of womanhood. I am sure that all who are here this afternoon will agree that both objectives have been reached.. But on that self-same occasion we also discussed the indispensable assumptions of human society, arguing that college life might well be from the social point of view a proving ground -- an experience in mutual good will and understanding. We could not then foresee that June, 1943 would find you deep in a struggle which sees the youth of the world arrayed against one another. With us stand all those who believe in the free community of men, in the dignity of the human person, and in legal institutions dedicated to the concept of equal justice. And on the other side are those who do not so believe..

It is decidedly worth noting that this war is after all a question of belief. This struggle does not take its rise in desperate human need or in lust for gain.. And therewith it illustrates with savage force the ancient truth that men and women verily are what they believe.

When I was myself going to college in the dim and distant past, a favorite topic for debate was woman's place in American society. Mrs. Dorr had published a widely discussed volume entitled, "What Eight Million Women Want." No, it was not a husband that was wanted. It was a society cleansed from virulent evils which affected the lives of women -- discrimination, sweatshop employment, and so forth. Mrs. Dorr's book was in the great tradition of Uncle Tom's Cabin and stirred the American conscience to remedy the ills it attacked. But in retrospect, how simple its outlook seems! Then the ills to which humanity is heir were easily diagnosed and cured. Today the social scientist seldom dares to be identified with an optimistic forecast. He is like a physician whose patient is down with half a dozen strange maladies at the same time, and who hopes to find in a bewildering array of sulfa drugs and vitamins something which will cure at least one of the diseases.

And it seems to me that individual happiness has likewise become baffling and complex. Cicero in his time felt that retiring to the country and to the pursuit of wisdom was the proper hope of a man who had during his prime served the republica and laid aside a nest egg while doing so. Walt Whitman said that joy was to be found in walking about the metropolitan city, looking into the varied faces of humanity, and realizing the riches of one's brotherhood with all of them. And of course there was the philosopher who said austerey that bliss was a condition which enabled one to get one's work done.

But when you leave College you will encounter at once the specific modern disease -- in particular the disease which seems to affect the educated. This illness is a feeling that one's personal gifts are very great and diverse, whereas the tasks which one is given to do are absurdly simple and monotonous. No doubt your parents declared when you were on the verge of entering the sacred portals of Hunter that they wanted you to go to college so that you could know a more interesting life than that of the worker in a garment factory or of a this or a that. You had a similar notion in mind, and may well have fancied yourself some day teaching another generation at Hunter. How fascinating such a task may seem. You would go on safe in the knowledge that you knew positively all there was to be known, and could proceed gleefully tossing crumbs from your abundant store to nibbling youth.

And now here you are. May I say that if you were eventually to become an instructor your lot would from several points of view be rather a surprise. Your evenings would be given over not to the enjoyment of your boundless knowledge but to preparation for the next day's teaching. And in between you would attend the quite innumerable committee meetings which in this our day afford such endless opportunities for exercising one's auditory powers. It would be a constant pleasure to dip into stacks of quizzes and examinations in order to determine whether there was an air-tight case on which an "F" could be based.

Nevertheless there really is something in the feeling that the life of the teacher is blessed. The more immediately functional jobs of our day offer relatively little

that seems in tune with the infinite of the cultured imagination. You become a statistical clerk in the Census Bureau, and are assigned a job at figures, which you will leave in due time in order to assume a more august position having also to do with figures of a more rarified sort. Or you become a chemist and rise from laundry soap analysis to toilet soap analysis. During the past few years quite a few graduates have come and talked with me about their experience in this vein. And some of them, I shall confess, were fearfully bored and rather given to fancy that a College President like myself was just a lucky accident in the scheme of things -- concerned always with momentous and challenging problems, acting like Socrates and Solomon combined to adjudge issues of state, and then breezily tossing aside everything in order to attend another glamorous chicken dinner at some Society or other's expense.

But I shall confess to you that the job of being President is likewise woefully monotonous. You know as sure as shooting that the budget will be cut either during February or March, and that then you will spend weeks trying to make yourself and everybody else believe that the institution can get on just as well on half a shoestring as on a whole one. I shall confess that I, too, chronically long to be a professor, forgetting about the examinations and the committee meetings and seeing myself accumulating an ever greater knowledge always eagerly sought after by students all of whom were naturally destined to get A's and no questions asked.

The only way out of the dilemma is to stop fooling oneself and to realize that the happiness of life depends upon ethical and emotional dedication. Patrick Henry was a lawyer who tried to fool the jury and to forget that his clients were imbeciles who ought to be fined heavily and sent about their business. But then one day in the Virginia Assembly all that he had thought about in his leisure hours came to a focus and he delivered an address in which there was concentrated unforgettable significance and emotion. Thomas Jefferson was a young man of 33 when he was asked by his elders to write the Declaration of Independence. It was not just luck that made him the choice. He had been sitting around writing that sort of thing for a long while, getting nowhere in particular. And now suddenly there he was with an opportunity which every American will envy as long as there is an America at all.

These men had lived intensely the life of the mind, regardless of the tasks which were their immediate share of the world's work. They expanded their intellectual horizons, lived with great ideas humbly and in the hope that some time they could worthily serve not themselves but all men. They were firm of character, knowing that there can be no compromise with one's self though there may well be endless bargaining with others. I heard the other day of a lawyer who as a young man refused to do a very dishonorable thing, and who thereby lost the chance to make himself a rich man. For twenty years he toiled on in obscurity, saving his probity and deepening his knowledge in after hours. And then a dramatic thing happened. In a critical hour in American life there was need of a man of absolute honesty; and then the president of the corporation he had once refused to serve grudgingly remembered this lawyer and recommended him. That happy ending doesn't always come about. Yet even without it one earns that elusive thing called happiness.

Happiness is in the life and desire of the mind. It is in realized integrity. The other day an alumna came to see me and spoke briefly of her son in the air force. Suddenly she remarked with feeling that on a furlough he had said, "Mother, thank God you knew how to bring us up." And as she spoke I knew that if she had to scrub floors for a living that remark would suffice to keep her as happy a woman as ever lived.

In short this little homily has now come round to the point it wishes to make. Nobody is happy or successful all the time. Happiness and success are in the moments which flash from a long preparation through loyalty to one's deepest desire. They are verily like little children one has fostered month after month in the womb of one's thought. There is even such happiness in sorrow.

For very many of us these are anxious hours in which the fortunes of a dear one hang in the balance. God hears our hearts beat quickly in the dark. This is Father's Day and I think I can speak to you like a father on such a matter. If you must send your man away to the war -- brother, sweetheart, or father -- he can take a light from you into the austerity of his possible sacrifice, if you will remember that in his dream of you there must be no frail beauty or conventional passion, but the simplicity of one

who could not be mean or vulgar, of the earth merely, but who rather had to be -- by reason of her own integrity had to be -- the essence of all for which men these thousands of years have loved the hearth fire above everything else in the world. I remember that just before I left for France during the last war, I went to say goodbye to my mother. She had always made a fuss previously when I went away from home, and I dreaded the moment. But it was dusk and we sat for a while in the garden looking at the stars.. I knew that she had not felt so close to me since the day I was born. But she did not cry. And I went away knowing that however brave I might compel myself to be, I could not be as brave as she had been. And if your man does not come back, you can know that you are with him in his everlasting rest if you will add to your own dedication of yourself to nobility all that he would have desired to be. And so in sorrow God will give you the rarest happiness which is union of the spirit after the body has gone unto its doom..

There is no disguising the fact that life could be brighter for us all than it is now. One is troubled not merely by the terror of the fighting on the lands and the seas of all the earth, but by the stark horror of so much here at home that is so unlike what you have been taught. One hears of Beaumont, Texas, and shudders. I think of one who said, "Love the Lord Thy God and thy neighbor as thyself:" and can find no answer to the problem of why men should hate one another so desperately and intensely. But life will never be any better unless you, all of you, try to make it so in spite of everything. I am sure you will keep fast to the discipline of nobility for your country's sake.

And so let me wish you joy in the making of some moment of happiness in dedication by which you will be remembered, even as your College will remember you.

President's Office  
June 22, 1943  
RDC

Copy sent to Dr. Claire McGlinchey  
Friend of Dr. Shuster's by Dr. Shuster