

BACCALAUREATE ADDRESS

given by Dr. George N. Shuster, President of Hunter College
Sunday, June 23, 1946

As you brace yourselves for the pleasant shock of graduation, it may do no harm to observe that one hundred and seventy-five years ago the Founders of your country signed, amidst peril and the dire alarms of war, a Declaration of Independence. Likewise you may note that during nearly half that time young women have been coming to Hunter to be educated with the compliments of their magnanimous, restless and provident metropolis. Thus, during less than two centuries of American history, great, luminous objectives which the aspiring thousands of mankind had long struggled to reach were more than kept in kind. Of the Bill of Rights there is no need to speak here, or of its progressive revelation in our national experience. Nor, perhaps, have we any imperative reason to be reminded of the meaning of our own college.

That women should have been educated would have seemed to the majority of even the British and the French, a hundred and seventy years ago, a question to be answered in the negative. The fair mistress of one's affections was respected for her intuitions, her virtues and her tattling. But that there was any good excuse for training her in bacteriology, or public administration, or higher mathematics, would hardly have been conceded by the more rebellious among the ladies themselves. Everybody was agreed that since the days of Adam the distaff had ruled the world. It was only that domination through the intellect was considered bizarre. And so we may say in all sincerity that the full recognition which has been accorded the rights of women has represented general acceptance of the Bill of Rights itself.

And yet, while we recognize that the achievement of these seventeen decades is memorable, we cannot avoid seeing that the abode of civilized man is now everywhere under ominous siege. I recall a street in a European city on which a large apartment house had been bombed out. Only the two side walls of that house remained standing, and from each wall a series of steam radiators dangled with fantastic forlornness, like a series of stray rags on super-imposed clothes lines. They were reminders, tragic and comic alike, that once upon a time people had been quite comfortable here, looking up no doubt from their newspapers to berate the landlord if the temperature perchance went down to 69 degrees. Frugal housewives had kept the piano and the gold fish, the Bible and grandfather's picture, away from these radiators. People had come in and said how pretty the hostess was, and had held out their hands for a moment to the warmth, half recollecting ancient hearth fires.

They tell the story of a man who, after many hardships and an almost endless journey, came back to his native Warsaw. Of the house in which he had once dwelt he could find not so much as a stone. Then one day as he was hunting about in a heap of rubble he came upon a fragment of a rattle he had brought home years before from the United States to his baby daughter. Half a rattle was, as it were, the only documentary evidence left to show that his had once been a proud and pleasant family life. Then he had come home to swing his children high while they laughed. Then he had stood knee-deep in candid, wide blue eyes. And now he could not even find out on what corner of what field the bones of his beloved, shoveled into a sack at some prison camp crematorium, had been insanely scattered.

These things and the countless similar things which have happened-- the catalogues of murder, hunger and agony which have been written--could not exist unless an overwhelming moral tragedy had occurred. It cannot be our purpose to dwell on this tragedy this pleasant afternoon. But I cannot help fancying that the classroom and the fugues it plays on your memory, extremely valuable though they may be, are often a little remote from the business of life. Oh yes, it is all very well to say that up in the Bronx, in a gymnasium which will soon resound again to the thump of girls descending rhythmically from trapezes, et cetera, an organization known as the United Nations will promptly set all wrong things right. We hope it will. But the plain fact of the matter is that it cannot do so unless the peoples of the world desire its success. And the trouble with our time is twofold. It lives under the dark impress of tragedy. And it does not seem to know what the peoples of the world really and truly desire.

Therefore I say to you very solemnly this afternoon, thinking of the children who will cling to your skirts in the days to come: you must not be those who think either that the woods have swallowed up the trees, or that a tree is the wood. You must not be these because you must know clearly what you wish for yourselves, for your children and for others. And alas--I say this honestly and with humble regret--it is precisely all this we have somehow not managed to teach you. Oh, to some extent we have. One of your committees has helped you see that famine in Europe and Asia is not just so many calories multiplied by zero, but that hunger is a little child, any little child, and an old man, any old man, with the film of death before his eyes because he has not eaten in so desperately long a time. And because you have learned this you know also that the people of the future will be in large part people who have starved. They will bear in their bones immemori-

ably the signs of our indifference and our charity. And the bones of those in whose marrow the stigma of inflicted indifference lingers interminably are not scaffolds on which one can build a happy world.

Have we not, you and I, been on the whole fearfully nonchalant about the matter? Have we not made a fetish of one aspect of the democratic form of communal living, namely discussion, while ignoring the most vital safeguard of the free life, namely action for the common good? We assume, for example, that the promulgation of varied points of view, no matter how crotchety or bizarre, will set before the public a number of policies and courses of action from among which it will in its wisdom choose. But in all sober truth, the result is not choice but confusion. Everybody has a panacea, and as a result nobody gets any medicine. We Americans, for example, have come up with the most fearful weapon in the world. If we knew what to do with it, there would have to be peace among the nations. But nobody knows, for the simple reason probably that so many know different things. In like manner we have developed the most effective industrial methods humanity has ever seen. But because we do not know how to make social use of these methods--because as a matter of fact we are afraid of them--the symbol of our contemporary life is the fact that, like Marie Antoinette, we tell folks that since they can't have bread they should eat cake.

I am of course not arguing that debate should cease or that there is no value in difference of opinion. But it seems to me obvious that there must be something wrong with education if it cannot make dominant in literate society at least that regard for reason, for common sense, and for prudent execution of the common tasks which our well-being and indeed our safety require. And perhaps the explanation of this fault is not too hard to find. Have we not encouraged

the individual person to be acquisitive, without setting before his imagination, in vivid outline, the intellectual and ethical goods which he must secure for his own welfare? It is forever true, for example, that no one can for any long time acquire anything permanent through dishonesty except dishonesty itself. For whenever the dishonest person attains to power, the disease spreads like a plague. His emulators then become legion. The beneficiary of political graft corrupts the civil service. The official who winks at the black market sooner or later finds it taking the food from his own table. The profiteer in European and Asiatic hunger--the soldier, for instance, who builds up in an occupied country a white slave traffic with cigarettes--returns to find his own daughter not safe in the streets and parks of American cities. This is a virus for which there is no serum and no sulfa drug.

And so it is also in the domain of opinion. You can get attention for a point of view by being more original, more lurid, more exciting than somebody else. And in the twinkling of an eye almost the air rings with a babel of voices, catering to prejudices and carefully masked ideologies, to a native human hankering for sophistry, and to a deeply rooted tendency in some hearts to relish hatred more than love. And what results can one anticipate save a mounting tide of confusion, in which each citizen caters to his own worst separatistic instincts?

That is why you must remember the commitments implicit in the education which is now for you in a sense a completed experience. For this education assumes that learning is unified, and that, while all our little lives are shrouded in dreams, it is possible to establish basic social verities no more decently questionable than is the assertion that two and two are four.

It is all very well to say that we educate ourselves for leadership. But the beneficent leader, knowing that demagoguery is the most vicious form in which power is exercised, will think twice before he speaks once, will carefully weigh the evidence, and will remain even so conscious of his own self as merely a dot on the human landscape. I therefore often think it providential that the education of women has been carried so far ahead in our time. For women are close to the unswerving facts of human destiny. They know the pitiful weakness and the great though limited strength of their race. Looking at their children, they understand that a patrimony can be wasted and a house torn down. We can only hope that you and your companions in age, now graduating from the colleges of America, will stand for reason, for courtesy and for progress in the community life of the peoples. I hope that God will give you the strength so to do.