

Commencement - January 1949

Hunter College Commencement Address
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FREEDOM FROM FEAR...

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Noted very good

There is something portentous and even awesome about a class completing a period of college study, and facing the world -- a turbulent and threatening world, at this pinpoint of history. For it is impossible for anyone living in these times to escape the effects of the dreary catalepsy of fear and frustration that has gripped us with such relentless hands. The pages of the daily newspapers, the radio commentators, the statesmen and the politicians, the pollsters, and the ordinary man on the street, have all been preoccupied with dismal thoughts of the disintegration of our society and of our moral standards; the collapse of western civilization, the impending physical destruction for most, if not all of us.

Lewis Mumford calls this world into which you as a fresh new generation, are emerging, "kindling for global gehenna." The moral breakdown, he says, has shown itself in several ways: philosophically, in a cult of nihilism, which denies the fundamental discriminations between good and bad; politically, it has shown itself in the debasement of justice and disregard of law, and in practiced indifference to cruelty; and physically, it has shown itself in the uncontrolled exploitation of physical power, creating, in the rather strong language of the writer, a state of disorder and terror never even approximated in human history since the slow invasion of the glaciers during the ice ages.

I have quoted Mumford only because he makes the typical case with force and imagination. This sort of representation of the present state of the world is now quite common; so common, in fact, that it was headline news for the Washington Post, on Christmas Day, that there was no

world-shaking bad news to report for that day.

If it were not for some reassuring thoughts, which will be the central theme of my address to you tonight, your appearance as a graduating class, in full academic panoply, would be a sad and sobering picture of misspent faith and futile courage.

We have settled into the belief that we, as a nation, are a frustrated lot generally; dismayed and throttled by our own power, and bent upon enforcing peace upon the world only on our own terms, with our mighty weapons. There is no happiness in this prospect; there is, in fact, a wretched defeatism. But I am convinced that this very nihilism, this frustration, this flight to the finalities of violence, are in themselves the weariness of age.

I do not believe that this widespread disintegration so dramatically described, is in any such degree as is implied, a reflection of the mentality or spirit of our younger people. There are increasing numbers in our colleges; they are showing a deep and real and wholesome interest in social issues; they are engaging themselves directly with the social problems of these times; they are not worrying themselves ill about preserving a status quo that is obviously no longer possible; in Europe as well as in America they may have lost some of the old values (and some might well be lost or exchanged), but new values are emerging which in time may well prove to be soundest for this new age. The antidote to fear and the sense of futility, is the clear recognition of these new values.

There is not to be discerned in these youth themselves, so far as I can observe, the cynicism, the fear of war, or of depression, or of new ideas. Nothing more clearly reflects this broad change and period

distinction than the sense of mission that is held by increasing numbers of these youth in social and political problems, and in the changing status of women. Certainly this does not suggest the kind of moral or spiritual or mental collapse that our commentators are worrying about. More women are today in positions of responsibility in the field of human relations than at any time in recent history. More women are today seated in the parliaments of the world than ever before. And what is most significant, the most spectacular increase in women legislators has been in those countries where women had little or no political stature before the war.

The striking difference in orientation and academic concern that sets off the generation represented by this class, and the cynical ones is, I believe, the most wholesome and promising symptom of this very new day. It is ^a positive and constructive approach to the world, a sense of direction that is realistic and free from the constricting mythologies of the past.

They represent the new values emerging in the world -- or certainly new stresses in older values to which lip service ~~has~~ been given more often than personal dedication. It is in these new values and stresses that we look for the strength and spirit of the next years ahead.

Let us look at some of them.

(1) The New Academic Concern about Social Responsibility.

I recall seeing a statement by Dr. Oliver C. Carmichael, that the two subjects that have attracted universal attention since the war are general education and international studies. Here we have a revolt against the fragmentation of knowledge and a deepening of interest in those subjects that prepare for the common social responsibilities shared by all men.

Here also we have, even on the undergraduate level of study, a concern about how other people live, what values reside in other cultures than our own, what common bases exist for living together in a larger even if more complex and difficult world.

The extraordinary growth of interest and participation in social issues and programs as a part of the educational process is an unmistakable index to the positive concern of presentday college youth. This concern has entailed a great many academic headaches, the breaking of shibboleths, at times startled teachers, parents and elders, over the invasion by young students of the not yet socially acceptable worlds of labor, politics, social service, interracial and intercultural education and living. But these interests have had the rich merit of humanizing the relations between people in an age growing steadily mechanistic, cold, fearfully and hatefully objective. The observation of Emerson that the principal aim of scholarship is action has found fuller realization in these recent years than at any time in our history. These are not signs of frustration, or of fear. This is a new and important value and force in the modern world.

(2) The New Cult of Human Rights.

There is another development that is reflected in the faith and action of the uncynical ones -- a development that is positive and unmoved by the fears and threats of war. It is the swift contagion of the doctrine of human rights. Only ten years ago the idea of human rights was largely a concept of philosophy. It is today a principle of action, a living experience to be understood by sharing in its operation.

The mood of the world has been hospitable to the enunciation of the Four Freedoms, the covenant of the United Nations, the Atlantic Charter. Along with the major nations of the world, we were signatories to this

pronouncement:

"We, the peoples of the United Nations, determined to save succeeding generations from the scourge of war, which twice in our generation has brought untold sorrow to mankind, and to reaffirm faith in fundamental human rights, in the dignity and worth of the human person, in the equal rights of men and women and of nations large and small...have agreed to the present charter and do hereby establish an international organization to be known as the United Nations."

In the past, and very recent past, the human rights on which we placed the highest value (and which really are embodied in our constitution), have been, in the last analysis, negative rights -- intended to protect the individual against certain kinds of action. There has grown up in the very modern world a more positive conception of human rights, of economic and social rights. These include the right to do a job, to certain social benefits, to certain minimum standards of living. And now, only within the past two or three years, we have reached the point, for the first time in our history as a nation, that civil rights can be dealt with as a majority national political issue. This issue is in fact before Congress today, with a popular mandate from the last Presidential election for legislative action by the 81st Congress.

The very last act of the Third Conference of UNESCO in Beirut in December was the unanimous approval of the charter of universal human rights, by the Sub-Committee on Human Rights of the United Nations, incidentally under the leadership of Mrs. Eleanor Roosevelt.

This positive position has been taken by practically every national and international organization, whether religious or secular or learned. When it has not been taken, its direct denial has been evaded, because it could not face the growing moral censure of human inequality and exploitation. This is indeed a new climate, a new challenge to youth, a new day, despite

the insolent rebellion of a provincial section of our own country, against this tide of history.

Acceptance of the principle of action can be observed in the sweeping extension of suffrage, the beginning of rebellion of college youth against the snobbishness of fraternities and sororities, the relaxation of racial and religious quota systems in colleges, the growth of organizations for democratic action, and the mounting protests of segregation and discrimination throughout the nation and, in fact, throughout the world.

This is a new front, a new orientation, a new value stress that is different in texture and character from the unhealthy fears that possess the minds of the cynics. It may indeed be, as Victor Hugo says, that great perils bring to light the fraternity of strangers.

(3) Courage for Personal Democratic Action.

I want to call attention to still another value of this most recent period, partially obscured by the hysteria of the elders. It is the expanding will to personal democratic action, -- both in ^{/old} situations and in situations newly defined in our modern society. When we entered World War II, the great majority of the youth who went to battle under the banner of democracy ~~and freedom~~ had very little real conception of its meaning. They did not see the incongruity of such a crusade to save or carry democracy to the world in racially segregated units, nor did they protest the insistence of some of our national policy makers upon the racial segregation of blood plasma even for the wounded and the dying, merely to perpetuate an acknowledged and obnoxious myth.

To many Americans still, what goes under the name of democracy is more a standardized fear of Communism than realistic and profound democratic conviction. This much is certain; that if freedom is to be made

to live, it must be made to work, now. There is no longer the leisure for slowly and lazily maturing the processes of freedom through education, or for waiting until all rebellious or merely hateful racial and religious attitudes have been in one way or the other changed. In this stepped-up age, with its instantaneous communication, its swift travel, its magnified power, its impersonal forces pushing hard against the frail structures of human association, this lesson must be learned and applied within a relatively few years.

The late Reverend Peter Marshall in opening the U. S. Senate spoke this prayer,

"Help us, O Lord, when we want to do the right thing, but know not what it is. But help us most when we know perfectly well what we ought to do and do not want to do it."

Here is another of the values that can and is commanding the faith and loyalty of the new generation. For the failure to translate creative ideas into the reality of everyday situations is a failure that can lead to frustration, fear, confusion, and uncertainty. It is the private of conviction each of us that determines what we call public attitudes.

(4) Science and Knowledge.

There has been associated with this new age of violence, an almost unhealthy and terrified respect for science. In our modern society science plays a great and sustaining role. It is well, however, to keep in mind that science is not the only kind of knowledge there is. It is a kind that serves a special purpose and is valid for the purpose. But it cannot, as Charles C. Morrisonso well says, take the place of wisdom or invalidate the world of reality which wisdom presupposes and reveals. Our emotions, our purposes, our values, our ideals, and our decisions, in their living context -- of actual experience, lie beyond the

reach of scientific method.

(5) The Pursuit of Peace.

I wish to speak of one other redeeming value that lies before us and which is, I believe, deeply sensed by this newer generation. It is the imperative pursuit of peace. Now this may sound like a pious platitude these days, because it should be perfectly clear to everybody that war is terrible, destructive, and inconclusive. There can be military victories but no peace. We do not have peace now despite our victories -- after the greatest attempt in history that ever failed. But you cannot fail to sense the real shallowness of the depth of so much of the talk about peace, in the open and sometimes sneering cynicism of some of the press and the omnipotent commentators, directed at the efforts of men of good will and wisdom to lay a foundation for a lasting peace.

One of the most courageous efforts in this direction is the United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization, which has just ended its third session in Lebanon. What is there that is comic or ridiculous about men who try to build the defences of peace in the minds of men? As Mr. Archibald MacLeish so well says, it requires no longer to provide a background for peace through education and culture than to prepare an army and fortifications for the destructive but futile test of force. What is there that is unrealizably idealistic, about getting a knowledge and understanding about the necessities for survival of other people than ourselves, of feeling their human kinship, of sharing resources, or even yielding a fraction of sovereignty to the lasting end of living peacefully together on this planet? Powerful men and nations, says Reinhold Niebuhr, are often in greater peril from their own illusions than from their neighbors' hostile designs. We can undermine the reality

of our power by our very uncritical pride in it.

Here again is another challenge for this new generation. One first test of world peace is our ability to live peacefully at home with our human differences.

These thoughts I commend to you graduates, as vocations, and ^{as} positive, creative missions, that you may remain free from the debilitating and distorting fears and frustrations that lead to spiritual surrender, to nothingness. I commend to you these fresh and compulsive values, whatever of the old ones may have been lost within the violent past. May you, in the words of Swift, live all of the days of your life.
