

THE SEVENTY-SIXTH COMMENCEMENT

For the first time since its erection, Hill Auditorium was inadequate to hold the large numbers who desired to attend the Commencement Exercises on June 25. Two reasons were doubtless responsible for the extraordinarily large attendance. In the first place, the Senior Class was larger than ever before, save in 1915, with almost 1000 graduates in line, while the fact that the President-elect was to deliver his first address before a Michigan audience was undoubtedly the cause of an unusual demand for places.

The Commencement procession formed as usual and proceeded from University Hall between long lines of Seniors, with their yellow and blue pennants, to Hill Auditorium. The two white-clad buglers who led the procession were followed by Professor H. C. Sadler, as Chief Marshal, in his scarlet Glasgow robe. Then came President Hutchins and President-elect Burton, the Regents, the recipients of honorary degrees, the Faculties, and the alumni, with the various senior classes falling in order behind them. Promptly at ten o'clock the Exercises were opened. President Burton took as the subject of his address, "Being Alive," which was, in part, as follows:

I cannot begin the commencement address without taking an opportunity to express in no unmistakable terms my profound appreciation of all that has been accomplished in the name of this University. It was my rare privilege to have seen and conversed with President Angell here in Ann Arbor about a decade ago. With all other educators and citizens I have shared the highest esteem and regard for him. Today I claim the privilege of paying a brief tribute to the distinguished man who for eleven years has guided the destinies of this great institution. His gracious courtesy and magnanimous generosity to me cannot be expressed publicly in words. I believe he knows how deeply I appreciate his attitude in these matters. I do not believe that all of you have any adequate conception of all that he has done for his *alma mater* during his administration. Quietly, wisely, persistently he has met the problems as they have come and today we behold a larger, better equipped, more powerful institution than when he began. Few people fully realize the outstanding achievements of his presidency. When we enumerate the new buildings which we now enjoy we begin to sense the cumulative effect of his work. The Natural Science building, this auditorium, the new library, the Michigan Union, the dormitories have all come during one short decade. So today, Mr. President, we feel an irresistible desire to convey to you our esteem, affection and gratitude.

I envy you with all my heart! On the first of July you become a free citizen at liberty to express your convictions upon all public issues and to serve as the mentor of Michigan standards and American ideals. Relieved of administrative routine, freed from executive responsibilities, rich in experience and ripe in judgment, you will be willing, I am sure, to share with this University, its alumni and friends and with your fellow-citizens everywhere your convictions upon the great issue which confront mankind. We sincerely trust and believe that you understand in a measure at least how we honor you today and how we shall hold you in our affection through all the years.

It is usually expected that a commencement address will aim to be of service to the graduate as he enters upon life. Accordingly the message this morning must not be regarded as an educational pronouncement by one who is shortly to assume the presidency of this University. Other occasions will doubtless afford ample opportunities for exploiting one's notions about education! Today the emphasis is clearly upon the

student. These young men and women are about to set out upon the challenging sea of life and the occasion demands that we attempt to give them a hint of what we think we may have learned about that strange and fascinating venture.

There is one phase of it which immediately commends itself to the judgment and interest of the typical student. He instinctively regards himself as being thoroughly alive. To him the fact is self-evidencing and axiomatic. To be a student *is* to be alive. Moreover he is quite right. The university man at his best is the living embodiment of our thought today. As baffling and comprehensive as it may at first appear, our subject is "*Being Alive.*"

I.

1. Precisely what is it to be alive? Probably there is nothing which all men covet more. Doubtless there is nothing which the university man dreads more than the possibility that he has started away from life toward death in its deepest spiritual sense. When we speak of a person as being alive we imply that he possesses richness and fullness of life. It carries the implication of reserve power and potentiality. A *live* shell is loaded and has actual capacity to do its work. A *live* wire is charged with power. It is dynamic. To be alive does not mean restless diffusion of energy. It requires poise and quietness. At times, however, to be alive calls for prolonged vital activity. So the man who is alive is energetic, alert, keen, aroused. He burns with enthusiasm and glows with the white heat of intense, determined convictions. Like a *live* axle he imparts power to all his connections. In fact rich full life brings the color of health. It gives quality. He who is actually alive in every atom of his being sparkles with bright, vivid colors. He is simply irresistible, scintillating and magnetic. He sustains the truth that nothing is so potent as personality.

2. To decide whether a person is alive or not, it is only necessary to examine his contact points. If they are clean and firm, he will meet the test. Is there evidence that the receiving lines are intact? If so, he is marked by a high grade of receptivity. He accepts facts as facts. He is not ruled by his ignorance, prejudice or superstition but goes through life with his eyes wide open and actually sees what the world is trying to say to him in science, in history, in art, and in literature. His mind in a highly proper and scientific sense is a *tabula rasa*. It does not attempt to twist the world to meet preconceived notions or special interests. This world, however, to a live mind is not a mere haphazard ill-considered jumbling of facts. A man is not an encyclopaedia. He insists upon thinking, upon understanding the meaning and relationship of facts. He realizes that true receptivity in sheer self-respect requires deep thought and virile independence. Moreover the man who is thoroughly alive understands that all facts do not congeal. He knows that while statistics and graphic charts are important, there is something more to be considered. He appreciates the primary fact that change is the only permanent element in life. So he has sympathy. He possesses a spirit which is highly sensitive to all of the unexpressed, unformulated but mighty and intense yearnings of mankind. He seeks to understand the movements of his day. He has a keen scent for detecting new paths of thought and new ways of action. He is more impressed by a tendency than by a result. In a word, he suffers happily from the artistic temperament. Esthetic values count in his practical judgments. He speaks and understands a universal language. Such a man will possess courage. That is to say, he will be a real scientist. He will glory in problems. He will evince a boldness in attack, a freshness in vigor and a resourcefulness in strategy which will inevitably win the victory. His action takes the form of courageous expeditions into the realm of the unknown. To be alive, in essence, is at one and the same time to be receptive, independent, sympathetic and courageous.

3. A man is alive just in proportion as he enjoys wealth of relationships. Life everywhere is made up of two factors. Within us are hopes, aspirations, desires, visions. Without us, are the stern unalterable facts of life. Neither set of realities can be annihilated with impunity. The individual is to be numbered among the final values of the universe. We live in a dependable world which serves as the objective,

independent order of truth upon which we base our judgments. The only true life is found in the right relationship between these two elements. A man is alive when he gets himself into the right relationship to himself, his neighbor, his country and his universe. This assertion applies alike to individuals, institutions, states, and nations. History throbs with illustrations of this unescapable truth. Our relationships to Cuba and China and our part in the great war are obvious confirmations of the solemn truth that life at its best is wealth and depth of relationships.

4. But being alive means keeping alive. The dangers of stagnation and death, even for university graduates, are appalling. We come here upon one of the most profound problems of thought. In a word, what is the nature of a true ideal? Is it attainable or unattainable? To keep alive must you set out to do something you can do or cannot do? As paradoxical as it may appear, the only way to keep alive is to select a task which you can never fully perform. For example, the efforts to become rich, or famous or learned are genuine goals. They always hold before you larger possibilities of achievement. "We only live by escaping the death of attainment." The man who sits down and says, "Now I have done it," is dead but does not know it. To be alive you simply must keep alive. You must grow.

II.

1. If the task of being alive is so exacting, some one may seize the other horn of the dilemma and ask: Why is it necessary to be so much alive? Why not just exist or to make it more respectable, Why not lead a normal, sane, quiet life without all this effort at excellence and this desire for fullness of life? It must be admitted that in effect multitudes of people do this very thing. Our line of thought is based upon the assumption that a university man or woman readily grants that "to whomsoever much is given of him shall much be required." So we do not hesitate to claim one presupposition for our thought today. We assume that every real man and true woman here would turn in disdain upon any contemplated plan of life which did not recognize that he or she owed to the world, under normal circumstance, the very fullest and best life of which he is capable.

2. The outstanding fact, however, is that not one of you is to live under normal circumstances. The absolute necessity of being alive today rests upon the abnormal world situation which your generation faces. Conditions within and without the nation today accentuate the unqualified demand that every one of you shall tingle with life and shall be all aglow with a passion for service. The great war through which we have just lived has thrown doubt upon every answer to the permanent problems of organized society. You must face this universal challenge. Everything is questioned. All of the ordinary ideas and beliefs of man are being re-examined, re-formulated or abandoned. A deep tone of disrespect runs all through American life. The home, the courts, the ballot box, the present theories of property rights are all regarded by large groups of people as temporary solutions of fundamental issues. In this atmosphere you must breathe and work and keep vital. No generation ever faced such gigantic, momentous problems as you face. With no thought of solving them or even of casting any light upon their complications and entanglements, but for the purpose of burning into your very souls the magnitude of your responsibilities, there should be mentioned here by way of illustration certain primary questions which you must answer.

(a) The issues of an industrial democracy must be faced more clearly and more sharply with every passing day. Here is undoubtedly the paramount domestic problem of America. It is not merely a question of wages and hours. It runs down into the very foundations of society. It asks whether labor shall be regarded as a commodity or whether the worker shall have some share in the organization and conduct of the shop. The whole problem of "representation in industry," of living wages, of standards of living, of American economic prosperity and financial stability are involved here. Mr. Albert Mansbridge in the August, 1919, *Atlantic*, wisely and solemnly said: "No community can afford to let the powerful influences of education and labor develop otherwise than in conscious co-operation."

(b) To what extent the government shall go in the exercise of its functions is a problem upon which you will be required to vote throughout your lives. Do we still believe in individual initiative? Or do we believe in any case in expanding governmental activities? That this issue is acute in certain regions of our country goes without saying. We believe in the post office and in public education, we assumed the wisdom of the government taking over during the war the railroads, the telephones and telegraphs, but how far now shall these processes go? Shall the individual states go into the insurance business, erect packing houses, own elevators and engage in other basic industries? How far shall the government be asked to go? There may be solemn elements of truth in the jest that although Germany once possessed the more efficient form of government, that Americans prefer the less competent form.

(c) The international situation cannot be ignored. League or no league American citizens will be voting regularly on these issues. One needs only to read John Maynard Keynes on the Economic Consequences of the Peace, or Mr. Frank Vanderlip's book entitled "What Happened to Europe," to appreciate the overwhelming, momentous difficulties which confront the world and therefore every intelligent American citizen. The situation can scarcely be exaggerated. Whether we speak of financial insolvency, industrial disorganization, transportation difficulties, lack of food supplies or general disruption of life the picture is equally baffling and dark.

Surely no true person can be too alive to do his share in meeting such tasks. We face not only the attractiveness but the necessity of being thoroughly, incessantly alive.

III.

It is easy enough to attempt a definition of being alive; it degenerates almost into "platitudinous flabdoodle" in these days to point out the necessity arising out of world problems for every person to do his share; the real issue comes when we discuss methods. How shall one play his part in this game? Curiously enough as one sets out to fill his place he will discover sooner or later that "self" is the most troublesome factor with which he has to deal. No one with intelligence can shout today the old doctrine of excessive individualism,—a doctrine which preached personal success and individual triumph so vigorously a generation ago that we see its direful effects written in capital letters all over American political and business life. Nor will the doctrine of "live" and "let live" be adequate for our huge responsibilities today. It will not do to say to yourself, "I will make the most of myself and let everybody do likewise." It isn't a sound doctrine. If you swallow it whole you will have intellectual indigestion. Even so, Germany would have done well in 1914 to have stooped to this level rather than to follow the policy she did. Moreover we cannot with discrimination advocate the absurd doctrine of complete self-abnegation. To be absorbed as a drop of water in the ocean carries no thrill to American youth. Weak, supine acquiescence does not appeal to healthy youngsters. Negative, colorless humility and meekness do not grip the imagination. Surely there must be some other method for keeping self at its best. We all agree that we want to get ourselves out of the center of the universe but we insist upon possessing genuine self-respect, vigorous initiative and undaunted courage.

2. The only method which recognizes fully both sides of the problem requires one to *have a cause*. In effect it says: study your desires, capacities and achievements. See what you have and what you can do. Likewise study the world. Learn what its real needs are. See what must be done for humanity. Then match the two things. Take all that you have and place it at the disposal of some worthy cause, outside of and beyond your own personal interests.

This is the method of the soldier. It was the ideal of the Pilgrim Fathers. It has been the plan of all great individuals, groups and nations. They identify themselves with some noble undertaking. As Carlyle wisely said: "For all human things do require to have an ideal in them, to have some soul in them."

3. Any man who really identifies himself with a cause soon learns the great secret of life. Self now finds its proper place. Genuine, natural, positive humility is born. Conceit, self-pride, exaltation of self—all these are impossible. Yet there is here no

weak, dawdling, supine, sentimentality about self-sacrifice and service. Rather there is amazing self-effacement in devotion to great ends. Marvelous poise, conscious power, innate dignity, unqualified self-respect all arise by virtue of the great cause he serves. Just as the traffic policeman, the soldier, the governor of the state or the President of the nation are respected not for themselves individually but because of the communities they respect, so the individual finds his real effectiveness in his cause not in himself. Ruskin formulated this mighty truth in this paragraph: "Arnolfo knows that he can build a good dome at Florence; Albert Dürer writes calmly to one who has found fault with his work, 'It cannot be done better'; Sir Isaac Newton knows that he has worked out a problem or two that would have puzzled anybody else; only they do not expect their fellow-men therefore to fall down and worship them. They have a curious understanding of powerlessness, feeling that the power is not *in* them but *through* them."

4. As paradoxically as it may sound therefore we must all sooner or later come to realize that the path of life is the path of death. This is the final law. We must lose our lives to find them—lose them in a great cause. Except a grain of wheat fall into the ground and die it abideth by itself alone, but if it die it bringeth forth much fruit. Call it what you please—being thoroughly socialized, entering into the life of mankind, loyalty, old-fashioned unselfishness—this is what being alive demands. Sir Auckland Geddes was quite right when he affirmed that "a man does not live by or for bread alone. If he does he is not worth keeping alive." Somehow, by experiences bitter or sweet, through success and failure, through joys and sorrows, you will be forced back to the truth that "No man liveth unto himself," that life is worth living just in proportion as the welfare of mankind in some form becomes your first consideration.

No higher hope can be expressed for each one of you today than that as the years come and go you may lay hold on life. Emerson once said that "the one thing of value in the world is an active soul—this every man is entitled to,—this every man has within him, although in almost all men obstructed and as yet unborn." May the obstructions be torn away and the splendidly noble life within each one of you gradually be born. The University of Michigan confidently expects each one of you to be thoroughly alive, to hit hard at every form of injustice and to forget himself in the exacting service of this American Democracy.