

Commencement, 1940

NEVER TO GROW OLD

Fellow Students:

My message today is a twofold one. One part is addressed to your successors; the other is specifically for you.

To those young people who are planning to enter, or return to, the University next year I issue this warning: Michigan does not welcome students who are not convinced that democracy is the ideal form of government for a civilized people. She will not be confused by sophistries built around meaningful but ill-defined phrases, such as "freedom of the press" and "freedom of speech," but will deal firmly, without fear or favor, with subversive, or so-called "fifth column," activities.

"True freedom consists with the observance of law," and unlawful acts cannot be justified by differences in ideologies. Honest discussion is a valuable method of educa-

tion, but is to be clearly distinguished from propaganda. The University of Michigan is an institution of the people, and its staff must continue to insist that Americans who prefer to live under other forms of government are at heart unfriendly aliens who have no right to the benefits provided by our schools.

Now, may I speak directly to you.

If I were a king or, to be more modern, a dictator, I would issue an edict that none but earnest souls be permitted to address students on these and similar occasions. I would make sure that speakers under consideration appreciated their responsibilities and questioned their fitness for the task. I would favor those who could be counted on to feel, as they faced their audience, that they might have done well to have stayed at home, and, as they finished, that their listeners probably shared this feeling. If you will accept these opinions as criteria to govern the choice of

speaker, I assure you I am not out of place on this platform. The prayer in my heart as I came here today was recorded by an Egyptian scribe two thousand years before Christ: "Would I had phrases that are not known, utterances that are strange, a new language that hath not been used, free from repetition, not an utterance which hath grown stale, which men of old have spoken."

While my prayer has not been answered, of some things I am confident. To indulge in platitudes, to pretend to a knowledge of economics, political science, or sociology only possessed by specialists, or to assume the role of prophet, sage, or seer would not be appropriate, for I trust that you have been trained to detect sham, to analyze propaganda, and to prick the bubble of conceit. To fail to be frank with you, to argue for the status quo, or to attempt, by rattling the dry bones of human failure, to frighten you into accepting generalizations of doubtful validity would be resented as an

affront to the intellectual honesty which your instructors have assisted you to acquire.

There remains for me, however, one theme which can never become outmoded, and which may appropriately be discussed by an educator who has faith in the ability of the human race ultimately to raise itself above a barbarism in which men act in ignorance and on impulse to a civilization in which they act on knowledge and principle. I refer to the responsibility of the trained individual in a communal group. Specifically, I propose today to speak of one of the factors which tend to destroy the natural assets of youth and to vitiate the advantages of education--the mental and spiritual degeneration which often comes with age.

We in the United States have chosen to live in a democracy. Admittedly, our efforts have to this time produced only a blundering, inefficient, and otherwise obviously imperfect organization. The important consideration, however,

is that we still desire and struggle to govern ourselves in ways which will preserve maximum freedom of thought, initiative, and action consistent with happy and peaceful communal living: to achieve, in the words of Thomas Mann, "that form of government and of society which is inspired above every other with the feeling and consciousness of the dignity of man." We have also understood that education is an essential activity of democracy. Although we have not always fully appreciated the importance of training the individual for the responsibilities of citizenship, we have held to the concept that self-government demands for its competent expression wide distribution of all available knowledge and the ability to use it. But, if for so much we may accept credit, we can no longer be content with the slowness of our progress and the blind optimism which has assumed that we are sufficiently rich, powerful, and isolated to be able safely to dawdle along toward Utopia.

Recent events have shocked us into the realization

that an apparent general incapacity of historic democratic institutions to deal effectively with problems in a period of rapid change challenges the very existence of representative government. Unless all signs fail, a world-wide outbreak of an ancient struggle is impending--a conflict between two ideologies--individual freedom and regimentation. If this is true, it scarcely needs to be argued that the safety of democracy in America requires not only an immediate tightening of its defenses, but, more importantly, a vigorous offensive, involving an improvement of practices. The schools and other social agencies must reject the concept of social and moral neutrality and both teach and exemplify the principles of self-government. Individually our people must have a spiritual revival. They must abandon their attitude of laissez-faire, their belief that conditions of life in our country are as good as can be expected, their confidence that we can exist in splendid isolation. They must become intolerant of

ignorance, greed, and injustice. They must reaffirm their belief in the equality, brotherhood, dignity, and moral responsibility of man, examine objectively our successes and failures as a nation, and dedicate their lives anew to the task of improving our efforts to govern ourselves.

As young people, it will not be hard for you to understand the responsibility of individuals to strive honestly and effectively to apply the ethical concepts, values, and outlooks of democracy to their lives and institutions. Your difficulty will be that as your hair changes color and you are forced to become better acquainted with your dentist, you will tend to become too myopic to see far beyond your own interests. I venture the opinion that, despite all the trials with which they are afflicted, the schools are doing increasingly well the work of inculcating in their students self-confidence, love of freedom, belief in the right of free discussion and criticism, respect for fair-mindedness and honesty, and devotion to the common good. The main obstacle to their

greater service has been, and bids fair to continue to be, lack of support of adults who have abandoned their youthful convictions and refuse to be bothered about the state of the nation, except to complain about it, or to recognize their obligations to society, except to obey such laws as they cannot evade. In short, our failure to improve our attempts at self-government is in important part attributable to our lack of success in carrying over the valuable attributes of youth and the benefits of education beyond Commencement Day--with a consequent unlovely narrowing of the mind and a depressing spiritual backsliding.

Youth is normally characterized by flexibility of mind, enthusiasm, curiosity, frankness, and courage. These traits, often misinterpreted as symptoms of a dangerous radicalism in times of fear and hysteria, good schools and wise teachers value and cherish, for they are the hope of the world. They are indications of spiritual health and intellectual vigor. But, unfortunately, in our civilization, when a man



seriously takes up the business of making a living, he is inclined to become timid, conservative, selfish, mentally lazy, narrow-minded, and opinionated, just as he is prone to develop adipose tissue and hardening of the arteries. He often becomes more individualistic and less socially minded. He is discovered in attempts to justify his failure to be true to the ideals of his youth by appeals to practicability and the educational value of experience. He ignores what he has been taught that, in resorting to this type of rationalization, he is merely salving his conscience and conditioning himself to things as they are.

There is little hope for the democratic order unless young minds refuse to undergo deterioration. Education is little more than preparation for a trade if its social values are to be lost in large part shortly after graduation. If injustice, prejudice, bigotry, and selfishness are inevitably to prevail in adult life, some form of totalitarianism is probably called for in communal living and at any rate is

good enough for us. If we are to have and to deserve the freedom which it is the aim of democracy to provide, then we must somehow retain the faith, zeal, and flexibility of trained young minds.

Fortunately, while we cannot turn back the hands of the clock or halt our march to the grave, we can, barring accident and disease, and indeed in spite of these, preserve and increase our power of intellect and grow in wisdom throughout our lives. Study, observation, and experience, together with serious thinking and discussion, may be counted upon to keep the mind active, the ideals untarnished, and faith in man's destiny sufficiently lively to demand the works without which it is dead. Most important of all, these factors will produce a skilled social unit--the individual who can live happily both with his fellows and himself.

A great tragedy of mankind is the persistence of the age-old delusion that social progress can be ensured by organization and force, that enduring peace, justice, and

security can be had by formula. Sound social advancement is a product of peace, and peace is inspired by tranquil minds. Petrarch tells us that "five great enemies of peace inhabit with us, namely, avarice, ambition, envy, anger, and pride. If those enemies were to be banished, we should infallibly enjoy perpetual peace." These traits, the causes of conflict, indicate undisciplined minds, uninformed minds, stultified minds, minds willing to sacrifice principles for the ease of complacency. Continued training and self-discipline can banish them and give to the individual that inner peace which makes him a dependable unit of an evolving civilization in which to an ever-increasing extent tastes are cultivated, "manners refined, views broadened, and natures spiritualized."

Members of the Class of 1940, in behalf of your instructors, as you leave these halls, I deliver an admonition, voice a wish, and promise you a reward.

A democracy cannot be static. When it ceases to improve, it begins to break down. Its improvement is possible

only as its citizens become increasingly worthy to govern themselves. Thus, you are to remember that a good citizen is one whose mind is always in the making.

Our hope for you is our hope for the democratic order, that you will always be of the group of men "who never seem to grow old. Always active in thought, always ready to adopt new ideas, they are never chargeable with fogyism. Satisfied, yet ever dissatisfied, settled, yet ever unsettled, they always enjoy the best of what is and are always first to find the best of what will be."

As a reward, I promise, if you are determined never to become bankrupt in intellect and in spirit never to grow old, you will, even in lives of toil and strife, enjoy that inner peace which passeth all understanding. You will not be:

"Like a tree grown in the forest;  
In a moment comes its loss of foliage;  
Its end is reached in the dockyard;  
It is floated far from its place;  
The flame is its winding sheet."

But you will rather be:

"Like a tree grown in a plot;  
It grows green, it doubles its yield,  
It stands in front of its lord;  
Its fruit is sweet, its shade is pleasant;  
And its end is reached in the garden."