

# THE 1944 COMMENCEMENT ADDRESS

June 24, 1944

By SHIRLEY W. SMITH

MR. President, Regents, members of the Faculties, Ladies and Gentlemen, and especially you young men and women of the one hundredth graduating class sitting down there entertaining the erroneous theory that your education is now complete:

And again especially to you members of

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On June 24, 1944, the one hundredth class to graduate from the University was addressed in Hill Auditorium by SHIRLEY W. SMITH, Vice-President and Secretary of the University. The speaker was graduated from the University in 1897, receiving his master's degree in 1900. After serving as instructor in English for three years, he was General Secretary of the Alumni Association and Editor of the *Michigan Alumnus* from 1901 to 1904 when he resigned to become assistant in the president's office of the Fidelity Mutual Life Insurance Company in Philadelphia. He returned to the University in 1908 as Secretary and Business Manager charged with the systemization and reorganization of the University's business offices. He is a trustee of the Teachers' Insurance and Annuity Association of New York and a charter member of the Association of University and College Business Officers.

the class: Ain't it a grand and glorious feeling that the University has had to wait a hundred years for US!

Every man likes to feel himself distinguished by at least one thing, and the only thing I have ever been able to think of that sets me off from run-of-mine mankind is that I have unquestionably signed more university diplomas than any other living man—75,000, the Catalog Office tells me. I have served the University forty-two years in all—at least, the institution has paid me a salary on that theory. But in all this period this is the first Commencement address I have ever been asked to make—or if you want to be finicky about words—permitted to make, either here or elsewhere. Meanwhile, I have sat through a good many of them and today I awake to a new realization of a great truth once promulgated by the late, beloved President Marion LeRoy Burton: "If commence-

ment speeches have to be made, it is better to make them than listen to them."

Recently a truly distinguished professor of philosophy at Harvard (one of our leading universities—I rank it close to Michigan) has published a little book in which he quotes a minor poet on the proneness of the elderly to admonish, as follows:

King David and King Solomon  
Lived merry, merry lives,  
With many, many lady friends  
And many, many wives.  
But when old age came creeping on,  
With many, many qualms  
King Solomon wrote the Proverbs  
And King David wrote the Psalms!

I quote this merely to show how ancient is the practice, how irresistible is the urge, that as men grow older they do less and advise more. In this fact lies the origin of college commencement addresses. And in these days when the span of life is lengthening and when, therefore, the pressure gauges on countless storage tanks of advice are going up and up, it is a god-send that the number of commencement occasions is trebling.

Cicero once wrote: "Old age, especially an honorable old age, has so great authority," (I will repeat that) "age has so great authority that this is of more value than all the pleasures of youth."

But Cicero is now dead, as some of you may know, and I infer from familiarity with the editorial pages of the *Michigan Daily* that his theory concerning the authority enjoyed by the elders is not universally held today.

Nevertheless and notwithstanding, and in spite of what my reason tells me, I have not the strength of character to refrain from expressing certain views of my own which seem to me pertinent to three subjects, namely: (1) the war, (2) the University, (3) your future; and I submit that if in twenty minutes more I can end all discussion in these fields, I shall merit for myself the epitaph I saw in an old New

England cemetery on the tombstone of one of the permanent residents, "He averaged well for these parts."

I don't know that there is very much to say about the war. The war demands deeds. Whatever I can personally contribute to the struggle is distressingly little. But one who lives through two world wars has experiences which teach him something of what John Milton meant when he said, "They also serve who only stand and wait." I know, moreover, that in a world where this, our country, should be defeated by its present enemies and made to submit to their ideologies, I would not care to live. I could not live.

But some day this war will be over—and God grant as soon as may be with complete victory.

And when the war is over I want to get back as soon as possible, in as great degree as possible, to the old American personal freedom for which we fight. Regimentation is necessary today. I honor and I cheerfully obey the Commander in Chief and his aides and associates who have had the wisdom and courage to impose upon us these necessary measures for our survival. But if after the war our lives are to be planned and ordered for us, if we are to be told what we may eat, what we may wear, what we may buy or sell, where we may go, what organizations we must belong to before we can even go to work, what difference does it make whether we call our rulers Nazis, Fascists, or Bureaucrats? I repeat: This sort of thing is proper and necessary now, and I comply not merely because it is the law and I have to, but because I want to. But I also want it over with as soon as victory permits.

I sometimes wonder how you of the present generation, who have lived so much of your lives under some sort of regimentation, who never were free in the old American sense—I wonder how you feel about it. I wonder if, when the war is over and the Bureaucrats seek, as, human nature being

what it is, they will seek, to hold on to their jobs and their power, I wonder if you are going to be content to acquiesce in their doing so.

This is not merely a soldier's war. It is a civilian's war. It is a woman's war. It is a high school and college war. It is a Boy Scout's war. It is a people's war. It is everybody's war. So we are told and so we know. Every one of us, we are told and we believe, is an important part of that whole machine that is operating for our survival; a single broken cog or tight bearing means a weakening or slowing down of the whole. Then why strikes? I know there are injustices that should be corrected; there are wrongs which ought to be righted—but why strikes? The Government has set up machinery for the redress of wrong and correction of evil in industry and business. There also are wrongs and injustices within the armed forces, but to try to correct such wrongs by strikes would be a puttering job, and would be called mutiny—not a strike. I sometimes wonder if one will feel like asking God's forgiveness if, after this war, he ever votes for or gives preference in any way to an unrepentant man or woman who, at any time, anywhere, on any excuse or for any reason, has gone on strike in the days of this war—this war of the people, by the people, and for the people that we may all stay free.

In these views, as in fact in everything I say on this occasion, I am not speaking for the University but only for a common man by the common name of Smith. I am certain, however, that the more responsible labor leaders, the true leaders, feel much as I do and ponder how they shall control and use for the general good the vast force that has come into being and that ostensibly they are leading—and that sometimes runs away with them.

The doors of the University of Michigan have swung in for over 135,000 students and they have swung out for students departing to every one of the country's five

wars. I never spent a more thrilling evening than at a reunion of "Dr. Tappan's Boys" twelve years ago. There were about a dozen men there, whose ages ranged from eighty-two to ninety-five. Most of them had been active in the Civil War. Two had been national commanders of the Grand Army of the Republic. One of these men came back at the Commencement of 1933 and received his degree as of the Class of 1861 of which, seventy-two years before, he had been a member when he left for the front.

I am almost sorry I have mentioned the evening with "Dr. Tappan's Boys," because I would like so much to tell you some of the stories heard that night. They would give you a new thrill in being a part of the University of Michigan of which these men too were part—the University of Michigan, the line of whose sons and daughters stretches back through the dust of a century—the University of Michigan, whose sons and daughters are today in the struggle for freedom on all the battlefronts of the globe. We all, in our share of the life of the University of Michigan, in peace or war, are like St. Paul, citizens of no mean country. Though I know there are other universities, I believe emotionally (if you understand me) there's nobody like us!

Not so long ago an alumnus of Michigan, Dr. LeRoy Crummer of Omaha, gave his library of rare books to Michigan. The late Regent Beal, on a visit to Nebraska, was shown a monument in the cemetery which bore a tablet to the effect that it was set up in honor of Dr. Crummer who had labored long in Omaha for the good of the community. The inscription concluded, "His ashes are with his books at the University of Michigan." "Now," said Regent Beal's hostess, "Dr. Crummer loved this state. We have perfectly good universities in Nebraska. Yet he not only sends his most precious possessions to Michigan, but he arranges to go back there to be buried.

On what meat do these Michigan Caesars feed?"

Charles Baird, a regent of the University of Missouri, gives his memorial carillon to Michigan. We have hundreds of funds provided by alumni able thus to give grateful expression to their love for this place. Hearts loyal to Michigan are beating in every corner of the world. Your course here has been a shortened one, but I hope you have been here long enough to have some knowledge of your own, some feeling in your heart, that what I have said of the loyalty of these other Michigan alumni is true for you also.

There is one way in which I think the University of Michigan could be better than it is. Bluntly, I wish that when men are under consideration for appointment or promotion there could be more of studious, directed attention to demonstrated joy and accomplishment in teaching in comparison—in comparison, I say—with demonstrated joy and accomplishment in research. I think, as I make this expression of my desire, that I instantly feel from certain angles the cold breath of dissent on the back of my neck. Nevertheless and notwithstanding, I do not feel my neck limbering up in the least. And the air isn't all cold and disapproving.

Believe me, I am not belittling the importance of research. The man who, as has been said, is able first among all mankind to think God's thoughts after Him, has a great and a splendid distinction and is worthy of all honor. But it is also a great and splendid thing, and worthy of all honor, to send a boy or girl away from college blessed with "the glory of a lighted mind." Distinguished as is a great scholar, no less distinguished, if the souls of boys and girls are important, is a great teacher. I hope that as documents addressed to the President and Regents in support of nominations for appointment and promotion begin to pass through the hands of my successor, he will early note a redressed bal-

ance between lists of publications on the one hand, and evidences of genius or talent for teaching on the other hand.

A devotedly public-spirited citizen of Ann Arbor has just established here what he calls the Beacon Institute—a shop in which boys may earn their expenses as students in this University by industrial work for pay. In planning this enterprise he says in part: "I asked hundreds of our top men throughout the country, 'How did you achieve your position of leadership?' The answers have been as different as the personalities. But running all through these answers there are certain basic factors repeated over and over again in one way or another.

"One, and I think the most profound one, is the influence of some person who kindled the fire of ambition in the potential young leader. A mother who taught a few terms of school, an inspiring teacher, an understanding employer, or someone he secretly admired and emulated."

Within the last thirty days the University has received a bequest of \$50,000 given, in the exact and complete language of the giver, "in loving memory of President James B. Angell." Is there anybody in this auditorium today who has ever heard of a bequest of \$50,000, or any other sum, "in loving memory of a list of publications?" Think what the influence of that great teacher, President Angell, has meant to the men and women among whom the man who made this gift lived for fifty years after he left the campus.

I repeat, and I beg that nobody misunderstand me, that I am asking for no less attention and no less honor to research, but only more attention and more honor to the man or woman who would not only gladly learn but gladly teach—and who can teach.

Finally, for your own lives, I think I want to dwell very briefly on only one thing. In spite of all that has been said by your critics to the contrary, I believe most of you are animated and governed by a

sense of duty. Who can look about him today and believe that the old breed has run out? No one knows what lies ahead of any of us on our pathway of life, young people today least of all. But you will keep the faith. Some of you, it may be, will live but a short life, though packed with more experience than falls to the lot of the average seventy years. Others will live many decades. But a great need of all of you, whatever your lot, will be courage. From somewhere I recall a story entitled, "The Courage of the Commonplace." That is the kind of courage most men and women are most likely to have need of most often. We can't live our lives on the mountain top, however inspiring the view. The work of the world is done in the valleys and on the flatlands, and we have to be down there to do it.

One of the best antidotes to discouragement is a calm and placid acceptance of the fact that mistakes are inevitable. I have over and over recalled a noon hour on my grandfather's farm when, as a boy of twelve, I was circulating among the threshers resting after dinner. Suddenly there flew up on the hen-house roof a little sparrow who flirted himself back and forth on the ridgepole in a manner most contemptuous of all human beings. The sight was too much for an old spade-bearded fellow named Cole. Mr. Cole reached up and took down from the wall of the well house a muzzle-loading shotgun that hung there. He took most careful, almost studious aim—and fired. When the noise subsided and the smoke cleared away there was the sparrow, still making his lively and insulting gestures. I could see the wind-tanned Adams apples of those farmers working up and down as fitting comments on his failure sought expression. But old Cole beat them to it. "Boys," he said profoundly, "did you ever think what an amount of space there is around just one sparrow?" I have often in my life had comfort in this philosophy

and I commend it to you in your moments of discouragement.

And do not be discouraged by disappointments. Arthur Hill of Saginaw, the man who gave this Auditorium to the University, met the great disappointment of his life when, by the legislative ballot of that time, he was beaten for the United States senatorship. As was the practice in those days, defeated candidates were asked to come to the platform and express loyalty to the party and the successful candidate. The hope of a lifetime gone forever, it was not easy. But the courtly Hill smilingly came to the front of the rostrum and began with the words: "The sun still shines in Saginaw." Always remember that you can, to some degree, control your own sunshine.

There is another minor poem that will be remembered at least as long as I live:

All through the night the cards were fairly  
shuffled  
And fairly dealt, but still I got no hand.  
At length I rose from play and with a mind  
unruffled  
I only said, "I do not understand."

Life is a game of whist. From unseen sources  
The cards are shuffled and the hands are dealt.  
Vain are our efforts to control the forces  
Which, though unseen, are no less strongly felt.

I do not like the way the cards are shuffled  
But still I'm in the game and bound to stay.  
So, through the long, long night will I, unruffled,  
Play what I get until the break of day.

May God keep you and bless you. Keep you in the protection of a courage that, though it fail you at moments, shall always come creeping or surging back again before it is too late. And may He bless you with the simple faith that your life, whether it shall go out upon the battlefield or endure through years of peace, will have its sure, even though small, effect on whether this world is a better or a poorer place because you lived in it.