

# Commencement Address

The University of Michigan  
Ann Arbor, Michigan  
May 3, 1975  
Kingman Brewster, Jr



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President Fleming, Graduates and Friends:

This is an honor, I might say with some credibility, an unexpected honor.

I am reminded of the effort of my former dean at the Harvard Law School to be felicitous to a professor of law who had left suddenly and unhelpfully to take an important government position. Trying to restore good will, Dean Griswold wrote, "You will be glad to know we have found a more than adequate replacement."

I expect no such felicity from your President. He is an honest man. He also knows the weakness of his own profession. We college presidents speak at the drop of a hat—on any campus other than one's own.

President Fleming and I shared the exclusive honor of being singled out for opprobrium by name by the last elected Vice President of the United States. We were enemies first class, with oak leaf cluster.

Our two universities also have a common bond, a common pride, a common responsibility—a responsibility for the education of Gerry Ford, yours in football, mine in law.

Actually what I want to talk about this morning is not unrelated to President Ford's greatest accomplishment: the restoration of decency, the erasure of cynicism from the affairs of state. We may have doubts about the adequacy of his agenda, but there is no longer misgiving about a hidden agenda. That is very good for us all, and Michigan and Yale should take pride in it.

I am getting cynical about cynicism.

Your generation has every reason to be cynical, or at least skeptical. Under President Johnson, the promise of the Great Society was falsified by the performance. Its hopes were sapped by the claims and costs of an immoral war. Under President Nixon, too many exaggerated promises were knowingly false even when they were made.

When I say I am getting cynical about cynicism, I mean that: as denial gave way to confession, first by the Vice President, then by the President, then by a host of Cabinet Members, then by corporate

executives for illegal donations, the ultimate line of defense was, "Everybody's doing it," "Everybody has always done it."

The lonely scoundrel longs for company. His final appeal is "I am not alone." The effort is to bring down the expectations of the society to the level of his own. He wants to take us all down with him.

Grubby self-seeking in high places has its counterpart among the intellectual and student spectators.

A soft form of this command to "lower your sights" is the professional debunker. You know the type who seeks to find solace for his own lack of conviction by saying, "You can't believe a thing you hear." Then there is the chest-beating "realist," who is only too glad to tell you that "might makes right." Scoffing too often passes for sophistication among the young. A sneering, "You can't change human nature," passes for wisdom among the elders.

Too often, cynicism is a cover-up for moral flabbiness, a sense of moral failure, or maybe just moral laziness. Too many of us who are quick to point the finger of accusation at the wrongdoers, are too slow to recognize the cynicism in ourselves.

Aside from the experience of leadership by manipulation, aside from the scoffers and debunkers who have always been with us, there is a tendency to selfishness in our time. Every man for himself is a tendency when jobs and things become scarce. The truckers' strike, deliberately clogging the highways, was perhaps the crudest example, just after the Arab oil embargo. And every nation for itself almost fractured the Western Alliance and almost broke up the Common Market under the pressure of the Arab cut-off.

It is as if there were a perverse natural law at work which says that just when scarcity makes joint rationing most important, everyone is tempted to look after his own. Books appear under the unattractive title, "How to Get Yours." When things are abundant and we don't need to band together for common survival, then selfishness relaxes.

At the moment we are, it would seem, at a time of selfishness which reinforces the tendency to cynicism which is the Nixon heritage.

I would like to urge upon you the examination of your own experience, your own observation, your own learning; for in spite of all the tendencies and

temptations of the times, I do not think the cynic has the best of the argument.

I would assert five propositions. I suggest they are borne out by your own immediate personal experience and the experience of others whom you have observed—in your families, in your personal relationships, in your communities, here at this University. I assert it also on the evidence of learning. It finds support from vicarious experience of history and the insights of literature.

One—happiness is more than material well-being.

Two—conscience is more than simple fear of getting caught.

Three—love is more than sex.

Four—authority is more than power.

Five—community is more than organization.

In each one of these areas of experience the “more than” is measured not by things tangible, but by whatever it is that measures the difference between life with a capital “L” and a mere vegetative, animal existence.

It is not on general propositions, however, that the argument with the cynic takes its stand. The cynic cannot be put to rout by the lances and spears of self-righteousness. You can go at the argument by asking where the roots of your personal satisfaction lie.

I would suggest that on the basis of my own experience, and I hope yours too, the activities and relationships which are most satisfying, most fun, are those which one way or another seem to contribute something to the capacities and opportunities of others.

Now that is terribly abstract. And so it is, I picked it up from an obscure British nineteenth century philosopher named Bernard Bosanquet. He defined freedom as capacity times opportunity. Stated that way it reeks with the gloriously irrelevant vacuity typical of philosophical discourse. But it merely means you are not free to play the piano simply because you know how to, if you don't have a piano. Nor are you free to play the piano simply because you have one, if you don't know how to play it.

What I am suggesting is that helping someone else to be free, either by contributing to their capacity, or by contributing to their opportunity, is where true satisfaction lies.

In these terms the truly creative artists and scien-

tists among you may be the most blessed. True creation, true discovery, do, after all, automatically add to both the capacity and opportunity of the beholder, the listener, the apprentice, or the student. The scientist, the artist, the creative scholar, the teacher, allow others to see something or hear something or understand something which otherwise would remain hidden.

But this satisfaction of adding something to the capacities and opportunities of others is not limited to the laboratory or the atelier or the classroom.

Some of you who will eventually become competent to serve in one of the professions to which people turn for help or guidance or cure or solace will know this satisfaction again and again.

And even though it is sometimes hard to persuade a businessman or a banker or a bureaucrat to admit that their satisfaction is moral, there is a creative spark, too, in the steel desks of the civil servant or junior executive. It can even be detected in the office “with a Bigelow on the floor.” Even President Fleming and I would sheepishly admit that our moments of highest executive satisfaction are moral too.

Anyone with any executive responsibility occasionally has the delight of knowing, or at least thinking, that because of something he promoted, or permitted, or prevented, someone else had a chance to develop capacities or seize opportunities otherwise beyond their reach.

I guess what I am trying to say is that “How to get yours” is not an adequate prescription for satisfaction. At least it does not seem to me to describe the motivation of the people I would call happy, nor does it square with my own experience.

To the extent that the cynic excuses his sourness by an insistence that human motivation at bottom is narrowly and materially self-interested, I deny it.

But even if my five propositions stand up; even if my recital of where the roots of satisfaction lie is convincing; to what avail is it, if there is really no prospect of improvement in the human condition?

In his delightful recent book, *The Bridge of Criticism*, Professor Peter Gay conjures up a hypothetical dialogue between Erasmus and Voltaire, each taking a retrospective look at the optimism of the Enlightenment from the perspective of the late twentieth century.

Erasmus, the scoffing pessimist, says to Voltaire:

"Your faith in Progress remains as touching as it was two hundred years ago. Admit it: the most thoughtful are rejecting your facile philosophy of hope and taking on the heavy burden of despair."

Voltaire replies:

"I see nothing heavy in that burden—it is not a sign of insight but a symptom of self-indulgence. It has always been easier to despair than to hope. Despair is a form of laziness."

This has a message for all of us, students and parents alike.

I do not ask you to be Pollyannas. But I do ask you to believe that there is good in every man, and that this good is capable of being made better.

I think it was Stephen Spender who once wrote that, "An idea may be wholly bad, but a man never can be."

Human purpose does presuppose that all men individually and mankind in general are capable of improvement. "The perfectability of man" is the way it is usually put. I would settle for the more modest claim that man is capable of improvement.

This faith in the human possibility is the fundamental basis of an optimism whose roots are deep enough to sustain the tree against the winds of cynicism. It has sustained our Republic since its birth in the optimistic soil of the Enlightenment. It has survived wars, civil wars, and deep economic depressions. It will even survive our recent national nervous breakdown.

I would commend to you a statement of conviction by a great alumnus of my University, a great public servant, Henry Lewis Stimson. In the epilogue to his biography, which was written with his collaboration by McGeorge Bundy, Mr. Stimson wrote:

"The sinfulness and weakness of man are evident to anyone who lives in the active world. But men are also good and great and kind and wise. Honor begets honor; trust begets trust; faith begets faith; and hope is the mainspring of life."

I used to wonder whether perhaps optimism was a weakness of our calling, President Fleming's and mine. Maybe being a college president requires a touch of the madness of a Pangloss: fifty per cent rationalizer, fifty per cent wishful thinker. But,

alas, I have come to realize that college presidents are almost human. At least I observe that everyone lives on hope. And in our moments of deepest satisfaction, hope has not let us down.

So too, in the life of the Republic, the sour "realist," the pessimist, is given the lie. Somehow or other the free press, the independent judiciary, and the voice of decency is vindicated. The seeds of moral outrage and moral purpose are stronger than the winds of fear, stronger than the parching drought of so-called "real politik." Let us throw the challenge back into the face of those who say, "You can't change human nature." For human nature contains within it a need for generosity, for mercy, and for honesty.

Keeping faith with some vague notion of an ideal spirit seems to be a necessity for us all. And if that necessity is so universal, if it is so durable, maybe we are not wrong to call it true.

I envy those who can wrap it all up in the articles of an inherited faith. But those of us who cannot derive belief from an inherited catechism should not deny our belief in ourselves, our belief in each other, our belief in some ultimate harmony of the cosmos. Let us say in the words of the second chapter of Hebrews, our faith is simply "the substance of things hoped for, the evidence of things unseen."

I cannot say where the path to vindication of this faith lies. The unending search is yours. But whatever path you seek, do not be distracted or bemused by the self-serving cynic.

Again I would commend to you Henry Stimson's final words in his epilogue:

"Those who read this book will mostly be younger than I, men of the generation who must bear the active part in the world ahead. Let them learn from our adventures what they can. Let them charge us with our failures and do better in their turn. But let them not turn aside from what they have to do, nor think that criticism excuses inaction. Let them have hope, and virtue, and let them believe in mankind and its future, for there is good as well as evil, and the man who tries to work for the good, believing in its eventual victory, while he may suffer setback and even disaster, will never know defeat. The only deadly sin I know is cynicism."