

"THE PROMISE OF KNOWLEDGE AND BEYOND"

Remarks by

President Harold T. Shapiro

at

Spring Commencement  
The University of Michigan  
May 2, 1981

Greetings

On behalf of the entire University of Michigan community, it is my pleasure to welcome each of you to our 1981 Spring Commencement exercises. We meet here today for an occasion of special celebration. On this day and in this place, the hopes and aspirations of many individuals come to fruition as we award the various degrees. These degrees serve as the ceremonial culmination of years of planning and diligent work on the part of this graduating class. Your achievements here have been notable and The University of Michigan faculty joins me in expressing their pride and pleasure in all your accomplishments. We are sure that you will come to reflect honor upon yourselves and your families, upon this University, and upon your communities, both here and abroad.

But let us recognize that it is not merely the graduates who have worked so hard to make their success possible. It is with special pleasure that we pause to acknowledge the contribution of the families and friends of our students to the accomplishments for which we honor them today. Through their intellectual, emotional, and financial support, they have made this occasion possible. In order that the faculty of the University and the graduates themselves might publically have the opportunity to express their appreciation for this unfailing support, I would ask that all the mothers, fathers, grandparents, spouses, children, relatives, and friends of the graduates stand and be recognized.

(Recognize and ask to stand the following persons who are leaving their positions)

Vice President Radock

Dean Fellin

Dean Lohr

Dean Farris

Dean Knott

Dean Mann

The Promise of Knowledge and Beyond

Now I would like to address a few words directly to the graduates. University commencements are more than a celebration of the completion of one phase of work; they mark the beginning of yet another. Each of you will take a different path from here, but whatever the road you travel you are certain to encounter new personal and social responsibilities. Responsibilities, by definition, involve obligations to others, particularly to community and to family. For many of you this will be the first full experience in shouldering obligations beyond yourselves.

Beyond personal responsibilities, each generation of graduates has its special set of social responsibilities to face. The graduates of the 1930's and 1940's faced the trauma of the Great Depression and World War II and its aftermath.

Perhaps the most publicized issue faced by the graduates of the late 1960's and 1970's was the confrontation between many

of the most traditional values in our society and an alternative set of so-called "life styles." This confrontation often centered on the rejection of authority--the authority of tradition; the authority of institutions; and the authority of the family. In an important sense, this recent generation of graduates rejected their past in a kind of collective oedipal revolt. In many ways it was modern art--writ large across the institutions of society. Despite the many accomplishments of this movement, much of the enormous energy spent in these efforts degenerated into a paralysis of narcissistic sensibility, a feeling of impotence, and a withdrawal into concern with the self.

At this moment in our history, this excessive narcissism has fortunately given way to a concern for the necessity of a broad national renewal. Economic renewal, political renewal, and, increasingly evident, an intellectual and spiritual renewal. At such a moment, a thoughtful, patient, and wise citizenry is

needed to continue and, indeed, strengthen our country and our society. As President of this University, I ask myself what the University has done to help prepare you for such a role. Though each of you will have a different response to this question, let me express to you in a personal way what it is that I hope you have gained--beyond factual knowledge and practical techniques.

I hope, first of all, that you have gained intellectual discipline. Intellectual discipline means that your thinking has become more precise and ordered, your powers of evaluation more critical and refined, and your judgments more balanced. To have achieved such discipline is to have forged a set of attitudes and habits which will form the basis for further intellectual development throughout your lives.

Secondly, I hope that, while you have been here, you have gained a better appreciation of both the power and the limitations of knowledge. Let me speak first to the power of knowledge. It

was Francis Bacon who first observed that knowledge is power. But facts by themselves can be a rather tiresome burden. The power of knowledge is realized only when we develop a vehicle for these facts which enables them to become an energizing and liberating force in our lives. I hope your time here at The University of Michigan has helped you develop a capacity not simply to accumulate facts but to use them as nourishment in the development of new ideas and concepts. As Alfred North Whitehead noted, when used this way, knowledge becomes "energizing as the poet of our dreams and the architect of our hopes." When we employ knowledge in a creative way, we do not merely add bits of information to what is already present in our minds. Instead, increasing our knowledge changes what we are, enlarging and expanding our whole selves and creating aspects of ourselves and our communities which were not there before.

I hope that you have also gained an understanding of the limitations of knowledge. Knowledge, no matter how much it may

transform the individual, is, in the end, not enough. Perhaps there does exist a single, coherent, unified structure of knowledge that will, sometime in the future, reveal appropriate solutions to all questions of fact and value. If such a structure does exist, however, it has not yet been revealed. Science cannot now, and perhaps never will be able to give us a complete account of our ultimate nature, or that of the physical environment in which we live.

Knowledge alone cannot bring us salvation or resolve all the problems before us. Our lives are finally redeemed not only by knowledge, but by values which enable us to dedicate ourselves to worthy ends. It is my hope that your experiences at this University will have helped you to articulate and deal with the issues of commitment which are raised daily in your lives as individuals and as citizens of a larger community.

I hope, too, that you have gained the capacity to pose the creative question, to find and articulate an important problem.

As the history of human discovery amply demonstrates, the source of human creativity lies in asking the unlikely but significant question, entertaining the remote but telling hypothesis, and proceeding to locate the imaginative answer.

If your professors have encouraged only the conventional response to the traditional question, we have, in part, failed in carrying out our educational responsibilities.

Furthermore, in a general way, knowledge and knowing do give the individual the capacity not only to address the larger issues of human life but also a capacity to know and transform the self. I believe that a greater comprehension of one's life does not come from courses in "self-discovery"; it comes rather as a by-product of other activities. It comes through searching for answers to questions in a disciplined way, through engaging in moments of quiet contemplation, through reflecting on the paradoxes and ambiguities which inevitably are part of our lives and often contain the key to human understanding.



Above all, I hope you have learned that, to make sense of our existence as human beings, one must hold to the brave and improbable assumption that our lives do matter, that what we accomplish does make a difference. While knowledge may be the springboard, our lives are finally launched by our own attempts to give them meaning and significance in what is often a confusing world.

Implicit in all that I have said is the assumption that knowledge, though important, is only one aspect of human existence. In addition to the set of facts that a person possesses, there is the system of values which informs that individual's life; the beliefs, the commitments, and the sense of purpose which make the appropriate application of those facts possible. Values function as critical guides to action. Without this component of human behavior, only partial progress can be made. Thus, it is not only the knowledge you have gained here but the uses to

which you will put what you have learned which will ultimately reflect upon yourselves and this institution.

You are graduating at a time when we are at the forefront of what may be called the "new technology." The truly astonishing discoveries in physics, in genetics, in medicine, and in many other fields seem to promise enormous opportunities for us and, indeed, the potentiality for vastly improving the human condition already exists. Consider for a moment, however, some of the paradoxes of the twentieth century. On the one hand, the accomplishments of science are unprecedented. On the other hand, so is the increasing list of major human tragedies. We have witnessed a tragedy on campus in the past few weeks, where human life was taken, in an incomprehensible but all-too-often repeated act of violence. We work in laboratories for generations to develop the capacity to save a few newborn infants from a difficult disease, while at the same time we manage to tolerate genocide of various

kinds on a wide scale. The failure of our political and social system--worldwide--to give an adequate realization to a universal concern for human life makes our accomplishments in modern medicine, no matter how spectacular, pale by comparison. Other examples of such paradoxes abound around us.

As you leave the University, your paths through life will carry you in many different directions. Your commitment both to knowledge and to humane values can help give direction and informed purpose to your journey. I hope that your studies here, your friendships, your associations with professors and colleagues, will have helped to make your passage an easier one.

There are an abundance of opportunities before you. Each one, however, will demand the most of your talent and commitment.

To quote an old Gaelic expression:

- (1) May the road lie straight before you;
- (2) May the wind be at your back; and
- (3) May God hold you in the cup of his hand.

Good luck and Godspeed. Thank you.