

UNIVERSITY OF MICHIGAN

COMMENCEMENT ADDRESS

MAY 2, 1987

I CONFESS TO A SPECIAL HAPPINESS AT STANDING HERE TODAY, FOR MICHIGAN IS MY SCHOOL. AND TO BE HONORED BY THE UNIVERSITY OF MY YOUTH, A UNIVERSITY WHERE MY LATE UNCLE, PROFESSOR LEO SHARFMAN WAS, FOR MORE THAN A QUARTER CENTURY, CHAIRMAN OF THE ECONOMICS DEPARTMENT, AND WHERE - OVER THE YEARS - MANY MEMBERS OF MY EXTENDED FAMILY HAVE STUDIED - AND GRADUATED ... TO BE HONORED BY THAT UNIVERSITY, I'M SURE YOU'LL UNDERSTAND, IS ESPECIALLY SATISFYING.

AS EACH OF US GROWS, AND LEARNS, AND EVOLVES ... WE FIND THERE ARE VARIOUS REWARDS FOR WHICH WE WORK. AND NOT THE LEAST OF THEM, BY ANY MEANS, IS THE RECOGNITION - BY THOSE WHOSE RECOGNITION WE ESPECIALLY VALUE - OF WHAT WE'VE TRIED TO DO, FOR THAT REASON, I THANK PRESIDENT SHAPIRO AND THE REGENTS OF THE UNIVERSITY FOR THEIR APPRAISAL.

AND MY SHORT REMARKS THIS AFTERNOON - AS A RESULT - WILL BE MORE PERSONAL THAN MAY BE TRADITIONAL AT SUCH CONVOCATIONS.

I STILL HAVE VIVID MEMORIES - NOT ALL OF THEM TOTALLY PLEASANT -- OF THE DAY OF MY FIRST ARRIVAL HERE IN ANN ARBOR, BACK IN SEPTEMBER OF 1935.

ABOARD THE TRAIN CALLED THE WOLVERINE, OVERNIGHT FROM BOSTON, I REMEMBER FEELING SOME APPREHENSION. I'D NEVER BEEN WEST OF THE MASSACHUSETTS BORDER BEFORE, SO I WASN'T SURE THAT INDIANS DIDN'T STILL ROAM THE WOODS NEARBY. IN ANY EVENT, DEBARKING AT THE ANN ARBOR RAILROAD STATION QUALIFIED AS GENUINE ADVENTURE.

AND I REMEMBER SOME TREPIDATION AS I LUGGED MY BAGS UP THE HILL, ON STATE STREET...TREPIDATION TRIGGERED BY THE COMING SEARCH FOR A ROOMING HOUSE, FOR A BOARD JOB TO HELP PAY THE BILLS, THE TENTATIVE SELECTION OF NEW FRIENDS. IT WAS THE BEGINNING OF A GREEN YOUNG MAN'S VOYAGE OF DISCOVERY.

AND THEN FOUR GLORIOUS, VARIOUS, FULFILLING YEARS LATER - ON A DAY MUCH LIKE TODAY - OUTDOORS AT YOST FIELD, I CAN STILL REMEMBER MY GRADUATION, MY COMMENCEMENT.

THAT IS JUST THE RIGHT WORD - COMMENCEMENT.

TODAY, LIFE BEGINS FOR REAL, AS YOU SET OUT TO FIND YOURSELF - WITHOUT THE UNIVERSITY'S BENIGN REGIMEN, ITS MILD CONSTRAINTS, WITHOUT THE SUPPORT SYSTEMS, WITHOUT THE COMMUNITY'S HELP OR HINDRANCE. YOU'RE ON YOUR OWN, BEGINNING NOW. AND YOUR MAIN GRADUATION GIFT IS FREEDOM, THE FREEDOM TO FIND OUT WHO YOU ARE.

ON THIS DAY, MY COMMENCEMENT DAY BACK IN 1939, I HAD JUST FIFTY DOLLARS, I REMEMBER. IT WAS A GIFT FROM MY DAD, AND BIG MONEY THEN. I HAD NO JOB WAITING. IT WAS DEPRESSION TIME. I DIDN'T WANT TO GO BACK HOME TO BOSTON, I WANTED TO STAY HERE IN THE MIDWEST. I WANTED TO BE A RADIO ANNOUNCER. BUT I'D STRUCK OUT WHEREVER I'D APPLIED.

AND THEN ONE OF THE PROFESSORS HERE, THE LATE JOE MADDY, WHO ALSO RAN THE NATIONAL MUSIC CAMP UP IN INTERLOCHEN, TOLD ME HE NEEDED AN ASSISTANT IN THE RADIO CLASSES THERE. TWENTY FIVE DOLLARS FOR THE SUMMER PLUS ROOM AND BOARD. I JUMPED AT IT. BUT THEN, JUST A MONTH LATER, CAME THE OFFER OF A STAFF ANNOUNCING JOB AT WOOD IN GRAND RAPIDS. AND SO I WAS LAUNCHED AND ON MY WAY.

WELL NOW, I'M SURE THAT SOME OF YOU, PERHAPS LOTS OF YOU, ARE WONDERING WHAT COMES NEXT, WHERE THE WORLD WILL FIND A PLACE FOR YOU! ALTHOUGH TIMES ARE SURELY BETTER NOW THAN THEN, STILL - YOU'RE BOUND TO FEEL SOME APPREHENSION.

WHAT YOU ARE FACING NOW, IS A TIME OF CHOICES. FACT IS THE WAY THAT LIFE DEVELOPS FOR ALL OF US - IS OUT OF OUR CHOICES. NOT JUST WHAT DO WE WANT TO DO, TO BE? AND WHY? BUT WHAT CHANCES ARE WE WILLING TO TAKE TO ACHIEVE IT? WHAT INVESTMENT ARE WE WILLING TO MAKE NOW, FOR RETURN LATER? AND WILL IT BE THE EASY WAY, THE HARD WAY? THE SLOW WAY, THE FAST WAY?

I KNOW THAT IN MY OWN CASE I FELT THAT MY CHOICES WERE NARROWED BY THOSE MERE FIFTY DOLLARS. AND WHO KNOWS WHAT MIGHT HAVE HAPPENED HAD NO RADIO JOB BEEN FORTHCOMING AND THE MONEY BEGUN TO RUN OUT? I'D LIKE TO BELIEVE THAT I WOULD HAVE PERSEVERED, WOULD HAVE TAKEN WHATEVER JOB, DOING WHATEVER, THAT I COULD HAVE FOUND, BUT KEPT RIGHT ON TRYING FOR THAT JOB IN RADIO.

BUT IF INSTEAD I'D CHOSEN TO GIVE UP AND GO BACK HOME TO BOSTON, TO SACRIFICE FIRST LOVE FOR SECOND BEST...WHO KNOWS WHAT MY LAST FIFTY ODD YEARS MIGHT HAVE TURNED OUT TO BE?

BUT OUR CHOICES - DIFFICULT AS THEY MAY SEEM TO US NOW - VITAL AS THEY MAY BE TO OUR INDIVIDUAL FUTURES - THEY ARE MADE AT A TIME AND IN A PLACE WHERE CHOICE, FOR MOST OF US ANYWAY, IS AT LEAST POSSIBLE. A COUNTRY IN WHICH, FOR ALL ITS IMPERFECTIONS, WE HAVE WON THAT POLITICAL FREEDOM THAT THE MEN AND WOMEN WHO CAME BEFORE US FOUGHT FOR, BLED FOR, DIED FOR. (IF THAT BE SIMPLE - MINDED PATRIOTISM, SO BE IT.) SURELY WE CANNOT FAIL TO BE SHARPLY AWARE, POIGNANTLY AWARE OF ALL OF THAT ON A DAY ON WHICH THIS UNIVERSITY, AND ALL OF US HERE, HONOR THE COURAGE, THE STEADFASTNESS, THE VISION OF NELSON MANDELA.

HE STILL LIVES TODAY IN PRISON BECAUSE HE MADE AN EXTRAORDINARILY COURAGEOUS CHOICE. THERE IS NO DOUBT (I'VE HEARD IT FROM THE LIPS OF SOUTH AFRICAN OFFICIALS) THAT WERE HE, EVEN NOW, TO CHOOSE TO RENOUNCE THE VIOLENCE THAT THE AFRICAN NATIONAL CONGRESS - AFTER YEARS OF PEACEFUL PROTEST - FINALLY FELT IT HAD TO ESPOUSE IN ITS CAMPAIGN FOR FREEDOM FOR SOUTH AFRICAN BLACKS, THERE IS NO DOUBT THAT HE WOULD BE OUT OF PRISON, AND HERE WITH US TODAY, TO ACCEPT HIS HONORARY DEGREE IN PERSON.

BUT MANDELA'S CHOICE WAS - IS - TO STAND BY HIS CONVICTIONS, TO STAND WITH HIS COLLEAGUES IN THEIR REVOLUTIONARY CALL. HE HAS CHOSEN TO STAY IN PRISON RATHER THAN BUY HIS FREEDOM AT THE COST OF THOSE CONVICTIONS. ABOUT WHAT COURSE, FINALLY, HE BELIEVES SOUTH AFRICA'S BLACKS MUST TAKE TO WIN THE RIGHT TO SHARE IN THEIR OWN SELF-GOVERNMENT.

I SAY ALL OF THIS, OF COURSE, IN THE CONTEXT OF WHAT HAS BEEN PLAYING OUT ON THIS CAMPUS AND OTHER CAMPUSES ACROSS THE NATION THE PAST FEW MONTHS - INSUFFICIENT NUMBERS OF BLACK STUDENTS HERE AND ELSEWHERE ... THE UNFINISHED REVOLUTION IN CIVIL RIGHTS IN AMERICA. WE'VE READ REPORTS OF IT...SEEN IT ON THE TELEVISION NEWSCASTS.

AND - I SAY THIS TOO - IN THE CONTEXT OF SOME THOUGHTLESS, APPARENTLY RACIST REMARKS I, MYSELF, MADE SIX YEARS AGO, IN THE COURSE OF PREPARING AN INVESTIGATIVE PIECE FOR "60 MINUTES." BECAUSE OF THOSE REMARKS, THERE HAVE BEEN OBJECTIONS TO MY BEING INVITED TO SPEAK HERE TODAY, TO BE AWARDED THIS DEGREE TODAY. UNDERSTANDABLE OBJECTIONS FROM SOME INDIVIDUALS WHO, I LIKE TO THINK, SIMPLY DON'T KNOW ME WELL!

BUT WHAT HAS GONE ON ON THIS CAMPUS IN RECENT MONTHS RECALLED FOR ME MY OWN SENTIMENTS, MY OWN EXPERIENCE ALL THOSE YEARS AGO WHEN I WAS JUST ABOUT TO GRADUATE FROM THE UNIVERSITY OF MICHIGAN.

I THINK I SMOLDERED THEN WITH SOME OF THE SAME FEELING THAT I SENSE APPROPRIATELY INFECTS SOME OF YOU TODAY IDEALISM, SYMPATHY FOR THE UNDERDOG, A DEEP SENSE OF RIGHT AND WRONG, SENSITIVITY TO THE FEELINGS AND VULNERABILITIES OF OTHERS.

I WAS JEWISH (MATTER OF FACT I STILL AM). AND THOUGH, LORD KNOWS, IT HAD NEVER REALLY CAUSED ME ANY SERIOUS DIFFICULTY, HERE, NONE IN FACT BEYOND BEING BANNED FROM MEMBERSHIP IN SOME CAMPUS FRATERNITIES WHICH I WOULDN'T HAVE WANTED TO JOIN IN ANY CASE, I WAS KEENLY AWARE OF BEING JEWISH, AND QUICK TO DETECT SLIGHTS, REAL OR IMAGINED. ALL OF THAT SEEMS VERY FAR AWAY, ANCIENT HISTORY TODAY. AND AS FAR AS I KNOW, NOT ONCE IN THE LAST 50 YEARS HAS MY RELIGION MADE THE SLIGHTEST BIT OF DIFFERENCE - NOT ONCE HAS IT TURNED INTO ANY APPRECIABLE OBSTACLE THAT I KNOW OF, IN MY PROFESSIONAL OR PERSONAL DEALINGS.

BUT, AS I SAY, BACK THEN AND FOR SOME YEARS THEREAFTER, I WAS HYPER-SENSITIVE AND QUICK TO ANGER IF I FELT A SLIGHT. AND ALMOST AS SENSITIVE - ALMOST AS QUICK TO ANGER - ABOUT SLIGHTS TO OTHERS, TOO -- BLACKS, FOR ONE, ALTHOUGH WE DIDN'T CALL THEM THAT THEN, THEY WERE NEGROES, AND WE JEWS FELT A KIND OF KINSHIP WITH THEM, FOR THEM.

LORD KNOWS WE WEREN'T RIDING THE SAME SLAVE SHIP, WE DIDN'T HAVE IT HALF AS BAD, BUT STILL AND ALL WE FELT SOME OF THE SAME PAIN. IF WE WERE - IN A SENSE - SECOND CLASS CITIZENS, THEN THEY WERE A STEP DOWN EVEN FROM THAT. AND SOME OF US - MANY OF US - WANTED TO HELP.

OF COURSE, THERE WASN'T A WHOLE LOT THAT WE COULD DO. AND BESIDES, THIS WAS IN THE EARLY '40'S, AND OTHER FOLKS' TROUBLES SEEMED TO PALE BESIDE THE STORIES OF THE HOLOCAUST THAT WERE JUST BEGINNING TO SEEP OUT OF EUROPE...THAT WAS INTOLERANCE ON A GRAND AND MONSTROUS SCALE, AND ANYTHING THAT HAPPENED HERE - TO US - WAS SMALL POTATOES BESIDE THAT.

SO IT WASN'T UNTIL ALL OF THAT WAS OVER AND THE BLACK REVOLUTION BEGAN TO TAKE SHAPE IN EARNEST IN THIS COUNTRY THAT SOME OF US BEGAN TO CONFRONT THE REAL DIMENSIONS OF INTOLERANCE THAT INFECTED US HERE AT HOME. BUT THAT WASN'T US - UP HERE - OF COURSE, THAT WAS THE FOLKS DOWN SOUTH!

IT WAS ON THE BULL CONNORS AND THE THEODORE BILBOS AND THE ORVAL FAUBUSES THAT WE OH-SO-TOLERANT NORTHERNERS -- LIBERALS -- FOCUSED OUR ANGER, AT THE BEGINNING. IT TOOK US YEARS AND YEARS TO UNDERSTAND AND ACKNOWLEDGE THAT OUR HYPOCRITICAL NORTHERN INTOLERANCE WAS JUST AS MEAN AND BITTER, THOUGH IT TOOK A DIFFERENT FORM FROM WHAT IT DID DOWN SOUTH. OUR WAY WAS NOT UP FRONT, IT WAS BEHIND-THE-HAND. THOSE SOUTHERNERS WERE FLAT-OUT RACISTS, THEY TALKED ABOUT IT, ACKNOWLEDGED IT. AT LEAST SOME OF THEM DID.

UP NORTH, WE WERE MORE SUBTLE. "WHO, ME?," WE'D SAY: "ME A RACIST? NEVER! LOOK WHAT I GIVE TO THE NAACP, TO THE URBAN LEAGUE." BUT THAT WAS MAINLY WHAT WE GAVE....MONEY. NOT HEART, NOT TIME, NOT SOUL. AT LEAST NOT ENOUGH OF US DID. AND THEN CAME VIETNAM, AND WITH IT INTOLERANCE ON A GRAND SCALE. IT WASN'T JUST AGAINST THE BERRIGAN BROTHERS OR RAMSEY CLARK OR JANE FONDA - NO, IT WAS AGAINST MARTIN LUTHER KING, TOO. AS IF HE DIDN'T HAVE ENOUGH TROUBLE TELLING THE WHITE ESTABLISHMENT WHAT THEY WERE DOING WRONG ABOUT AMERICA'S BLACKS. HE ALSO TOOK OUT AFTER THE WHITE ESTABLISHMENT BECAUSE HE BELIEVED THEY WERE PERVERTING THE AMERICAN IDEAL IN A SENSELESS, BRUTAL, AND BRUTALIZING WAR. HE WAS RIGHT, OF COURSE. BUT HE SUFFERED FOR IT.

AND THOSE WHO DESPISED DR. KING BELIEVED THEY WERE SOMEHOW GIVEN A LICENSE TO FEEL THAT WAY, BECAUSE HE WAS SURELY NO PATRIOT TO TALK THE WAY HE DID ABOUT VIETNAM, WHERE AMERICAN BOYS (SO MANY OF THEM BLACK) WERE DYING BY THE THOUSANDS...

OF COURSE, YOU KNOW THERE'S A LITTLE RACISM IN ALL OF US. AND SOMETIMES IT'S COMFORTABLE TO THINK YOU HAVE A LEGITIMATE REASON TO SNIGGER. AND AS YOU GROW OLDER AND SOMETIMES LESS SURE, NOT MORE SURE OF YOUR VALUES, YOU'LL FIND THE TEMPTATION TO BIGOTRY MORE AND MORE APPEALING. IT'S AN EASY OUT, IT CAN BE DOWNRIGHT COMFORTING TO FEEL BETTER - BIGGER - THAN THE NEXT FELLOW.

I PROMISE YOU IT NEVER OCCURRED TO ME BACK IN COLLEGE THAT ONE DAY I'D BE LISTENING TO POLISH JOKES OR JEWISH JOKES OR ITALIAN JOKES OR BLACK JOKES ... AND LAUGHING. OH, I'M NOT TALKING HERE ABOUT THE GENUINELY FUNNY STUFF THAT A RICHARD PRYOR OR AN ARCHIE BUNKER DO. SATIRE...A MIRROR UP TO LIFE, TRUTH AS JOKES. SOME OF IT BITTER, BUT NO MALICE, NO MEANNESS.

IT'S THE MEAN STUFF THAT WORRIES ME. THE BEHIND-THE-HAND STUFF, THE SELF-AGGRANDIZING PUTDOWNS THAT BEGIN TO CREEP IN AND INFECT THE DIALOGUE, LITTLE BY LITTLE, THAT TAKES ON A LIFE OF ITS OWN. THE STEREOTYPES HARDEN.

AND THEY HURT. AND THE LAST THING THAT ANY OF US WHO IS DECENT WANTS TO DO - IS HURT ANOTHER PERSON, AND CERTAINLY NOT BECAUSE OF RACE OR CREED OR COLOR.

WHAT AM I TRYING TO SAY? WHAT IS ALL THIS RAMBLING TALK ABOUT? THAT INTOLERANCE COMES MAINLY FROM INSENSITIVITY. AND THAT TODAY, ON YOUR GRADUATION DAY, IN AN ATMOSPHERE OF JOY AND CAMARADERIE AND ADVENTURE, HERE ON THIS UNIVERSITY ISLAND IN WHICH YOU'VE LIVED THESE LAST FEW YEARS, YOU ARE ABOUT AS SENSITIVE, AS PURE PROBABLY, AS YOU WILL EVER BE IN ALL YOUR LIVES. YOUR MINDS ARE OPEN, YOU'VE BEEN STRETCHING THEM, LEARNING MORE ABOUT YOURSELVES AND OTHERS, OTHER SOCIETIES, OTHER STRUGGLES, OTHER NOTIONS OF FULFILLMENT, OTHER IDEAS.

YOU'LL FIND, I'M SURE, THAT IN THE MONTHS AND YEARS AHEAD YOU'LL BE FORCED TO MAKE SOME CHOICES, TO MAKE DECISIONS THAT WILL BEGIN TO NARROW - NOT BROADEN - YOUR VISION OF LIFE AND OF THE FUTURE. SOME OF IT WILL BE FORCED ON YOU BY ECONOMIC NECESSITY, SOME BY "GOING ALONG TO GET ALONG"; YOUR INTELLECTUAL ARTERIES - YOU'LL FIND - WILL BEGIN TO HARDEN, YOUR EMOTIONAL ARTERIES TOO, YOU'LL BE LESS SENSITIVE TO THE UNDERSTANDINGS, THE YEARNINGS, THE FEELINGS, THE NEEDS OF OTHERS:...LIFE, YOU'LL BEGIN TO DECIDE, LIFE IS REAL AND LIFE IS EARNEST, AND SO LITTLE BY LITTLE, THE SENSITIVITY WHICH MOTIVATES YOU TODAY, WILL BEGIN TO DISSIPATE. AND WHEN IT DOES, INTOLERANCE WILL BEGIN TO SETTLE IN.

NOT TERMINAL INTOLERANCE OVERNIGHT. YOU WON'T SUDDENLY TURN INTO RACISTS, BIGOTS. BUT YOUR NERVE ENDINGS WILL BEGIN TO DULL. YOUR WILLINGNESS TO CHUCKLE AT THE BAR ROOM JOKE WILL RISE, YOUR SENSE OF INJUSTICE WILL FLAG. YOUR OUTRAGE AT SLIGHTS TO OTHERS WILL DIMINISH. AND YOU'LL BEGIN TO DO WHAT I DID. NO CRIME. A HARMLESS JOKE, (IF I MAY), BY AN ESSENTIALLY DECENT MAN. BUT A JOKE THAT NONETHELESS HURT. HURT NOT JUST THE PEOPLE AT WHOM IT WAS HUMOROUSLY AIMED, BUT HURT THE FELLOW WHO TOLD THE JOKE TOO.. FOR IT SEEMED TO SHOW THAT PERHAPS HE WASN'T QUITE AS PURE NOR AS CARING A SOUL AS HE WAS, WHEN HE SAT IN A GROUP LIKE THIS FIFTY ODD YEARS AGO, WONDERING, DREAMING ABOUT WHAT LIFE HELD IN STORE FOR HIM.

YOU HAVE A DREAM ABOUT WHAT'S AHEAD FOR YOU. KEEP THAT DREAM!
AND KEEP THE FAITH!!

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