What Is An Education?

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Commencement address to the Seniors of Lawrence College

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APPLETON, WISCONSIN
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In accordance with traditional presuppositions you are now held to be "educated." You are done with the matter. Studies are to be put away—as a child puts away his toys. It has been customary to regard this day as the commencement of life's real work. Uncounted speeches have been built on that theme, and the soil still sprouts that form of expression as richly as ever. You are to leave academic detachment, you are to dwell no more amongst books, you go forth to do battle in a "real" world, whose realities are particularly cold and hard. This occasion has been viewed in a sentimental light. You are leaving idyllic surroundings, which are to be recalled only in moments of tender memory,—when you think of the beauty of a snow-clad campus, or of the charm of climbing ivy. Indeed this day has been so saturated with sentiment that we have sometimes created in our alumni the false impression that the chief thing an alumnus owes to his college is love.

I want, if I may, to emphasize an entirely different point of view. This day is chiefly notable because it marks the end of a period characterized by the constant exercise of personal influence and official pressure in the direction of intellectual life. For fifteen or sixteen years, now, you have been subjected systematically to intellectual stimulation. There has been someone at your elbow urging you to think, think, think. What you should read has been pointed out persistently, and various devices have been resorted to in order to see that it was read. Even the method by which the reading was to be done has been laid out for you. The hope and expectation was that habits of reading and study would be developed.

I view this day, therefore, as a crisis in your life in this respect,—you are now to assume fullest responsibility for your own mental life and your own intellectual habits. A poster in one of the local schools bore this motto: "What a boy is depends upon what he does when he has nothing to do." The aphorism has a sound kernel. It may well be paraphrased: Whether a man is educated depends upon what he does when
he has nothing to do. Thus we may emphasize the fact that not all who go to college get an education. You may have passed every course without being educated. You may forget all the crammed knowledge. You may have improved your judgment not at all. You may have developed no burning curiosity which impels you to inquire insistently in the hope of solving the problems which so beset our lives.

An educated person is one who is eager to know more of the world about him, who has the industry to seek such enlightenment persistently, and who has developed the capacity to search for it efficiently. You must judge today as to the fruitfulness of your education. You must choose whether you are to drift into an attitude of mind which looks only to the day's task, or whether, as befits an educated person, you are to be one of the creative forces in the world, whose prying curiosity (not into other people's business, but into the business of mankind), whose eagerness to improve every aspect of human life,—physical and mental and moral,—whose effectiveness of brain, make them the leaders of the world.

We have sought by various methods to rouse your curiosity, but the curiosity must be your own. We have tried to share with you our curiosity. Now you must depend entirely upon your own. You may stifle it,—and become cynical or blase. Life may come to bore you. Time may weigh heavily on your hands. But if so, you have no education. The person who cannot think of anything to do is not educated,—no matter how many years he may have haunted a campus. Education is incompatible with boredom.

I would have you look back at Lawrence not without sentiment. He would be unnatural who could walk this lovely campus for four years amid such associations, and not feel a tug at his heart strings. But I would have you look back upon the college even more as a place wherein you learned to work with something of your own initiative, where you learned to face moral situations with courage and candor, where you acquired the strange and unaccountable, and, to most people, unbelievable joy that comes from hard work well done.

Whether you have attained that standard of industry you may judge. We have set you a daily dozen of intellectual setting-up exercises. You have gone through the motions. But whether you have done them with enough vim and snap to have received permanent benefit, you must decide. For the industry, like the curiosity, must be your own. No one can manufacture either one for you.

There is not to be very much of a break between college life and "real" life. The distinction has been grossly overdrawn. College life has its differences from the life of business, but many of you have faced on this campus, under a somewhat different environment and perhaps upon a modified scale, many of the same situations you must face in the world as you earn a living. There have been the same problems of human relationships, the same essential adjustments to social requirements, the same competition in keenness of analysis,—and not a few of you have already contributed a major part toward your own support.

But in a more important and a more vital sense, college life has been in contact with "real" life. Here, it is said with some scorn, you have lived in a world of books. If the books have meant to you what they should, they have thrown open to you avenues of contact with the past. That past was real. It is vital to the present and to the future. It conditioned the formation of our modern world and still influences every action—even every business transaction—we undertake. The past lives in a world of books, which reveal not only the events of the past but the thoughts which have become the common stock of our thinking. One learns by experience, but not entirely by his own experience. The development of the capacity to learn from the experience of others is one of the best measures of the progress of mankind. Books should have brought you much of mankind's accumulated experience, and, if you have any constructive imagination, those intensely real experiences have become part of the fiber of your minds. Books, forsooth!—books have pointed you along the pathway of scientific advance. The reality of science and of its achievements, the nature of its method and the extent of its progress cannot be
challenged. Where else, but in our laboratories and from books, would you learn of them?

To one unaccustomed to their use, books appear to be strange tools— not well adapted to serve as a substitute for personal experience. So also does any other tool in the use of which one is not skilled. The American cabinet maker marvels at the tools employed by the Chinese craftsman, but he must marvel also at the results. So with books; they must be used with a skill compounded of imagination and practice. But rightly used they are as “practical” tools as any in the world. They can put one in as close touch with reality as any other device may do.

There is a sort of hard materialism which is fashionable just now, and which insists that the important things are the tangible items of life which one can touch and taste. It denies that life is more than meat or the body than raiment. In the educational world this philosophy of life is represented by people who measure the value of a college degree in dollars and cents, whose first question with reference to the graduating senior is, “What can he do?” “For what vocation is he trained?” “What special marketable skill has he acquired?” Before all else these people demand an education that is “practical.” They have their eyes firmly glued upon the hours to be spent in the office, the class room, the store, or the mill.

Their thinking neglects the fact that there should be a home life, consisting of something more than the narrative stage of the office routine. There should be a civic life more vital than voting the ticket father voted, if the party will furnish transportation to the polls—a life calling for other thoughts and tasks and aptitudes than the mill requires. There should be a church life, exhibiting not different moral traits or ethical principles, but making a different sort of demand upon your capacities. There should be an aesthetic life, wherein you cultivate the good and the beautiful, wherein you seek the enjoyment and enrichment that comes through the revealing genius of musicians and artists and authors. There must be a social life demanding tact and urbanity and charm, and wide range of interest—calling for capacity to listen as well as to talk, and to listen and talk about things quite unconnected with your daily tasks.

College should have contributed to the shaping of your life along all these lines. Education for earning a living is important, but it is only one phase of your education. I am ready to contend that the most important thing your education can do is to broaden and deepen the meaning of life, and that may come from subjects which will never bring a dollar by way of direct return on your investment of time and energy and money.

I should like to have every college student take a course in astronomy, and, putting his eye to the powerful telescope, look far out beyond the narrow horizon of our puny world, and glimpse a universe so vast and so orderly as to stagger the imagination, even when it is trained to great concepts. There is little of “practical” utility, there is nothing of economic advantage, in developing an imagination eager enough and bold enough to speculate upon the infinite size and marvelous precision of the universe. But there is life-value in the endeavor.

I wish that every student might put his eye to the microscope and see another world invisible,—a world as infinitely small as the heavens are infinitely great, but a world just as orderly, and exhibiting the same energy and purposeful activity. It is useless information from any coldly materialistic point of view, but it ought to make a fresh contribution to his breadth of view, and to his satisfaction in the things of the mind.

I wish that every student might be sufficiently familiar with electro-physics to understand the secret of the wireless transmission of sound. Understanding how we have learned the trick of translating sound into another sort of unit and tossing it about and catching it as players with a ball, he should accustom himself to the thought that the air is full of sounds we do not hear, sounds we might hear if our ears were rightly attuned. The number of persons for whom this will be knowledge of cash value will be small, but if one can seize the idea in all its implications, it will have most fruitful consequences in developing a wholesome life concept.
If you have gotten from college what college has to offer, the whole horizon of your thought has been extended. You have been made alive to a world invisible, but no less real, to sounds inaudible, but no less meaningful. From it all you should have developed a life philosophy which bids you look beyond the moment and the obvious into the greater and more significant reaches of fact and thought.

Even in the training you may have sought in order to make you vocationally more efficient, you dare not be narrow. The narrowly trained man is not really educated at all. Men have developed marvelous skill in tending machines, so that they move with astonishing speed and precision. They have been trained to do a maximum of work with a minimum of waste energy. They operate as smoothly as the complicated power-driven mechanism before them. But no one would make the mistake of calling them educated.

Not alone in factories and mills is that sort of thing possible. I once stepped into a room as large as this chapel, and saw three or four hundred girls doing the work of bookkeeping for one of the great insurance companies. They worked with wonderful speed, and with such astonishing accuracy that the books balanced perfectly at the end of the day. But they worked by rule of thumb. None of them knew the purpose of the operation she performed. Their interests were alien to their activity. Their perfection of efficiency gave them no education.

In much the same fashion you may learn some business which requires care and accuracy and conservatism. You may reduce your work to a mere process—somewhat more complicated than watching a machine, yet essentially no different. Your mind may be working in a groove; you may be following a routine, doing the task without any deep personal interest in it, and with no constructive thought spent upon improving its methods. If so, you may be marvelously trained, yet not educated.

The history of the last century and a half cries aloud with the tragedy of the trained man. The industrial revolution has left human wreckage strewn in its wake. The old hand weavers had wonderful skill. They were trained with care to do expert work. But they were narrowly trained, and when new inventions altered the processes of production they were helpless. They were not adaptable. They did not have an education upon a basis broad enough to allow for radical readjustment in the tasks to which they had long been accustomed. They could not alter their vocations to a new basis. When the old life was taken away they had no power to create a new one. So they rebelled against the machinery. They sought to destroy the iron monster that seized the bread from their mouths; they rioted against the substitution of untrained youth in the place of experienced age. In one industry after another tragedy overtook the skilled worker, and legislative assemblies and charitable bodies ever since have struggled with the task of salvage.

The educated man is in a different position. He differs from the man merely trained in that he has his own mind, and his own point of view. He has his own contribution to make. It comes welling up out of his disciplined imagination; it is matured by dint of his unflagging industry; it becomes valuable because he has learned efficiently to utilize what he knows and what he thinks. His technical skill is like an instrument with which he can fashion a wide variety of plans and achievements.

In a world of change, a world in revolution, this flexibility of mind, this ability to launch into new situations, this creative power, is vital. You are going out into a civilization more completely in a state of flux than any which history records,—into a world where our supposed knowledge is more relative and less absolute than in any earlier age. You must breast a current moving at a pace more rapid than ever before in human history. The speed at which life moves has increased more rapidly in the last twenty-five years than in the previous seventy-five; it increased more in that seventy-five than in the thousand years before!

The political world is a world in revolution. It is no longer predominantly monarchical, as in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. It is no longer a balance between monarchy and republicanism, as in the nineteenth century. It is a chaotic world of autocracy (as expressed in dictatorships in Europe, Asia, South America, and Africa), of republican democracy
of fascist coercion, of socialist and communist domination, of proletarian dictatorship. It is a political world where tides no longer follow one another in periodic succession, but where tidal waves upset predictions from day to day. No rule-of-thumb statesmanship avails for these times. The demand is for men of breadth of vision, for courage and faith, for efficient intelligence.

You are going into a world where science is in a state of revolution as profound as politics. The accepted dogmas of a quarter of a century ago have been overthrown. It is not merely the superstructure which is being remodeled. Many of the basic conceptions of physics and chemistry have been altered. Even the law of gravity has been subjected to modification. The atom is no longer the unit of matter. It has become a world in itself! As one of our faculty said recently, he learned many important things in graduate school twenty-five years ago,—most of which were not true! Scientists have played the greatest part in increasing the pace of life. The advances in communication and transportation, which have remade the world, all rested upon scientific progress. Now science itself is being hustled along at a pace that is astonishing and bewildering. To be abreast of scientific progress today you must be intensely alive, unwearingly industrious, and wonderfully efficient.

You are going out into a religious world where civil war has broken out afresh. A conflict, thought to have been settled a generation ago, has burst into new and more violent activity. The impact of a world changing in every other important phase of human thought and activity has been too much, and the church is being jostled in the tumult. Doubts and questionings and problems assail accepted dogmas in much the same way that fresh scientific hypotheses upset the older assumptions. It is a moment when a satisfying philosophy of life can no longer be inherited from our fathers, when the demand is for people who can think for themselves, and build anew,—as the shattered cathedrals of the war-torn cities of Europe must rise again from the dust.

You are going into an aesthetic world as stormy as can possibly be imagined. Schools in art, styles in literature, standards of musical composition and appreciation,—all reflect the phases and currents that sweep through the fields of politics, science, and religion. Impressionism, cubism, realism, and all the other "isms" of art have their correlative movements in writing and in music. Old standards of taste, the old sense of form,—these have yielded, and in their places there is competition for primacy among many competing forms.

Your life is cast in a world where social customs and standards are changing, where barriers and conventions have been thrown down without much regard for their past utility, but as in a mood of irritation. New fashions and fads, new modes of conduct, press for recognition.

In so stormy an age the old shibboleths no longer furnish the password. Old charts are no longer safe guides to navigation. We can no longer equip you with a body of knowledge that will see you through. In a world which was essentially unchanging or only slowly changing, it used to be possible for the schools to make up a packet of information that would carry the students a long way through life. But in a civilization which has slipped its moorings, where change is so rapid, such a neat budget of information is all but valueless.

If your education is now complete, your case is hopeless. The procession will soon leave you far behind. If you know one thing well, and have developed great skill in that field, and have not breadth, and depth of foundation, and elasticity of mind, you will some day suddenly find that what you know is untrue, or no longer vital, and that your single skill is useless as a means of livelihood. As the pace of life has quickened, the danger of narrow training has become greater. The same sort of wreckage that was left in the wake of the industrial revolution bids fair to be found on the shores of the scientific and professional world. The world today is ruthless to those who do not know how to observe, to think creatively, to strike out in new paths, and to develop new forces for the stabilization of life. The demand is for folk with courage to accept the new thing, and with discrimination enough to reject the thing
which is merely novel, but unsound. If you are to succeed, your education has just begun.

The demand upon you is even greater than I have yet indicated. The age of specialization in the old sense has passed. You cannot enter one compartment of activity and leave others alone. A generation ago the demand was for the partition of knowledge into smaller bits. The students at Lawrence fifty years ago were learning their science from Avery’s *First Principles of Natural History*. A former colleague of mine, now Emeritus, is accustomed to remark that he was not elected to a professorial chair, but to a scientific settee. Then came the division of “natural philosophy” into individual sciences. It was a fruitful movement; tremendous advances were made in every branch. But it brought difficulties in its train, because specialists tend to be narrow and their work was not correlated.

There arose a demand for a new breadth of conception. The great names in science today are of the men who know more than one thing, who are able to throw bridges across the chasms which have developed between related subjects. The old boundaries, which were always artificial, are being thrown down, and physical chemistry, bio-chemistry, biological psychology and all the other hyphenates are witnesses to the fact. One of our professors here at Lawrence, in speaking to the freshmen, remarked that it is necessary to know everything in order to know anything. It was a paradoxical expression of the fact that all knowledge is one, and that it is more and more essential, if we are to have a grasp upon the meaning of life and the world about us, to have a broad foundation.

Another reason why this broader education is essential arises from the fact that one must be intelligent in many more fields than formerly. Public affairs are pressing hard upon each of us. There was a day, not so very long ago, when women were not expected to know or care about public affairs, much less influence them markedly. In the first edition of *The American Commonwealth*, James Bryce said, “An American may, through a long life, never be reminded of the Federal Government, except when he votes at presidential and con-
gressional elections, lodges a complaint against the post office, and opens his trunks for a custom-house officer on the pier at New York when he returns from a tour in Europe.” In the thirty or more years that elapsed between the publication of his book and his death, the situation had altered so that the comment was no longer pertinent and it was removed from the later editions. There is no citizen today who has not had many contacts with the federal government. The Great War, with its draft, made real once again the obligations of national citizenship. The income tax brought us into direct relationship with federal officers. The enormous influence exercised over trade relationships by government policy has profoundly affected us all. Citizenship, not so very long ago, consisted of the shrewd application of common sense to the petty business of local government. But public affairs have become infinitely more important and vastly more complicated. Citizenship, if it is to be intelligent and constructive, requires a breadth of information and a depth of intelligence scarcely to be dreamed of a half-century ago. The obligations of citizenship no longer affect us only in time of war; they are no less insistent in time of peace. They rest equally upon the women with the men.

Whatever vocation you may select, it will be strange indeed if it does not have a more or less definite relationship to the government. Business used to be private, but as it became larger, its social importance became so great that the state interfered with it. Not only the business of transportation, or the business of communication, or the production of foods or drugs, but one after another all the fundamental businesses of the country have come under government supervision, and even those which are still ostensibly private are deeply affected by government control of rates, trade practices, and the like.

Many of you are going into teaching. You have already found that the state government enters into your preparation to direct it, before it will give you a certificate permitting you to enter that vocation. The requirements you have already met are only the beginning of government contact with your work.

In whatever vocation you select, if you are to play a leading role, you must have a keener appreciation and a livelier under-
standing of the place and function of government in relationship to your task.

You must have contact not alone with public affairs; you must have some grasp upon the principles of finance. It was a poor merchant, half a century ago, who did not own his own business. It was an unusual manufacturer who did not attend to his own financing. I once knew a businessman (now old, I am frank to say), who boasted that he had never borrowed a dollar. Needless to say, he retired from business long since. The greatest businesses in the country today are operated by men whose investment in them is insignificant in relationship to the total. No man is wealthy enough to own the telephone company, or the steel corporation, or Standard Oil. What is true of those great aggregates of capital is true of all manufacturing and of all but the smaller mercantile enterprises. The habit of thrift, and the conservation of assets, shrewd buying and selling, no longer suffice. It is essential today that everyone should understand the fundamental principles of the management of capital, the essentials of banking, and at least the elements of investment. You are, all of you, virtually, to be trustees of other people's resources, and there is laid upon you by that fact a requirement that you should be ready and prepared intelligently and honestly to administer that trust. Your failure would be more than your own. It would involve others beside your family and your immediate friends. Your failure might carry with it the destinies of an institution. It might destroy the comfort or even the livelihood of people whom you never met and of whom you never heard.

I am pleading that you shall avoid provincialism. Provincialism is the narrowness that comes from ignorance of the great world. It is the foe of progress. Provincialism, as applied to places and one's prejudices about them, or to peoples and one's prejudices about them, is the enemy to peace among the nations. It is subversive of unity within the nation. It is divisive of all human relationships. Provincialism of the mind, ignorance about the great work of the world, and prejudices about vocations other than your own,—these also are the foes of progress. Provincialism in the realm of ideas is a menace to the unity of truth. A broad and catholic viewpoint, a tolerant and sympathetic spirit,—these are as essential to a comprehension of the achievements of science, the advance of religious thought, the developments in social structure, as they are to peace within the community, be that community local or international.

You go out today as graduates from a college of the liberal arts. It has not been our purpose to equip you as specialists in some narrow field. Our aim has been to give you an acquaintance with many fields of life and interest, to develop within you the habit of industry, to stimulate your curiosity, and to drill you in the effective satisfaction of your curiosity. Go forth, now, but go forward. Carry on the training we have just begun. Grow with your age. Keep step with it as it advances. Do your part in widening the horizon of mankind, and in seeking adequate solutions to the problems of church and state, of business and of learning.