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Commencement address

Max Carl Otto

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I want first of all to express my appreciation for the opportunity of being here and talking to you a little while this morning. First because it's an evidence of the joint interest the two institutions have—the one from which I come and the one to which I come—in the higher lines. I suppose it's proper for me to say, too, that I am a substitute speaker for another. You must know that the gentleman chosen for this honor was a member of your own staff, Professor Trever, who cannot of course be here. I shall not pretend in any way to fill his place. I hope at best that I may approach his loftiness of spirit, his breadth of humanity, his right scholarship, and his intellectual integrity.

There's something incredible, aside from what I've just spoken about, something incredible about our gathering here this morning. It's as though we had been caught up in a daydream, released, while it lasts, from the rigors of actuality. For in this quiet, peaceful, flower-scented room we are removed, I need not tell you, infinitely removed from the mad world where millions of others are compelled to strive and suffer. I propose that we indulge that mood of detachment for an hour. We cannot thereby hope to escape the responsibilities and dangers of the time in which we live, but if we make good use of such hours of detachment perhaps we may be better prepared to meet the tests of mind and character which are before us. We may refresh our spirits and we may possibly see a little more
clearly what it is we have to do. Life has often been likened to a river. Seasons come to all rivers, do they not; to the Arkansas, the Ohio, the Mississippi, the river you happen to know best. Seasons come to all rivers when their banks are covered by the muddy deposits which they have gathered through miles of their flowing. The mud hardens into a crust and under that crust the life that formerly bloomed there is imprisoned, seemingly forever. But the winds blow; the sun grows warm; the hardened crust breaks up; green shoots appear; and presently that river can flow again between its beautiful banks. It is the same way, is it not, with on going life. Intellectual and moral seeds are buried in the deposits carried over it by routine activities. Thinking, reading, talking to one another, meeting as we do this morning, such occasions are the winds and the sun. They help to release those vital seeds which have it in them to renew life, make it beautiful again. Not long ago it was easier to make sense of things than it is today. We had a number of ideals which gave significance to our lives. Our ideals as individuals were augmented by ideals which united us with our fellow men in great hopes and great endeavors. Let's look at two of those great ideals for a moment.

We thought of ourselves as a people working out on this continent of ours a great experiment in society and in politics. We often fell short in practice and our ideal was, in some of its aspects, always Utopian. But the end we aimed at, and I think we ought to say it to one another today and tomorrow and the next day, the end we aimed at was one of the noblest and one of the most daring ends that men have ever set before themselves. We were justified in inviting people everywhere to come to us, join with us
for their good and for ours in that undertaking. And they were wise in accepting our invitation and coming in large numbers. We might have said, adapting the words of Thomas Jefferson—I say we might have said it because we thought it many times—that civilization is advancing across our country like a cloud of light improving our condition, increasing our knowledge, and no man can say where that progress will stop.

We had another great ideal: We thought of ourselves as children of a heavenly Father who had set before us a plan of life which, if we followed, would lead to temporal and eternal happiness. Methodist or not, we could sing in the verses of Charles Wesley:

"A charge to keep I have,
A God to glory by,
A never-dying soul to save
And fit it for the sky."

That be a sick religion of ours often tended toward sentimental even morbid exaggeration, but it saved us from becoming what we might have otherwise become because of our physical circumstances; it saved us from becoming materialists, fanatical devotees of pure economic, worldly success. It brought our material aspirations into relation with that incurable, undying aspiration of man to lift his daily life above the struggle of pure survival.

Now the prevalence of idealisms such as these—there were others—made it easier for us to understand the world in which we lived and the human career within that world. It was natural for us—not so natural for you now—it was natural for us to be devoted to causes, to give ourselves over to causes, natural for us to do that; and in doing that to give expression to the deepest and finest nature in us; and to make a contribution, some contribution, great or small, to the welfare of mankind. I
suppose it must be confessed that there was in that scheme of life, in those idealisms of ours, a very great serious difficulty in application. Perhaps I should say there was a fatal flaw in our outlook—a crack in it, a rift in it. We believed ourselves to be compounded of two mutually antagonistic, incompatible, irreconcilable elements. We were physical organisms, biological organisms, held to the level of cents interest by what we might call the pull, the downward pull of a psychological law of gravity, or shall I say depravity. And we were also immortal souls, immortal souls that by their very nature, by the very essence of their being, reached upward toward unearthly good, towards pure truth, towards eternal beauty; and these two elements of which we were compounded were irreconcilable, at war with one another.

Well if that was the situation, if I have at all correctly described it, the situation just a little while ago which you and I have inherited, what is the situation today? Can a man be realistic in the contemporary world? Realistic, we all want to be realistic. Can a man be realistic in the contemporary world? Can he try to look facts in the face? Can he endeavor to be objective in his judgment of events—what goes on, what he hears, and what he sees—and yet try to perpetuate in any form whatever these idealisms which we have inherited from the past? Can he do that? That's a simple question to ask, but it's not a simple question to answer. And it's not a simple question to answer because it's really not a simple question. And if this occasion, the time we have, demands a simple answer, that answer cannot be adequate. It need not, however, be unsound so far as it goes. Well then first of all, we all know do we not that in certain parts of this world today—very aggressive parts
of the world, too—the very idea of these idealisms of which I have spoken is taken as conclusive evidence of racial decadence, of moral cowardice, of intellectual imbecility. And not only in certain parts of the world away from here, but thousands of people, young men and young women and old men and old women, in the United States of America have come to the view, for one reason or another, that what we call the American way of life is, as they say, "washed up," and that any kind of reliance upon any kind of religious spirit is self-delusion. Are these people right, over there and over here? Or are they wrong? Well I think if we make a distinction that we must make even if we haven't very much time to make any kind of a distinction or do anything, if we make a distinction that we must make, we shall not be able to give a "yes" or "no" answer to that question. We must give a "yes" and "no" answer to that question. What is the distinction to which I refer? It's this: We must make a distinction, I think, today between the specific, particular ideals to which a purpose or a faith gave right and that larger, deeper, more general, more far-reaching purpose which expressed itself in those specified ideals. And if we make that distinction, then I think we shall have to say, "no," to the specified form; "yes" and again "yes" to the underlying purpose which those forms then actualize. The forms, the formulas, the symbols, the formulations, whatever we call them, that came down from the past just because they so exactly fitted the needs then paramount, and just because they so perfectly expressed the intellectual and moral climate then prevailing, cannot in their traditional formulations serve us whose condition and needs are so fundamentally different. I take pains to repeat in their traditional formulations because
today more than ever it is necessary for us to realize that when a specific, specified formulation of a faith is found insufficient, the aspiration under that faith, that purpose behind that faith does die with it.

Well, that seems to me the positive, challenging aspect of our time. We need new forms for that or those old purposes which we have inherited from the past. And in order to find those forms adequate, you must find them, I must find them, that it's you who are younger must find them and those of us who are older must find them, too. I wish I had time to dwell upon that little difficulty in our discussion this morning. The older generation, the younger generation, I must pass it by except just to say, "We'll rise and fall together, not divided." I say if we're going to have forms that are adequate to our time, we must find them intelligently and to do that we must ask ourselves, "What brought us to this critical juncture in which we are?" "How did we come to this path?" It cannot have been anything superficial; it must have been something basic, some deep error in the course we charted for ourselves. I want to call your attention, I hope you've read it, to an article by Archibald MacLeish, this one from the New Republic. I hope you read it and I hope you read the other one in the Nation just a little while before that. This is called, "Post-War Writers and Pre-War Readers," the New Republic, June 10; the other was "Irresponsible," in May 18, I believe it was. Mr. MacLeish looks at the situation and he finds that the difficulty came upon us because literary men, great writers, great artists refused to look at life. They retired from life. They retired to their own profession or they retired into some ivory cellar as he calls it. And, he says the issue before us
is a moral and spiritual issue. If we are distrustful of all such issues, of all judgments of better and worse, then, as he says, the moral and spiritual preparedness of the country is worse than the unpreparedness in arms, for in that case we are incapable of using the only weapon with which a free society of free men can fight off it's enemies. He thinks that the writers, the prominent, popular, influential, I mean, writers, of the last ten or twenty years have betrayed us into making us lose faith in words. And unless we can recover faith in words that designate moral issues, then we are unprepared. I read this as a last quotation from him: He says he doesn't know everything, "but this I think I know, that unless we regain in this democracy the conviction that there are final things for which democracy will fight. Unless we recover faith in the expression of these things, in words, we can leave our planes unbuilt and our battleships on paper, for we will not need them."

Well, time, time, no time! I want to say just this about Mr. MacLeish. I'd like to agree with it fully. I can't agree with it fully. It isn't the literary people and what the literary people did; it isn't the intellectual people and what the intellectual people did, serious as that is, was and is. It isn't that. It's something much more profound than that. Much deeper than that. Much more pervasive than that. Something affecting many more people than that. And about that I wish to talk to you for a few minutes.

You won't mind; I'll watch my time because I've been told how long to speak and I've learned, I won't, how, to stop when I have to stop. What was I going to do? I was going to suggest to you, I was going to
picture to you what seems to me a much more important matter related to what Mr. MacLeish says has happened to us, that is responsible for our condition. And I believe, in case I don't get a chance to say it again, that it's solving that problem that is before us and unless we can solve that problem, we're lost; not only we, but mankind. Let's go back a little bit. Our medieval ancestors— they lived in a universe created in all its details by a divine being. The thinker of that world headed at a certain task which he set for himself, and I would like to distinguish that task from the tasks of the men who followed him. He had a certain task which he set for himself. It was to make a conceptual system of the universe which as a whole internally consistent would be acceptable to the eye of reason as being truly representative of the world in which we live. That's what he wanted to get; that's what he gave his energies to. Why did he want that? Because he was looking for a dependable way of life. He wanted criteria of truth and goodness and beauty. And only by conceptualizing the universe and making it acceptable to the eye of reason did he believe that he could find those criteria. In other words, he explored the thinker of the medieval time, the great thinkers of medieval time, they explored the world of minds. I'm tempted, tempted to talk to you about Spinoza who stood between, just on the border line, and who made it so clear that that was his ambition; and he made it so clear that only by looking at the universe under the aspect of infinity, getting away from our infatuation with particulars, which are fleeting, which are passing, which are deceptive, which are perishable, and therefore cannot satisfy us; that only by getting away from those and seeing the universe under the aspect of infinity is when it's eternal and thoroughly satisfying could we find,
could he find, could we find, could anybody find those criteria. Let me sum it up though and say: What they sought was a way, an authentic, dependable, universal way to the good life. And they felt that in order to find that life you had to turn your back upon the irrational struggle of practical affairs.

Well now we may take 1600--it's a good deal this side of that--as marking the time when a new kind of thinking arose; when men came, and very intelligent men, geniuses, very ambitious, and very good men came on the arena who said: What we need is not moral insight; what we need is not knowledge of the good life; what we need, ladies and gentlemen, is power, power. To get power let's study not the realm of the mind, but the realm of matter. Let's study nature. If we study nature, we'll discover the laws of nature. And if we discover the laws of nature, we can by using them make inventions almost at will. And if we can make inventions almost at will, man will be the master of the world. Power is what we need. There'll be time to worry about how that power is to be used when we have enough of it to worry about. That's the problem and that problem was fastened on the western world when our country, when our form of government was established and we inherited that. And we inherited something more. We inherited the progress of that debate between those two attitudes. And we inherited something more than that, we inherited the effect of a succession of cultural tidal waves, I'd have to call them, which beat in upon the modern world from that day to this. We can name them in the order of their coming: physical science, Darwinian evolution, the exploitation of technology by business enterprise, and then in due time, in
our time, the unification of the three of them—science, ruthless might, and technology without any regard to where it's going. The unification of the three in a supreme mechanized, superbly armed, morally irresponsible marching nationalism. I want to read you a quotation, a startling quotation, published in 1878; the first essay published by William James and I read it and I can't comment upon it, but it needs no comment. He was writing about the impact of a theory then developing inimical to the highest aspirations of men. And he said: "Imagine a race of beings, a race of human beings, superbly endowed in body and mind and swayed by the single passion of survival at any price. Imagine their perceptions to be so piercing that no fact, however minute or however remote, can escape them, and their ability to make use of all their resources to be so invincible that no outward onslaught can prevail against them." "There can be no doubt," adds Mr. James, "that if such an incarnation of earthly prudence existed a race of beings in whom this narrow passion for self-preservation were aided by every cognitive gift, they would soon be kings of all the earth. All human races would wither before their breath and be as dust beneath their conquering feet." Mr. James was writing an essay. He was summing up in his imagination the picture of a race that he could not dream of existing. But what he created in his imagination has been all but created by the march of events. I know what you're thinking of. You're thinking of a certain people; I'm thinking of a certain people, too. But I'm thinking of something else and something worse. I'm thinking of something else we'd better be thinking of, and that is the incarnation, the embodiment of that narrow passion of triumphant survival regardless of the cost to all the
values that make survival desirable. I am thinking of the embodyment of that passion in the world at large and not only in one people. And that's an embodyment that has gone very far because of what I've said.

Well that being the situation, I have ten minutes more now unless my watch is stopped. Haven't I ten minutes more? I have ten minutes more to make a number of suggestions I want to make. We have a problem, then, a serious, profound problem. It's a hard problem and, if I may say so in passing, there's only one hopeful aspect to this dark world at the present time and that is that we're going to have hard things to do. Because we're going to have hard things to do, we'll reach down to the depths of our natures to do them. And the depths of our natures are better than the surface. They're hard things to do. You'll get plenty to do in the next few months. You may get so much to do in the next few months and you may become so optimistic in doing them that you'll forget this underlying problem to which I've called your attention. But that problem will not be solved unless we face it and try to solve it. And the more you have to do and the more jobs there are and the more optimistic the atmosphere becomes, the more dangerous it will be unless we face this problem to which I have now several times not only called your attention but referred. Here are a number of things to do then. First, I think--I talk for myself, my generation, and for you, too--first, I think we must get over this illusion, positively get over the illusion that there is a tendency in things which is going to bring the future, that it's going to bring regardless of what we do. Oswald Spengler used to say: "Time marches on regardless of what men want." It marches on through time as a cyclone marches over the landscape.
There is no power like that tendency—a power in the face of which we are helpless, in the face of which effort is futile and hope is vain. There is no stage that we read about in Greek tragedy; there is no destiny that Walter Lippman is talking about; there is no unfriendly universe that Hardy writes about in his novel, if you look, I ask you, if you look, you'll find men, won't you? and women, won't you? and they have names. Whatever future comes will come because men and women like yourselves aid it to come. It'll come through you and not through some nameless, not some named power, but unreal fictional power called destiny. Do you think that's an easy thing to get over? It isn't. And let me simply say in dismissing it now: you in your lifetime will bring some of the world that's coming. Well that's one thing to get over that notion. If you want a certain world, work for it. It won't come unless you do.

The second thing I'd like to suggest is brought to my attention by an article which Ann Morrow Lindbergh wrote. Let me read it to you and then just comment on it for a moment. "I hate the use of brute power. I hate it in small things and in big things, in nations and in personal life." Most of us hate it in nations but we don't mind it in personal life. She hates it both places. "I do not like to see one human being intrude himself by force on another human being even emotionally, mentally, or spiritually. "I believe you should stand," listen to this, "I believe you should stand back and not step on the hem of your neighbor's personality or on the ground that is covered by his shadow. It is one reason why I prefer to write rather than to speak. If I stood in a room with you, you must out of politeness listen to me but you don't have to read this article." Well I read this article and I said to myself: Mrs. Lindbergh was never a
teacher or a speaker, or she would know that people don't have to listen to you although they look you right in the eye and are very polite. Well I called your attention to that for this reason. That's a very lofty ideal. "Do not step on the shadow of your neighbor's personality." The trouble with it is, isn't it, that you can't help it. There's a problem again. Our personalities overlap, interfere, and the thing that I wish I had time to talk about is a plan that I think we ought to encourage in colleges like Lawrence. Probably you do it more than we do at home, the place where I come from, but you don't do it any too much, I hasten to say. We might do it in schools; we might do it in our homes; we might do it in our businesses. Creative bargaining! One personality and another personality overlapping, inevitably put each personality attempting to get vitally before it the personal wants, the plans, the schemes of the other and out of the labor of that conflict to bring to birth a way of life which enhances, expands, both personalities. Well you see I've just roughly touched upon what is really an extremely important matter, but I must leave it at that. We've done practically nothing in our schools, we've done practically nothing, may I say so, in our churches; we've done practically nothing, certainly nothing practically, in our business or higher education with the art, the art, the way of learning how to bring that about. Oh, I have another thing to say but I must stop and say one last thing to you. I wanted to talk about--what did I want to talk about--I can't even find it now. Oh yes, oh yes, yes, yes, I'll refer you to an article--Fortune, Fortune for January. I'm sorry I left that out--I'll have to leave that out now--because that comes right up to the issue we're talking about. Fortune in January, 1940, says: "The world in which practical men live,
laymen, is necessarily materialistic." There's no help for that. It
cannot do anything for itself. It's held down by this degrading pull
that I talked to you about earlier. And then he said we have the
churches, and the churches should get an absolute voice, bring an abso-
lutely voice and send it into this materialistic world and try to help
them. I said I wasn't going to talk about it so I'm not going to talk
about it. But that division of a materialistic business man and a purely
spiritual minister or teacher or philosopher or whatever else it is, who
is somehow or other to do something with this business man, who is com-
pelled to be materialistic; that's just what's brought us the ruin.
Read that article. That'll be better than anything I could say about it.

I want to say this at last, we have, you and I, each a little
garden to take care of, in this great garden of the world. And even
though you should become interested in this creative bargaining and in
bringing about a better relationship between business and the non-business
aspect of life and all the rest of it, unless you care for that little
garden where you yourself are going to live not very much would be accom-
plished anyway. And so I give my advice to you at last and I try to take
it home to myself as I give it to you: I want to do a better job in what-
ever work I have to do in the next year or two than I've ever done. What-
ever it may be--my job is teaching--all right, I want to be a better teacher
than I've ever been. And as a human being I want to be more tolerant, more
generous, more quick to see what the other man is driving at, more kind
than I've ever been able to be, and I want to have a deeper sympathy for
both generations: the generation to which I belong, if you'll allow me to
say so, isn't as bad as it's painted. We tried to do a lot of things, as a matter of fact, if you do as well as we did, no, I won't go ahead with that. Let me say this thing to you though: We started out in a world when it was going up and it turned sour. How'd you like that. You're starting out in a world when things look pretty bad. The chances are at least that you'll find it to go up. And if I had to choose between starting when the world is going upgrade and then having it go down on me and start the other way, I'd start the other way. That's what I meant. We've called this talk of ours this morning, "The Morning Cometh." But we were talking not of a morning in nature that comes. Anyway, inevitably whatever you do or don't do, we're talking about a moral, a spiritual morning, that'll come if we bring it and won't come if we don't. And I said "The Morning Cometh" because I believe it's coming. And I believe it's coming because I believe that we want it to come. And if we want it to come and set out to have it come, then you'll excuse me for dropping into scripture because of the way I was brought up:—"Then hath not seen, nor ever heard, nor hath it entered into the heart of man what great things we will do."
And it's because I believe we will do them that I think no matter how dark it may yet get, in the darkness we'll say to one another: Yep, pretty dark; the morning cometh!