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COMMENCEMENT ADDRESS

by

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June 12, 1960
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MR. PRESIDENT, LADIES AND GENTLEMEN, MEMBERS OF THE GRADUATING CLASS,

I admit to being both a poet and a professor; but I beg leave to simplify myself this afternoon. With your permission, I'll speak as a poet only, and attempt to apply some of the prejudices of the poet to the subject of education.

The advantages of having been educated are obvious, I should hope; but every gain entails a loss, and for every virtue there is a vice. I'm going to talk a little about some of the losses and vices to which the educated person is liable. It's a virtue of the educated person that he is not a prisoner of subjectivity; he is not confined to making statements like "I can't stand broccoli" or "the earth looks mighty flat to me." He is committed to processes of investigation and definition which can lead to some agreement on general truths — that the earth is an oblate spheroid, for example. And even in matters of taste, where the merits of broccoli or Picasso are at issue, he continually seeks to enlarge the province of the discussable. This is a great virtue, but it has an attendant vice which a remark of the poet William Carlos Williams may serve to illustrate. Suppose, Dr. Williams said, that there were two doors, and that over one door there was a sign reading  
This way to see God  
and over the other a sign reading  
This way to hear a lecture about God.  
"Where do you think the crowd would go?" he asked. A crowd of educated people would be all too likely to attend the lecture, because educated people are prone to subscribe to that eloquent half-truth of Wallace Stevens', "Life consists/Of propositions about life."

But the world is not a forensic society; and it is not true that only the formulated exists. Much of our life, thank heavens, is immediate, primitive, disorderly, and dumb. If we are truly alive, we are involved in and with life far beyond our power to understand or communicate it. And it seems to me terribly important to preserve one's capacity for living so — both for its own sake, and because our most vital thoughts derive not from other thoughts, but from the realm of the thoughtless. A good poem, for example, is never merely the pleasing embodiment of existing ideas; it is also, as Eliot says, "a raid on the inarticulate," a temporary capture of the unorganized. And this is true, I think, not only of poems but of every vital formulation. Therefore we impoverish ourselves if we deny reality to what resists our categories, or seems irrelevant to them: hard and fast notions of relevance freeze the consciousness, and this is why poetry, with its commitment to maximum consciousness, so delights in the far-fetched, and in connecting disparate things: Spinoza and the smell of cooking; logic and the cry of the loon. Poetry's quarrel with the pretensions of the intellect is a perennial one. In some nineteenth-century poets such as Wordsworth and Tennyson, intellectuality was often treated as a form of sin, because consecutive thought separates men from the instinctual, the concrete, and the communal. The charge, I think, is just; but of course the educated person cannot be expected to give up the benefits of thinking on that account. What he should do is to try always to be aware of the estranging tendency of thought. That logical clarity which makes discussion possible is achieved at a great sacrifice of consciousness. We withdraw from life in order to be clear. And lest he forget that fact, I'd have every brain-worker tack up over his worktable some words which Alfred North Whitehead addressed to a Harvard doctoral candidate. "What you miss," Whitehead said, "— What you miss is the essential vagueness of things."

Another virtue of the educated person is his courageous readiness to criticize the bases of his own conduct, the moral standards by which he lives. He shares Socrates' conviction that "the unexamined life is not worth living." That is a great and brave attitude; but there is something to be said against it, and Robert Frost once said it in a poem called The Generations of Men. In that poem, two descendants of an old New England family are speaking of their common heritage, and one of them observes, "It's the ideals that count; and those will bear some keeping still about." It appears to me that Socrates' demand for the examination of life, and Frost's demand that we keep still about our ideals, are directly contradictory and equally wise. Surely it is a good thing that so many of our college courses are designed to "shake the student up," as they say — to make him inquire what, if anything, might be meant by freedom, or truth, or justice, or goodness. It can strengthen us to put our inherited notions on trial, and make them define themselves. It can strengthen us to learn that the values of Cincinnati are not totally accepted by the Eskimo and the Balinese. It can strengthen us to apprehend the difficulty of judging, and to acknowledge that moral action is often tragically complex.
And yet all of this is very risky, unless we are very wise. It is precisely in this field of thought that knowledge must conduce to action; it is here that we should least relish that form of intellectual play which seeks out the logical cul-de-sac, or the paralyzing antithesis, and stops triumphantly there. Unless we continually remind ourselves that reason by itself is a eunuch, the sophistication of our moral awareness is likely to reduce us to an obscene detachment. I once looked out my window and saw a distinguished intellectual standing on the sidewalk, and staring at an old woman who was gathering up the parcels she had dropped. They had fallen at his very feet, but he made no move to help her retrieve them, and indeed he looked incapable of motion. I don't suppose that he was weighing the pros and cons of the matter; there could hardly have been much to think about; but I suspect that a lifelong devotion to pros and cons was now paying off in a perfect incapacity for action. Such a spectacle is unlively; and though I resent Plato's exclusion of poets from his metaphorical republic, I am glad that he chose to support his philosopher-kings with a class of auxiliaries, or lovers of honor, whose function was to do the obviously right thing. It seems to me that every nature, however complicated at the top, should contain a sort of soldier who knows damn well what his duty is.

The ideal, of course, is to be subtle and simple at once, both serpent and dove. The intellectual criticism of values should not shame us out of whatever simplicities we can hold on to, any more than semantics should shame us out of the use of so-called emotive language. We've got to talk and we've got to act. The poet, like the intellectual, is devoted to the examination of life, but the poet stresses in man not merely the intellect but the whole being. It is poetry's implicit view that we cannot, in fact, measure everything with the rational mind; that we have a limited power to act upon rational conclusions; that we accept a great many of our beliefs on some authority, or out of some fidelity; and that the major decisions of our lives are largely emotional or spiritual, and based of necessity upon insufficient evidence. The educated person, though he may have vicariously confronted the absurd, and pondered the gratuitous act, and sat up all night transvaluating values, should not scorn to fall back at need on what his grandparents thought was true or good. We could do worse than to be loving and critical adaptors of the best of our inheritance. The most adventurous philosophic mind I know, a mind which appals me by what it is willing to entertain, belongs to a man who is utterly devoted to his country and its institutions, and whose moral reflexes are as quick and sure as Mr. Johansson's right hand. He is simple where he can manage it, just as Socrates was: you remember how the great questioner Socrates, though unjustly condemned, died piously and without question for the great principle of Law.

Still another virtue of the educated person is curiosity: the feeling that there is something to be found out, and that one perhaps can find it. There's no need to say why curiosity is a good thing; and the quantity of research, discovery, and invention reported every year would indicate that we are still a vigorously curious nation. Yet I was troubled by something an Italian novelist said, on returning from a recent visit to America. He praised us handsomely for many things, but he had two adverse comments to make. First, he felt that the four-hour cocktail period is an institution dangerous to health. Second, and rather more importantly, he felt that the American intellectual class has lost the habit of adventurous general reading. How much this second reproach had to do with the sales of his own books, I don't know; but I'm afraid it's true that our educated people in general have ceased to have that breadth of curiosity which we remember in the Franklins, the Jeffersons, the John Quincy Adamses — the great readers, lookers and tinkerers of an earlier America.

Of course, the narrowing of curiosity is not a peculiarly American phenomenon. One finds it elsewhere, in England for example, and I remember reading, a good many years ago, an essay by Virginia Woolf on precisely this subject. If I remember rightly, she quoted as a reproof to our times a passage from the seventeenth-century diary of John Evelyn. In the passage quoted, Evelyn describes himself as seated in his garden, reading a book; a butterfly wanders by on the air, luring Evelyn's eye away from the page; the markings of the butterfly are unfamiliar to him, and so he sets down his book, rises from his chair, and stalks the butterfly to the end of the garden. Once it has come to rest on a flower, Evelyn observes its form and markings, carefully records them, and then — like Adam in his garden — gives the butterfly a name.

If educated people kept diaries nowadays — and on the whole they don't — I'm afraid there would be very few entries of that kind. Too many of us have conceded the butterfly to the lepidopterist. If, while reading in the garden, we notice a butterfly unknown to us, we
abort our curiosity at once by the reflection that somewhere, no doubt, the creature has been described, and named, and classified by the proper authorities. Perhaps we make a pious resolution to look it up sometime, and then we return to our book — which, of course, is on a subject connected with our specialty. It’s not that the educated person lacks curiosity nowadays; it’s that he feels he must ruthlessly prune his curiosity in order to make it bear fruit. The libraries are so big; so much is expertly known; each discipline has advanced so far; one must read and study so much before one can hope to make a contribution in any field. And one’s sense of the magnitude of one’s own field dissuades one from trespassing idly on any other. One therefore leaves trees to the botanist, engines to the engineer, the heavens to Harlow Shapley, and God, perhaps, to the Department of Religion.

Paradoxically, then, that desire to know which brings us to the academy can become so narrowly focused that the educated person has no wholeness of vision, and is less conversant with his total environment than some unlettered savage. Gibbon, toward the end of his history, assures us that no catastrophe, however great, will ever stamp out human civilization altogether, because there are certain fundamental arts of civilization which men will never forget: the use of fire and domestic animals, rudimentary navigation, the cultivation of grain, the methods of hunting and fishing, and “the simple practice of the mechanic trades.” I can only say that today there are some people so insanely specialized that I would not trust them to remember even these most fundamental things.

Doubtless there can be happiness, and a kind of heroism, in a life which harps forever and expertly on one string: we are at least half-persuaded of this by Browning’s grammarian, who lived only for grammar, and wore himself out in establishing the “doctrine of the enclitic De.” But it seems to me that for most people such shrinkage of concern is not only sad but impractical. When the various human creature is docked of his divergent impulses, and forced wholly into the mould of the specialist, surely it is done at a sacrifice in spontaneity; and surely his work ceases in great measure to be play. When work ceases to be play, it ceases to be vital and inventive, and we do not need D. H. Lawrence and the other poets to tell us so. Again, if it’s discovery one is after, is it not true that the greatest discoveries have been made, not through exclusive adherence to some one study, but by bold violations of established method, by surprising analogies, and by cross-pollinations from field to field? These practical objections may or may not hold in the particular case; but poetry has an objection to narrowed consciousness which, though hard to express, is stronger and even more practical. The deepest need of the human creature is somehow to know, to feel, and to imagine his world not through any one way of knowing, but with his entire awareness. As Thomas Traherne said,

You never enjoy the world aright, till the Sea itself floweth in your veins, till you are clothed with the heavens, and crowned with the stars, and perceive yourself to be sole heir of the world . . .

It is this longing to “enjoy the world aright” which poetry chiefly serves and celebrates in those perilous and provisional unities which we call poems. And therefore poetry is always asking, by implication, that if we must be experts, we be dilettantes too; that we surrender no object of knowledge, nor any way of knowing; and that even in this disintegrating age, we try for our happiness’ sake to look at everything, to inquire into everything, and to delight in everything.

I had thought of saying, at this point, a number of things about the subject which most nearly concerns me: that is, words and language. For one thing, I wanted to argue that, in the interest of versatile consciousness, the educated person should choose English as his basic language, rather than, for instance, the dialect of the social sciences. But I’ve run on too long about other matters, and so I’ll close with one fairly brief observation about words which will summarize much of what I’ve been attempting to say.

The intellectual uses words mainly to designate, to describe, to define, to distinguish. And poetry, despite its reputation for cloudiness, also aspires to precision of every kind: it tries to capture the thing in its uniqueness, it aims at clarity of argument and exactness of feeling. The intellectual and the poet, then, are both engaged in selecting and excluding, in chopping up the world. But there is a contrary purpose in the words of poetry, and this contrary purpose is radical to its nature. The essential impulse of poetry is to create metaphor; and a metaphor is a perception of resemblance, expressed as a perception of identity. Poetry says that the tree is a cloud, that the boat is a bird, that the light in the window is a star. When one talks this way, one is seriously threatening to cancel the distinctions between things; one is threatening to destroy the very words by which
we make distinctions; one is gesturing, in fact, toward that magic wordless wood which Lewis Carroll described in *Alice Through the Looking-Glass*.

Perhaps some of you remember the passage I'm referring to — though many readers forget it, because its tone is so uncharacteristic of the book as a whole. What happens is that Alice, having finished an absurd conversation with some insects, walks across a field and into a wood. The shade of the trees is cool, and she starts to remark gratefully on the fact, but finds that she can't, because she can't think of the word for "tree." The reason for this is that she has strayed into a magic wood where things have no names.

While Alice is standing there dumbstruck, a little fawn trots into view, and Alice asks him who he is. This being the wood where things have no names, the fawn can't tell her; nor can Alice herself say who *she* is. This puts them both at their ease; Alice embraces the little fawn, and they walk along together in a charmed and affectionate silence, until they come to the end of the wood, and emerge once again into sunlight. There, the fawn suddenly cries out, "Now I remember who I am. I'm a fawn — and you're a girl." And having made this distinction, he races off in fear.

The poet inclines to think that Lewis Carroll's wordless wood is not a sentimental fantasy but a quite real place. And what he respectfully asks the intellectual sometimes to imagine, is that beyond the names and words by which we multiply distinctions, there may be a single world; that beyond the spectrum of our sciences there may be an undivided light in which all things are seen to share one nature and one life.

I have spoken so much of the risks and losses involved in education, that I'm afraid I may seem to have been negative or perverse; let me hasten to say in closing that, though I mean what I've said, I am sure that the educated person has a better chance than any to be a whole person in a whole world. Therefore, my respectful congratulations to the members of the Class of 1960.