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Commencement address

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This is a very special day for me. Nine years ago I first spoke to your predecessors; and as I recall it, I was impudent enough that day to preach them the Baccalaureate Sermon—causing, I am sure, a good many raised eyebrows among my colleagues. Today you were protected from my amateur theology by Bishop Bennison; and I am much in his debt, because he has left me free to explore with you this afternoon a few things which this last decade has suggested to me about you and your many ventures. Today above all days, however, I want to create something rather than recapitulate the past; for the nature of a college is first of all creation. This is as true for you now that you are exalted, sated graduates as it was when you were naive and hungry freshmen. And it is, I hope, as true for me today as it was a decade ago when I was just beginning to discover the delights and the burdens of my own calling.

Beyond this, beyond the fact that each of us must in his own way be creative or be nothing, what is the single most important thing about our kind of education? What must we give you if you are to be ready for the world's great enterprises, and for the equally great ventures of the individual spirit? (Make no mistake about it, by
the way; the stock or assembly-line Commence-
ment speech is right, at least in this. The greatest
adventures are ahead of you; they are those of
maturity and not of youth, and I hope that you
will at the moment forgive me for saying so.)

If I had to express just one hope about your
time here as it bears upon your future, it would,
I think, be this: that you have begun to discover
the inwardness of things, or events, or people.
Now this is a cryptic word, because the idea is
too important for ease; it sustains every field of
your concern. A passion for the inwardness of
experience was, I think, the steady preoccupation
of that most verbose of major poets, William
Wordsworth. And though I shall let him speak
about it in just a moment, I really intend to
explore it in the setting of your direct experience
and my own. As a result, I shall be much less
concerned this afternoon with the grand phrase
than with the vital center.

Wordsworth goes after that vital center over
and over, but seldom as effectively, it seems to
me, as in one of the most immediate descriptions
of his own childhood, in Book I of The Prelude:

"All shod with steel,
We hissed along the polished ice in games
Confederate, imitative of the chase
And woodland pleasures,—the resounding horn,
The pack loud chiming, and the hunted hare.
So through the darkness and the cold we flew,
And not a voice was idle; with the din
Smitten, the precipices rang aloud;
The leafless trees and every icy crag
Tinkled like iron; while far distant hills
Into the tumult sent an alien sound
Of melancholy not unnoticed, while the stars
Eastward were sparkling clear, and in the west
The orange sky of evening died away.
Not seldom from the uproar I retired

Into a silent bay, or sportively
Glanced sideway, leaving the tumultuous throng,
To cut across the reflex of a star
That fled, and, flying still before me, gleamed
Upon the glassy plain; and oftentimes,
When we had given our bodies to the wind,
And all the shadowy banks on either side
Came sweeping through the darkness, spinning still
The rapid line of motion, then at once
Have I, reclining back upon my heels,
Stopped short; yet still the solitary cliffs
Wheeled by me—even as if the earth had rolled
With visible motion her diurnal round!"

The trick is one we have all played, but behind
the small boy and his giddy world stand the
great earth and the force which holds us to it—not
just the force of gravity, you will note, but
the forces of participation and sudden insight.

Wordsworth called these moments of special
insight ‘spots of time,’ since for him they were
usually identified with natural and therefore time-
bound events or objects. Such points of illumina-
tion or ‘inwardness’ can come through the most
unexpected places or ways, however. I was read-
ing an issue of the Scientific American a few
months ago, and a particular advertisement about
inertial guidance systems caught my eye. These,
as all of you know, are the complex guidance con-
trol mechanisms by which rockets locate themselves
in space, responding to a complex set of subtle
and variable events in order to reach the right
place at the right time. As I thought about the
range of perceptions which these devices have to
take into account, I compared them idly with the
kind of guidance system I am most familiar with—
the magnetic compass, which helps me steer my
shaky course around Long Island Sound in the
summertime. With a shock of surprise, however,
I broke through this thin ice of my casual thought
into the deep water of more genuine speculation. It is only in their outer form that the compass and the guidance system help a man to find his way. This is the use we make of them, but it is not their full or inner nature. Actually each is an instrument of relationship—in the compass, a line from the unknown here to the known there; in the guidance system motion along an arc which is simultaneously described in space and in time (and really is an inescapable fusion of the two). These objects are, then, tools for motion; but they are equally and even more significantly the means of revelation and understanding about motion. And I could say the same for a thousand devices which surround us; if they seem trivial and external, the fault is ours. They will tell us something about the inner and enduring life of the universe, if we allow them to do so.

Poem and guidance system do the same thing, then; and we could say the same for our reading of history. I happened to be reconsidering a few of General Lee’s major battles earlier this spring—not that I am about to fight the Civil War again, but I have been fascinated by Lee for a long time without quite knowing why. Now I think I see; he too is a striking example of the inward significance of violent and spectacular outer events. Several of the Virginia campaigns are dazzling examples of the General’s art, but their real meaning—and perhaps the real cause of their success—lies, of course, in the fibre of the man himself. Lee had a remarkable talent for sensitivity and gentleness, coupled with an equal gift for cold and yet daring analysis of events. He seldom yielded to that failure of nerve which at times plagues us all, and as a result he brought conviction, knowledge and action together as very few men have ever done. This is his inner life, and the real significance of his career. By comparison, the great battles were passing moments; they make sense, they are relevant to us only as we see the inner life which makes them possible, and only as we see that they themselves were stages in the tragedy and glory of that inner life.

This inward nature of a man can be matched in significance by the inner nature of a society—our own or some other. I was reading a book about Burma some weeks ago; and in the midst of a mass of fascinating and seemingly alien descriptions of social life I found this passage:

“He whose life has been lived in accordance with the belief that all earthly things, all ornament and pleasures of the earth, are illusion, impermanence and struggle, now has his exit prepared for by weaker mortals who build and decorate a seven-tiered pavilion for his pyre; and fantastic mammoth creatures to flank it high in the sky—giant birds, tigers and elephants, high on the slopes of Shwe Dagon Hill, tall and gigantic, but empty within, of inflammable bamboo and paper, caparisoned with gaudy, floating trimmings. Under the vast shadows of these empty creatures gay pavilions for feeding and the sales of bright ware are put up, lights are festooned for a night bazaar. When the day dawns for the burning, crowds throng to the fair, in merriment because the monk who so long ago renounced his attachment to human affections leaves no grieving widow and children; the coffin is lifted into its tiered catafalque and laid on a bed of inflammable tinder; it is drawn to the center of the giant animals. When the feasting, buying and jostling have had their run, word passes round that the final moment is about to take place; people are drawn towards the canopy; the masters of ceremony throw rockets and torches into the decked bier; four, five and suddenly a hundred tongues of fire lick the bamboo, paper and the bed of tinder, and a magnificent blaze rises into the
sky. Soon other torches set aflame the row of animals, and elephants, tigers, boats and birds go up in smoke, together with canopy, bier and coffin, leaving no traces of the saintly body. Excitement abates, the crowds leave the fair, the sellers their stalls, and of the caparisoned field only a charred blackness remains."

Here, in a ceremony I had never seen, never imagined, I found what thoughtful Buddhism does with the world of ordinary material objects. It makes them of paper and bamboo, and then it destroys them frivolously, as a kind of game in celebration of the eternal things. I sat in sudden recognition of a hundred fragile oriental toys; I saw them for the first time as they truly were, and as a result I saw myself in my own and very different inward nature as a non-oriental—hoping to make tangible objects permanent, looking for the eternal things in history, not outside, trying to catch infinity in some precious object or moment of here and now. In short, I recognized myself as a Western man in the Christian tradition, but I had to respect and sympathize with another way of life in order to see my own clearly.

When I say this, I am not suggesting then that you and I had better become thoughtful Buddhists; the usual consequence of such exotic conversions is a loss of philosophic and religious insight rather than a gain. I do suggest, however, that our own culture, our own faith, our own sense of the ultimate are nourished if we can feel our way to the inner, yet corporate life of other men. And I suggest, further, that acts of true understanding, true inwardness in my sense of the word, are acts of faith and love; we can never understand a man, a machine, a culture, a poem, until we lose our fear and suspicion of others, of those things which we call foreign. We are blind to ourselves until we are really open to the things beyond us.

Blind fear of this kind is, indeed, the worst enemy of all true learning, of all learning which takes us beyond the surface of events and into their heart. One of the most striking qualities of the four Gospels is that they show Christ so passionately devoted to the abolition of fear, and to the discovery instead of the significance of life in the inward natures of other people. Men have at various times made this same discovery in the natural world, in the social world—even, as I have suggested this afternoon, in the world of brilliant mechanical achievement which seems to be our own trademark. What you must learn, as educated people, is that this inwardness of things, their true meaning, is constantly there for us to find. Like Alice looking for her garden, or like Eliot’s pursuit of reality in the first of his quartets, Burnt Norton, the problem for us lies in the search, the interpretation, the understanding which gives us both ourselves and our multiple universe, clear to view at last.

"Other echoes
Inhabit the garden. Shall we follow?
Quick, said the bird, find them, find them,
Round the corner. Through the first gate,
Into our first world, shall we follow
The deception of the thrush? Into our first world.
There they were, dignified, invisible,
Moving without pressure, over the dead leaves,
In the autumn heat, through the vibrant air,
And the bird called, in response to
The unheard music hidden in the shrubbery,
And the unseen eyebeam crossed, for the roses
Had the look of flowers that are looked at.
There they were as our guests, accepted and accepting.
So we moved, and they, in a formal pattern,
Along the empty alley, into the box circle,
To look down into the drained pool.
Dry the pool, dry concrete, brown edged,
And the pool was filled with water out of sunlight,
And the lotos rose, quietly, quietly,
The surface glittered out of heart of light,
And they were behind us, reflected in the pool.
Then a cloud passed, and the pool was empty.
Go, said the bird, for the leaves were full of children,
Hidden excitedly, containing laughter.
Go, go, go said the bird: human kind
Cannot bear very much reality.
Time past and time future
What might have been and what has been
Point to one end, which is always present.”

Eliot is concerned with the now of true experience,
the inward experience which I have tried to evoke
for you. As he puts it at another point in Burnt Norton,

“Time past and time future
Allow but a little consciousness.
To be conscious is not to be in time
But only in time can the moment in the rose-garden,
The moment in the arbour where the rain beat,
The moment in the draughty church at smokefall
Be remembered; involved with past and future.
Only through time time is conquered.”

This discovery is what I wish for you, and
wish for us all. May we learn to conquer time,
to conquer our blind and fearful selves in the
only way which is allowed to mortal men — by
finding moments of vision in the most daily and
commonplace ventures of our lives. All the big
things men enjoy — money, reputation, power —
are nothing without this living insight. Solomon
prayed for an understanding heart, and he was
right. The door to the garden opens only with
that key; and may we find its magic today and
always, with a singing bird, and a rose, and a
voice of love in the bright air.