1973

Commencement address

Kenneth Sager
Graduates, Parents, Faculty, Honored Guests, President Smith:

"So it goes!"

As a head note - and as way of introduction may I observe - Surely athletics is the only public activity in which playing on the home field supposedly carries an advantage for the home team.

A public solo forensics attempt, on the other hand, before a host of extraordinary credentialed and non-credentialed, but still extraordinary human beings - and including one's colleagues - affords little comfort to the soloist. Not only are there seated here so many who spin their careers by verbally moving concepts on this campus intellectual chessboard so twitch a critical ear at anyone indulging in talk but also to be reckoned with among staff ranks is the how-to-write-in-order-to-pass duo, Schneider and Tjossem. That other duo - Strunk and White are blessedly absent by permission. Under this medieval tent one's knees provide a timpani accompaniment to the script.

I can only trust that on a Pentecostal Sunday the Holy spirit is fluttering benignly on a near-by branch - not, of course, directly aloft. For a time, when scribbling these remarks I was wishing that everybody who might dare come would be of Christian Science vintage - such a hope was based on a tale of three chaps who after passing on - passed into hell. Two of them unable to admit to knowing specific causes for such a warm demise asked the third, a Christian Scientist, why he was there. He replied, "I'm not!"

But you are, here! And each of you, particularly graduates and
parents, while wearing a mask of happiness yet 'tis one frayed
by time, energy, monetary concerns, just playing of the school
glass-bead game of existence in order to be here - now. May
I extend to you a verbal handshake in greeting and soberly ask
what does one say at this rite of passage, this trampoline
jump exercise into the "out-there" where ever "out there" may
be. You've already said to each other "my how time flies" -
easily declared after the fact, and "don't forget to pack every-
thing, including the guitar, which goes on top; we're leaving
right after the ceremonies."

Perhaps at these liturgies there is - there should
be "nothing" left to say. After four or more years of
wrestling with book, beaker, ball, canvas, and musical
score, even if still managing sanity as seniors and some
of you register beyond senior status, you must be in a
state of drip-dry exhaustion feeling encased in sawdust,
not really caring to partake of another introductory
survey to an academic heap of knowledge or, as you put a
collective big toe, stretching forth from unisex jeans,
into murky societal waters, a dissertation on the evils
in that society - such a dissertation usually coming to
climax with many "ifs" and "thens" and a generous dousing
with Mrs. Buttersworth's slow running, thick, gooey syrup
as the evil boys make it back to San Clemente by 12 o'clock
midnight - sometimes.

Yet, it does seem appropriate at this people-watching ritual to
talk with people about people, specifically with you graduates.
Philip Slater in his work The Pursuit of Loneliness maintains,
that despite modern style changes in practice, a graduation, a
marriage and parenthood still to be turning points in an individual's pacing out life.

A graduation celebration is a watershed experience - a moment to be caught and held like a fly ball in an outfielder's glove - the catching, holding, then a throw to second - separate actions - totally a twinkling video replay or is it for you a Socratic self-examination replay. A graduation is a time for reminiscing, for a mental raking together of the pieces as to where and how you are in the "now" along with a quizzical glance into distance. The prolog to your fresh coming here was perhaps not unlike that of Stephen Dedalus in the James Joyce novel *A Portrait of an Artist as a Young Man*. Joyce has a fresh Stephen contemplate:

"The University! So he had passed beyond the challenge of the sentries who had stood as guardians of his boyhood and had sought to keep him among them that he might be subject to them and serve their ends. Pride after satisfaction uplifted him like long slow waves. The end he had been born to serve yet did not see had led him to escape by an unseen path: and now it beckoned to him once more and a new adventure was about to be opened to him."

"Adventure" is a word, a construct, weighed down, oozing with personal connotation. Most observers of the American schooling and/or education scenario declare such an adventure ought to involve power, self-realization and joy - a healthy tripod of abstractions, as well as a Kuhnian paradigm, upon which at
this tribal gathering to perch a Lawrence experience - a liberal arts experience.

Power as an education concept refers to the intellect - to a university's stoking of intellect with knowledge from diverse sources, such knowledge to be churned via a rigorous honing of the processes of thinking so enabling students to grapple with present day issues with a whole forest vision, not a single tree provincialism. A liberally educated person understands chunks of existence, skeptically scrutinized from over-running bushel baskets of perspectives. His ultimate concern is a nudging closer to truth by way of decisionmaking - a reasoned moral choosing from a mountain of options with consequences of decisions to be managed in an aura of freedom - freedom as of the Robert Frost notion - a traveling easily in harness. Moreover, liberal arts intellect power ought cause you, the owner, to be '"new' centers of initiative and citizen responsibility" - a personal theme of Paul Goodman. Intellect power - the will to learn - rusts easily unless lubricated by eccentricities in thinking - by action - by confrontation in market place, not just meditation in an upper room.

In footnote to this abbreviated attempt to focus on meaning of intellect power tinged by a liberal arts grace, may I voice the hope that you have found Lawrence's program to be as liberal as its catalog insists that it is - the hope that occasionally your needs, your voice and pen expressing those needs, your heterodoxy overcame the school's (any school's) disease of orthodoxy - that we have listened to you - in tune with anthropologist Margaret Mead's declaration that in today's post-literate society
adults ought put a stethoscope to heart and minds of youth - the hope that for you the curriculum has not been too much bridled by "major" emphasis, by a banking concept as of a recording the receiving, storing and filing of deposits, or a graduate school end and too much measured by a compassionless grading syndrome wherein lives are judged just in what they do not in what they might become - the hope that your vertebrae is not skewed from a too much looking through a rear-view sighting glass - without salt and pepper seasoning of thinking of futurists - of "human verbs" like Herman Kahn, Robert Theobald, Buckminster Fuller. Science plus technology have branded upon our intellects, almost as of a mark of Cain, the fact of change. The straight line seam, if it ever existed as supposedly in chronologically oriented texts, stitiching past to present has become unloosened. Thought clusters of truth we once could depend upon are now but shattered plastics. English historian J. H. Plumb cautions that the agrarian Neolithic age after a 10,000 year life span is coming to a crunching end. Change in institutions like universities - resulting in schools to match - to manipulate society's upheavals - arrive with a creaking slowness. In Pennsylvania Dutch fashion it seems "the hurrier" an institution goes "the behinder" it gets. But even so a liberal arts intellect is flexible - eternally open-ended managing living with taste. However, in teaching-learning one must lament there is ambiguity-that/philosophic and strategy inconsistency to plague us all - or is it just vacillation expressed in this quotation:

"At present opinion is divided about the subjects of education. People do not all take the same
position about what should be learned by the young; either with a view to excellence or with a view to the best life; nor is it clear whether their studies should be mainly directed to the intellect or to moral character. If we look at actual practice, the picture is also confusing; and it is not clear whether the proper studies to be pursued are those that are useful in life, those that make for excellence, or those that are non-essential. Each kind of study gets some support. Even about those that make for excellence there is no agreement, for men do not all honor the same excellence, and so naturally they differ about the proper training for it."

Aristotle from his Politics - at first review I supposed same was really pronounced by Aristotle to the local press as he along with Lawrence's President Smith wearily left anyone of the faculty meetings scheduled during the soggy spring of 1973.

Then there is self-realization - or is it Abraham Maslow's self-actualization? Really not - for the latter halo descends upon so few and still fewer by the time of a first university graduation. Besides I have difficulty identifying with the delicate wispiness of the self-actualization goal and tie it to Plato's man of wisdom ideal. I even had looked for the wisdom halo by age 50, as of Plato's promise in the biblical Republic - so far he has stood me down.

Self-realization in a phenomenological liberal arts context has a viability. A Wittgensteiner philosopher
might gently scream that it is ludicrous to attempt definition of the term. I like to think he didn't think so until he, after much anguish, realized self, trapped legitimately in the brambles of analytic thought.

Four years of education sprinkled with 36 courses must have provided some enlightenment relative to questions of who you are? where you are going and how you will know when you get there? Your values must have received a jolt and your lifestyle not one but several risk-taking uprootings - and transplantings if only for an hour, a day in the rock of self-esteem giving confidence to listen - to listen from inside out to know your own heart. Self-realization implies, by route of Sartreian choice, a seeking and finding of one's reality which is an ordering of the bones and flesh of living so a coping with the dynamics of living. Realities, if not in existence, must be invented. Self-realization is a melding in confluence of intellect and emotion - a whole body ecstasy - a liberal arts multi-dimensional reality enabling a person in analyzed self-direction to walk tall in the role of a human human being. Education's prime purpose is to make man a more human man. Self-realization, unfortunately, is caught not taught; the catching is a difficult art - a Holy Grail quest - a waiting for Godot.

A preface page to Hesse's Demian laments:

"I wanted only to try to live in accord with the promptings which came from my own true self. Why was that so difficult?"

Difficult, but it also seems that within each of us is a Taoistic "way" to self knowledge - a "way" which reveals itself in a psychophysics spark - with another person in an I-Thou relationship, a
successful lab experiment, a discussion in a London pub, a gestalt truth like "don't push the river, it flows by itself," William Blake or Casteneda mysticism, a community Renaissance festival, a breakdown which becomes a breakthrough to self-understanding, love, solitude, a jazz orgy of sound rocking a chapel tower, a lollipop plucked from the campus green.

Or is the "way" to self-affirmation a meeting with a musical instrument, preferably a violin, which when conquered demonstrates physical growth and psychological development from a scratching to a subliming? I would counsel every Lawrentian to seek self through music, art, the theatre, affective linings in the academic coat of the institution.

Or is the "way" long, intense conversations with a sad Siamese cat, a dandelion in spring, prior to making the dandelion into wine and so a second conversation with it; is it a sense of awareness of a football as it winds its path in and out of hands - or just an awareness sung by Johnny Cash who in "I've got a feelin'" growls that some people feel the rain while other people just get wet?

Or is the "way" an acquaintance with gardening, and there are spaces on campus waiting the touch of a spade - gardening of both vegetable and flower variety including transformational lettuce and structural carrots, dangling petunias and linear delphineums - the gardener all of the time sensing modulation continuities between organic nature and organic sentences woven into an essay for Freshman Studies or a political science analysis of inquiry? Gardening, fishing, carpentry, activities not in Lawrence catalog would eliminate need for counselors.

Or is the "way" travel on non-polluting campus swings, so
a pragmatic use of trees? A swing goes to and fro from one point to another point - higher - lower allowing occupant to glimpse sequential horizon levels which in synergy yield a perspective touched with a dab of wisdom, personal and societal.

Finally, to bring this verbal spilling of a few grains of hourglass sand to final grain, self-realization, along with intellect power ought be wrapped in joy - fermented, educated joy - as of sense of spiritual play - spiritual wonder - joy creased with the comic and tragic.

In stressing "joy" as a mood essential to the well being of a liberally educated person I am not alluding to the shallow Adam's apple laugh of hollow men existing for "kicks." Neither am I interpreting such an in-depth emotion as one coming out of an ambivalent tremor experienced in a poem about a dachshund:

There was a little dachshund once
Who never had a notion
Of how long it took to notify
His tail of his emotion.

So while his little eyes were full
Of present woe and sadness
His little tail kept wagging on
Because of previous gladness.

Moreover, I am cognizant, even if Archie Bunker isn't, that a Wounded Knee and Watergate suggest all is not right with America - that to mention "joy" may be mockery. In our temporary society, really just a niche in the global village, we are stuck in our alienated skins and no longer believe in each other or our ability to creatively revitalize existence.

It could be that Henry Miller is correct when in
looking for an underlying cause to misfortunes flaying the human species, particularly the American Dream variety - he surmises that the lack of a good loaf of bread is rotting America. He writes:

"Bread: prime symbol. Try and find a good loaf. You can travel fifty thousand miles in America without once tasting a piece of good bread. Americans don't care about good bread. They are dying of inanition but they go on eating bread without substance, bread without flavor, bread without vitamins, bread without life. Why? Because the very core of life is contaminated. If they knew what good bread was they would not have such wonderful machines on which they lavish all their time, energy and affection. A plate of false teeth means much more to an American than a loaf of good bread. Here is the sequence: poor bread, bad teeth, indigestion, constipation, halitosis, sexual starvation, disease and accidents, the operating table, artificial limbs, spectacles, baldness, kidney and bladder trouble, neurosis, psychosis, schizophrenia, war and famine. Start with the American loaf of bread so beautifully wrapped in cellophane and you end on the scrap heap at forty-five."

One can only add not even ancient Greek tragic dramatists had to contend with such a miserable fate theme and that to squeeze American bread is nearly as critical a sin as squeezing the Charmin and arousing the anger of grocerymen Whipple.

In, with and under the bread and wine of a societal Marat-Sade nightmare the joy I urge upon you is a sort of exaltation
born out of absurdity, out of personal helplessness, loneliness as found at a university and expressed by Lawrentian Nathaniel McMorris in a poem entitled "Loneliness" -

No sky at all
No earth at all, and still
The snowflakes fall

Such a loneliness is disappointment marching downhill to disgust as of a refiner's fire - is a being down in the Psalmist's valley, only to be lifted, rolled back up by way of resources - intellectual and moral resources - resources one employs only when turning from using self as a mirror to using self as a window, seeing thereby with others that we all perish unless we wave aloft the white plume of courage, unless we believe with Jerome Brunner that the right hand is for doing and the left for dreaming and that two hands are just dangling appendages until they clasp two other hands - trust melding with trust in persons with a responsibility for each because of ability to respond to each.

So a joy as can only be sung only in a Brahms' Requiem - only by singers of life - by you - all of us in unity in expectation and aspiration.

Four years of buffeting in the high winds of thought - in the throes of a reaching for authentic self - touched by joy. Perhaps the time measures a Stephen Dedalus adventure after all, if not seeming so now, perhaps in retrospect when, because of peak experiences here, you return - sometime - and echo in chorus with T. S. Eliot:

"We shall not cease from exploration
And the end of all our exploring will be
To arrive where we started
And know the place for the first time."

So it goes -

May you escape from this place as
Jonathan Livingston Seagulls.

--So it goes.