

"THAT'S THE DEAL"

MATRICULATION CONVOCATION ADDRESS

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Though I eschew bumper stickers on my own car, I confess that when driving on long trips, lulled by the gentle breathing of my slumbering passengers, I become a compulsive reader of same. The variety, as you know, is staggering, ranging from the banal and trivial to the offensive and preposterous and including everything in between. Mind you, it's not that I'm really interested in whether or not the car ahead of me has successfully navigated Pike's Peak or if the family has paid a visit to Busch Gardens. Nor am I particularly taken by messages that suggest that the driver is imploring heaven on my behalf or which ask that I lean on the horn if I agree with some particular proposition plastered across the rear fender. And I must confess that after the first few yellow signs announcing that there is a baby on board or an ex-husband in the trunk, my sense of amusement flags. But I keep looking, tailgating across the interstates and the blue highways in search of a good read. And there are rewards. Occasionally the genre does yield a word of wit or wisdom or wackiness worth remembering. Last month, on route 2 in New Hampshire, I caught this one, commenting on the nature of participatory democracy: "Don't Re-elect Anybody." And, right here in the Valley, I've come across this one, commenting on the meaning of life in America: "The one who dies with the most toys wins."

Let's consider the implications of these two statements for a moment. "Don't Re-elect Anybody," as it turns out, expresses a sentiment that is increasingly widespread in terms of political participation these days. Our last two presidents, in fact, have

won election by running against Washington politics, as it were, and the old adage of "throw the bums out" seems to be enjoying renewed life. Ronald Reagan's frequent assaults on government itself and on the men and women who work for its various agencies have not only demoralized many federal employees, but have demeaned the very notion of government service. Other evidence points to the same attitudinal problem. A survey measuring trust in government has found that those of us who believe that government can be trusted to do the right thing "only some or none of the time" has doubled to 54 percent in the last twenty years. And a recent Roper poll showed that the number of people who feel that "things in this country are pretty seriously on the wrong track" totalled over half of the respondents.

With these attitudes abroad in the land, it may strike us as little wonder that when it comes to elections, Americans seem to be passing. In 1960, 63 percent of those eligible voted. In 1980, 52 percent voted for president, but only 38 percent voted for members of the House of Representatives. This decline continued into the 1984 elections. Many if not most of us seem not only prepared not to re-elect anybody, but not to elect anybody either. On a more immediate level, the percentage of Lawrentians casting ballots in the last LUCC election totalled less than half of the eligible voters--43 percent.

If politics is turning into a spectator sport, as it were, accumulating toys seems to be enjoying more broadbased support. At least that endeavor may be seen as a metaphor for what has been the prevailing mood in recent years. Being one's

own best friend, looking out for number one, and the "me generation" are but three phrases that point to this phenomenon, with the dreaded Yuppie often portrayed as the embodiment of the type. The story about the two young men hiking in the woods sums up this ideology well. As they proceeded down the trail, they spied a grizzly bear some fifty yards ahead of them. One of the hikers took off his knapsack, sat down, and began changing his hiking boots for designer running shoes. "What are you doing that for?" his companion asked; "you can't outrun that bear." "I don't have to outrun the bear," the first fellow replied, "I just have to outrun you."

Evidence that this kind of self-centeredness is not just episodic can be found in the fifteen-year changes in the attitudes and values of incoming college freshmen. From the early 1970s to the mid-1980s, the values which have increased most are: 1) being very well off financially, 2) being an authority, 3) having administrative responsibility for others, and 4) obtaining recognition. The values showing the greatest decline are: 1) developing a philosophy of life, 2) participating in community affairs, 3) cleaning up the environment, and 4) promoting racial understanding.

Over a twenty year period, this change is further illustrated by the fact that in 1960 almost 90 percent of college students wanted an education that would help them "benefit mankind"; six years ago, the percentage had dropped to 42. Additional survey data confirm the present situation: when asked, for the first time in 1985, whether the individual can do much to change society, over a third replied in the negative. And when

asked if they considered it important to participate in community action, influence the political structure, or influence social values, the percentage of positive replies among students was 23, 16, and 33 respectively.

In citing these statistics, I mean to convey something of a note of disappointment and despair. My disappointment and despair are mitigated, to be sure, by the fact that Lawrence students differ from the national norms, and in some cases differ dramatically. Whereas only 32 percent of all college freshmen in 1985 viewed promoting racial understanding as important, for example, 48 percent of Lawrentians did so. And whereas a third of all students agree that the individual can do little to change society, only a quarter of Lawrence students hold that view.

But these differences cannot mask the facts, namely, that a little over half of the Lawrence respondents did not see the promotion of racial understanding as important and that one in four feel that individuals can do little to change the society in which they live. And while it is heartening to note that 60 percent of you believe that it is essential or very important to develop a meaningful philosophy of life--contrasted with the national norm of 43 percent--it is sobering to note that the Lawrence response has declined by 25 percent in the last fifteen years.

At this point, as should be obvious to all of you, this address is well on the way to becoming a jeremiad--that form of address perfected by the second and third generations of new world Puritans who lamented people's lapses and declension from

the virtues of their forebears and decried the resulting state of New England society and piety. And while not wishing to deny that element of my purposes here, I do want to offer some context for understanding why I believe we need to rediscover and reaffirm a vigorous sense of civic purpose and engagement out of and as an expression of this community of learning.

Plato argued that "if you ask what is the good of education, the answer is easy--that education makes good persons and that good persons act nobly." For Plato, as the upperclassmen know and as the freshmen will soon discover, noble action was fundamentally public action--acting as citizen in the realm of civic affairs. Indeed, Graham Wallace once characterized the great philosophers of Athens as "training free citizens to exercise judgment on behalf of a consciously self-governed community," a notion that Joseph Tussman argues is "an especially apt statement of what liberal education is--when it is what it should be."

Such ideas not only can be traced to antiquity, but they have a distinctly American articulation as well. The Founding Fathers understood and proclaimed that education and a free society were inextricably interwoven, indeed that the latter depended on the former. Thomas Jefferson, for example, said "I know of no safe depository of the ultimate powers of society but the people themselves, and if we think them not enlightened enough to exercise their control with wholesome direction, the remedy is not to take it from them, but to inform their discretion." Washington concurred: "It is substantively true,"

he wrote, "that virtue or morality is a necessary spring of popular government. . . . Promote, then, as an object of primary importance, institutions for the general diffusion of knowledge. In proportion as the structure of government gives force to public opinion, it is essential that public opinion should be enlightened."

The genius of the American experiment has been--perforce, must continue to be--the bold commitment to self-government, government--as Lincoln put it--of, by, and for the people. That being the case, the wisdom of the people becomes of primary importance, and the political savvy and discernment of the people regarding the public good remain the bulwark of a free society. Education, in that sense, is viewed as a necessary ingredient of democracy. What Jefferson and Washington and others argued--the democratic requirement of informed citizen participation in public life--may be understood, simply, as an effort to avoid what Bertrand de Jouvenal foresaw when he warned that "a society of sheep must in time beget a government of wolves."

Just as our early statesmen spoke of democracy's dependence on an enlightened and educated citizenry and their civic virtue, so too have educators affirmed the civic purposes of learning. The establishment of Harvard College 350 years ago in the wilderness of the Massachusetts Bay Colony was motivated by the felt need for educated leadership. And while that pure purpose obviously flagged over time, there were those who reminded their fellow New Englanders of the reasons for a college education. Solomon Stoddard, preaching one of those jeremiads I alluded to earlier, put it this way: It is "not worth the while for persons

to be sent to the Colledge to learn to Complement men, and Court women [and, we would add, vice versa]; they should be sent thither to prepare them for Publick Service." Indeed, some version of that claim spurred the founding of other colleges--at Yale, the language called for youth to be instructed in the arts and sciences to fit them for "Publick employment both in Church & Civil State"--and such purposes have remained part of the language of higher education into this century.

Such sentiments, then, have prevailed over time. Charles W. Eliot spoke of this aspect of the mission of higher education a hundred years ago: "And what will the university do for the community?" he asked. And he answered: "First, it will make a rich return of learning, poetry, and piety. Secondly, it will foster the sense of public duty--that great virtue which makes republics possible." And in another place Eliot argued "that the best solution to the problem of national order lay in the education of individuals to ideals of service, stewardship, and cooperation." Eliot's claims are of a piece with the assessment of William Mather Lewis. "Education," he said, "is not concerned primarily with intellectual luxuries, but with elements which make the individual a valuable member of society."

While American colleges and universities continue to hold to some version of these views into the present day, such utterances, frankly, have lost the force and conviction they once possessed. There are no doubt many reasons for this diminution; Walter Lippmann located the change in the nature of education itself and offered this explanation 46 years ago. Modern

education, Lippmann said, "is based on a denial that it is necessary or useful or desirable for colleges to continue to transmit from generation to generation the religious and classical culture of the Western world. It abandons and neglects as no longer necessary the study of the whole classical heritage of the great works.

"Thus there is an enormous vacuum where until a few decades ago there was the substance of education. And with what is the vacuum filled: it is filled with the elective, eclectic, the specialized, the accidental and incidental improvisations and spontaneous curiosities of teachers and students. There is no common faith, no common body of principle, no common body of knowledge, no common moral and intellectual discipline. Yet the graduates of these modern schools are expected to form a civilized community. They are expected to govern themselves. They are expected to have a social conscience. They are expected to arrive by discussion at common purposes."

Lippmann's point was that such expectations were no longer valid and viable and hence that education no longer served with force or meaning the civic purposes it had long espoused. The condition he described probably remains more or less true today. What higher education has served, and served effectively, is the individual and individually-defined interests and intended pursuits of students. Most often, this service is related to the individual's private life--typically, vocational--and, as we hear with enervating monotony, to the individual's quest for securing personal goals and satisfactions. And so we circle back to the survey findings I cited a few moments ago: that, in the main,

American college students today hold private objectives in higher regard than public ones.

That, at least, is the predominant mode and the situation that has prompted the most comment and concern in and beyond the higher educational community. But leaving it at that will hardly do. In fact, there are signs which contradict that general state of affairs. There is, if you will, another side to the situation, and that other side deserves to be nurtured and advanced.

Robert Bellah, in Habits of the Heart: Individualism and Commitment in American Life, notes that despite the prevalence of personal and private priorities, few Americans "have found a life devoted to 'personal ambition and consumerism' satisfactory, and most are seeking in one way or another to transcend the limitations of a self-centered life." T.H. Huxley expressed something of the same idea when he said that "the sense of uselessness is the severest shock which our system can sustain." There is, then, evidence to suggest and support the persistence of individual commitment to community, on behalf of others, to what might be styled noble action in the public sphere. And though that commitment is, Bellah argues, constrained by the ethos of individualism, it is not crippled by it.

These evidences of commitment and action are, indeed, part and parcel of our national make-up. The Founding Fathers celebrated it. And Alexis de Tocqueville viewed its expression as one of the most salient features of democracy in America. Tocqueville found that in a democratic society, the individual--

being on equal footing with other individuals--is powerless alone. Through concerted and common purpose and action, however, the individual gained power and influence and this, he found, was the American practice. Here is how he put it:

"If each citizen did not learn, in proportion as he individually becomes more feeble and consequently more incapable of preserving his freedom single-handedly, to combine with his fellow citizens for the purpose of defending it, it is clear that tyranny would unavoidably increase together with equality. / Among democratic nations...all the citizens are independent and feeble; they can do hardly anything by themselves, and none of them can oblige his fellow men to lend him their assistance. They all, therefore, become powerless if they do not learn voluntarily to help one another."

And, Tocqueville discerned, that is exactly what Americans did. They joined together not only in the realm of politics, but in all aspects of civil life. "The Americans," Tocqueville wrote, "make associations to give entertainments, to found seminaries, to build inns, to construct churches, to diffuse books, to send missionaries to the antipodes; in this manner they found hospitals, prisons, and schools....Wherever at the head of some new undertaking you see the government in France, or a man of rank in England, in the United States you will be sure to find an association."

What Tocqueville here points to is the endemic tension in the American democracy between private and public life, between individual pursuits and common interests. What kept American society from flying apart, he thought, was that this tension did

not snap, and that private life and individual pursuits did not dominate the equation. Plato addresses this tension in The Republic and resolves it, as it were, by attempting insofar as possible to deny rulers a private life. "The guardians have no private homes, no families, no private property. Those outside the ruling class, on the other hand, have only private lives."

A democracy rejects this bifurcation between rulers--those who only live a public life--and others--those who only live a private life. That is a bold and adventuresome rejection, for it is predicated on the fragile notion that the individual in a democratic free society will, in fact, behave not only as a private person but as a public agent. As one political philosopher puts it, "democracy's basic assertion is that every citizen has two distinct roles to play. Each citizen is a member, a subject, a private person free within the common limits to pursue his [or her] private ends. But each is also an agent of the body politic, a ruler, a [member] of the sovereign tribunal with all of the duties, obligations, and responsibilities that go with that role."

John Gardner, in the revised version of his book Excellence, states the case here succinctly: "Freedom and obligation, liberty and duty--that's the deal." And in fulfilling the deal in terms of obligation and duty, one acts as citizen, as one concerned with the public interest, the welfare of others, and not with private goods and aims. Betrayal of the public interest to private interest is, one author has opined, "the treason to which we have become callous." The "deal," in Gardner's terms, is to

have it both ways, not only to celebrate one's individuality and freedom, but for each of us to recognize "the mutual dependence of the individual and the group" and to "pay tithes of allegiance--give something back--to family, community, nation, humankind."

For Lawrence and for Lawrentians, these ideas need to have force. To the extent that the college affords only opportunities to educate the student as private person and to further the individual's private aims, it has failed. The college must also nurture and celebrate the individual as public agent, and find ways to promote those expressions of public service and voluntary action which foster our citizenship and which, ultimately, give meaning to our lives. President Henry Wriston put it well: "The reconciliation of individualism with social demands is one of the highest functions of the college. But it never can be discharged by putting ...self-interest at the center of life."

There is, as I said a moment ago, reason for encouragement here. In 1985, nearly three-fourths of the Lawrence respondents in the polls I cited earlier stated that they deemed it essential or important to help those in difficulty. A little over three-fourths indicated that they had engaged in some form of volunteer service within the past year. Many student organizations on campus have a service component as one of their purposes and priorities. A significant number of new students responded warmly and positively to Ralph Nader's talk and call to action last Friday regarding citizen movements. And many members of the faculty and staff of the college are active and contributing participants in a variety of public and service

activities and groups. Surely, then, we can draw from these sensibilities and behaviors the base from which to move. I propose that we do so.

Last year, in thinking about just these kinds of issues and concerns, I promoted and secured Lawrence's membership in a new national organization of a little over 100 colleges and universities called "Campus Compact: The Project for Public and Community Service." This confederation is dedicated to charging "the nation's institutions of higher education to recommit themselves to equipping their students to be the committed, compassionate citizens upon which this nation depends." On behalf of our community, I accept that charge.

While recommitting and equipping will require analysis, thought, and conversation, my aim here is not for us to debate but to deliver, not to deliberate but to do. In their article "On Participation," Hanna Pitkin and Sara Shumer argue that "there are a number of things we can't do until we can think about them, but being a good citizen is probably something that we can't think about until we do it." Let's do it.

In the coming year, the college will work to investigate and delineate service opportunities within and beyond the immediate community in which we live and will, in addition, consider other initiatives to help promote student involvement with such programs. I have spoken with Aron Livingston, president of the Lawrence University Community Council, about these intentions, and he shares my conviction that they deserve a top place on the LUCC agenda for the coming year. In addition, I would here call

on all student organizations to make voluntary service activities a priority for their members. I would ask that we consider reviving "Lantern," the umbrella organization that was charged with promoting the ideal and practice of service in and for the Lawrence community, a symbolic act that might express our larger intent and which would give new meaning to the Lawrence motto of "Light, More Light."

I would urge faculty to continue to express in their teaching the applicable connections between coursework and public concerns, between the life of the mind and our lives in our communities. And, finally, I propose that through an ongoing series of campus conversations---structured and spontaneous---we give voice and reflection to those common concerns of peace, justice, freedom, equality, and human dignity that constitute the shared aims that bind us together. We are all adept at expressing and furthering our own interests; we need to find ways to discover and celebrate our collective interests.

As we do these things, I believe we will be most faithful to a central if neglected element of the best purposes of liberal education. And as we do these things, I am confident that we will find that service to others and society will bring rewards and satisfactions far beyond our imagining. We will find, with George Bernard Shaw, that the true joy in life is being used for a purpose recognized as a right one. We will find, finally, what it means to be a citizen.

Freedom and obligation, liberty and duty---that's the deal. That's the deal that calls upon the better angels of our nature to act in the public realm and for others. That's the deal that

defines our democratic freedoms and enables our common life.

That's the deal I urge we accept as part and parcel of our living and learning at Lawrence.