UNIVERSITY OF MINNESOTA, DULUTH

Commencement Address

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WHAT WORRIES ME ABOUT YOU

There have been three women in my life to whom I feel supremely indebted. The first is my mother; the second is my wife. The third woman has helped me through many a long, hard night. Lest you suspect the worst, let me say that this other woman became famous even before I was born by describing the activities of a certain Dr. Sheppard who was implicated in The Murder of Roger Ackroyd. I have almost come to believe that though the grass withers and the flower fades, the words of Agatha Christie will go on forever.

Now throughout Mrs. Christie's novels there is a recurring commentary on the dialogue between youth and age. In one of her books I came across a saying that stuck in my mind:

"Youth is a failing too soon outgrown."

I stand before you as one who regretfully has experienced the truth of that saying. But having outgrown the failing that is youth I have one compensation. I can now exercise the privilege of worrying about youth. Never has there been a time when people like me did not take advantage of that privilege.

Consider, for example, the way things were just two decades ago, back in 1953. This was the era that some labeled the season of "Peace, prosperity and progress." Others styled it the age of "the bland leading the bland."

In that year too people worried about those emerging from our colleges and universities. Some were worried about the terrifying panty raids that were then in fashion. What could you expect of people who spent their college careers in that way? It was frightening enough when bands of crew-cut young men stormed women's dormitories demanding tribute in the form of lingerie. But the previous year when carloads of young ladies invaded the male, Catholic preserve of Georgetown University with similar objectives in view, pious folk of all persuasions were convinced that the dread Day of Judgement was at hand.

Now from the perspective of history we see that this was only the first, small step in behalf of women's liberation.

That same spring Wisconsin's Senator Joseph McCarthy and Congressman Jenner of Indiana were worried about the degree to which college students were being contaminated by subversive ideas. They were investigating professors all over the country.

But perhaps the most profound concern was expressed by those who feared that the youth of the day were immune to any challenging ideas at all. A church youth manual written a little later spoke of that generation in this way:

"Someone has described our young people as 'the silent generation', not politically conscious, overly cautious, seeking security at any price, fearful of offending people by differing with their opinions."

Like all such characterizations of a whole generation, that one is too sweeping. But there was some truth in it.

But suppose we move up ten years to 1963. It is hard to imagine two decades set back to back in which the mood of the world stood in more radical contrast than those of the 1950's and 60's.

And the contrast was most pronounced among college students. I think it was in 1962 that the front pages and magazine covers were full of a blond young man from one of the colleges in Wisconsin with blood streaming down his face. He had been beaten during an interracial sit-in in the south. That picture spoke of a new era for the American campus. We were very far, indeed, from the silent generation.

To be sure, even as late as 1963 the contrast to that earlier decade was only beginning to appear. On November 17th of that year, just five days before the assassination of President Kennedy, the New York Times published a survey called, "Campus Report: Mood of the Students." The editors of college newspapers across the country contributed responses.

The correspondent at Harvard stated that the mood there remained one of "scholarly detachment." Of course, as we all know, that is always the mood at Harvard, which may be the reason why so many of their people get into trouble when they go to Washington.

At Iowa State the student editor replied that "students are more concerned with job prospects, finances, dating and marriage than with the crisis in Vietnam, the tax program or the threat of nuclear war." Above all, he wrote, students "want security in an anxious world."

Even allowing for the everlasting cynicism of college editors that does not sound much different from 1953. Yet in the woman who spoke for Stanford University we meet a prophetic voice. Already, she reports, a confrontation is occurring between students and administration. And she concludes, "The case is clear. We are children of the times when peace, civil liberties and religious unity have become the salient issues for pragmatist and idealist alike. We are children of a time of ferment, and as historical beings we make the ferment ours." [1]

"We make the ferment ours." They sure did. Only some of them. But enough of them to blow the lid off the whole society.

But, naturally, older people worried about that. In 1963 the Flower children had not yet turned to acid, nor had the political activists gone up in smoke. It was all very beautiful and exciting for those who empathized with the counter-cultures. I myself was never so young as I was in the late sixties, not even on the day I was born. But there was a grim under-side to this burst of romanticism and idealism. People made the ferment theirs, but increasingly they did so with a vengeance, literally with a vengeance.

And others lashed back with a vengeance.

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1. Ilene H. Stretetz in New York Times, Magazine, Nov. 17, 1963.

Now we find ourselves entering the summer of 1973. Once again we stand in a changed situation. As one writer in a recent anthology on the college scene observed:

"Something new apparently is occurring on the campuses just when people are trying to make sense of the previous crisis." 1

These sudden shifts in mood are humbling. They dispel the comfortable illusion that every generation suffers from the same complaints. They also deflate that form of egotism to which youth itself is especially prone - that egotism which regards the moment of our own youth as the decisive turning point for the remainder of human history.

But instructive though such recollections may be, if I am going to exercise my privilege of worrying today, there is little point in my worrying about those incorrigibles who have gone before. If I am to worry in a relevant fashion, let me worry about you, the class of '73.

So let me begin by saying that I worry that you will stop caring. This is not the most promising of summers. Whatever the defects of the class of '53, they were electrified by the news that on May 29th a party led by Sir Edmund Hilary and Tensing Norkay scaled the peak of Mt. Everest. In August of '63 a good many recent graduates were among the 200,000 who marched to the Lincoln Memorial and heard Martin Luther King declare:

"I have a dream!"

Other graduation years offered their heroic events, events that summoned the coming generation to meet the twin challenges posed by their natural and social environments. But what heroic happening of this year can inspire you? The event that electrifies the world today is known as The Watergate.

I am worried that you will stop caring. That is to say, I'm afraid that you are already tired, not physically tired, but morally tired. You have passed through so much since that class of '53 went out hoping that now that another war was winding down things would get back to normal. Since then you have known hardly a day when there was not war or rumor of war. You have been nurtured on a communications revolution that has bombarded you with stimuli on a scale unknown to any previous generation. By the time you went to kindergarten you experienced every raw emotion known to the human race. You have grown up amid the disintegration of traditional family life, mass protest, riot, assassination and sinister trends in the abuse of political power. In your lifetime the mood of your country has passed from conceited boasting about American power and superiority to the melancholy feeling that we have lost our way. You have passed into adulthood in a world where every system of beliefs, every set of values, every institution and every established lifestyle is called in question and found wanting. And they are wanting - all of them. You have witnessed a wave of youthful idealism rising just ahead of you only to break and scatter against the hard beaches of indifference, prejudice and greed.

If you feel old and weary already that is understandable. If you are disillusioned that is natural. If you feel helpless and hopeless before the perils confronting your world that is not surprising. If you experience

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1. Malcolm G. Scully in American Youth in a Changing Culture, ed. by Grant S. McClellan (New York. H. W. Wilson, 1972) pp. 15-16.

an emptiness in your own inner selves that is to be expected. If you feel just like crawling into a hole somewhere and surviving as best you can until the light dawns, I can hardly blame you.

I know that moral fatigue. It is pervasive; it is overwhelming. It is so tempting just to stop caring. We who are older have no right to ask you to carry on battles that we have lost. Even so, I must ask you not to give way to apathy and to cynicism. I must beg you to find the courage to take the risk of caring passionately about what happens to this world of yours. For unless you do, the light will not dawn.

I am worried that you will stop caring.

I am worried also that you will stop thinking. The purpose of education is to open our minds. But there is an old proverb that reminds us that what we don't know won't hurt us. When the times are hurtful, we trust the proverb more than we do those who bring us the truth.

Of course, none of us stops thinking entirely. I have seen a few out there on Sunday morning who gave me that impression, but charity suggests that they were only asleep. But if people don't stop thinking entirely, there are forms of limited thinking that are very popular.

One variety of limited thinking is that which we meet in the fanatic. Fanaticism is thinking on a single track and on a circular track at that.

The difference between fanaticism and a healthy commitment is not just one of degree. If the fanatic were simply more committed, then we all should be fanatics about the right things. The difference, I believe, is not quantitative, but qualitative. Where there is healthy commitment there is humility; fanaticism is arrogant. Where there is healthy commitment there is compassion; fanaticism is insensitive and in the end, ruthless. Where there is healthy commitment, there is openness to understanding; the mind is free to run on many tracks. Fanaticism thrives on the closed mind.

Fanaticism is not the majority temptation. The majority temptation is apathy. But fanaticism, whether political, religious or something else, does attract a significant minority today. Ever since I was in college I have felt that a fundamental issue of our time - a very personal issue - is how to be free yet committed. In my college days I reacted against the enervating effect of a vague and flabby liberalism. But today it is fanaticism that I fear. I see it rising as it always rises from the ashes of blasted idealism and personal confusion. If we do not look out, it will destroy us all.

There, again I ask you take a risk. Take the risk of thinking critically, of opening your minds to diverse ideas, of humbly and faithfully seeking the truth wherever it may lead, of continuing until your dying day the process of education that was only begun in this place.

One more worry I have is that you will stop worshipping. I don't have in mind just church worship, though I certainly don't want to leave that out. I worry that you will lose the sense of the wonder, the glory, the sacred depths of things and of persons. What I am concerned about is what I would call the spirit of hallowing, a posture of soul in which the radiant mystery underlying our lives is greeted and cherished with profound intimacy

and yet with awe. I think you have the feel of this spirit to a greater degree than your fathers did. But you could lose it. I am worried that not only will you cop out on the challenges posed by your natural and social environments, but that you will lose touch with an environment more comprehensive and more ultimate - that "in which we live and move and have our being."

It may have occurred to you that when it comes to finding a job this summer might best be compared to the depression year of 1933. When the business of just making a living is all-consuming, life has a way of narrowing down. We are tempted to try to live by bread alone. I believe you are less likely to yield to that temptation than most graduating classes I have known. But it could happen. So I worry.

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But that is enough worrying. I have exercised my privilege. If I can worry, so I can hope. You may be among the more bewildered classes of history, but you are certainly among the best equipped. There is work to be done in the world and you can do it. There are songs to be sung in the world and you can sing them.

The time of chaos and agony into which you move out from this place is also a time of opportunity. It is a very exacting time, but also very exciting. Don't think that yours is the generation that can sit back and wait for some more promising hour. This is the hour of promise. Don't think that yours is the generation that can be content to lead lives of quiet desperation until some more favored race comes along. You are that favored race. And there is hope for you. There is hope if you care passionately, and think critically and hallow reverently that little bit of history that is given into your hands.