

Commencement Address of
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U.S. Commissioner of Education
University of Maryland
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I congratulate the graduates for choosing the University of Maryland, for completing your program with success -- and I wish for you a life of satisfaction and great joy. The University of Maryland is an academic center with great status, and it is a special pleasure for me today to become an alumnus of this distinguished institution.

I'm also pleased to share this platform with outstanding people. Your new president -- John Toll -- is one of the most unusual people I know. We worked closely together in New York and I not only learned to know him as a friend but I admired him enormously for his quality of mind, for his dedication to academic excellence, for his conviction that every student can excel.

Astronomer Halton Arp once said: "Mavericks disturb things, rock the boat, cause trouble, and some, a majority, are dead wrong. But the ones who are right are very, very valuable."

- 2 -

John Toll is a boat rocker when he needs to be, but when things settle down you find the course corrections that he's made were pointed straight to excellence.

John knows that excellence is the yardstick by which education must be measured.

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During a lecture at State University of New York's Downstate Medical Center in 1966, Arnold Toynbee observed that

- o we have conquered nature
- o and now our great unfinished task
- is to conquer self.

He noted that the greatest irony of our time is that man may be destroyed

- o not by his madness
- o but by his carelessness
- o by his wanton disregard for his
- special relationship to the
- planet Earth.

Toynbee's warnings hang over us like a chilling cloud.

- o But in addition to the rape of physical
- resources of which he warned,

- o we increasingly encounter a new crisis--the crisis of the human spirit.

More than fifty years ago, the American philosopher Josiah Royce said that:

- o we have become "more knowing, more clever, more skeptical, but seemingly we do not become more profound or more reverent."

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This evening we meet on a marvelous campus--a distinguished institution.

And just before you leave this happy island of intellectual inquiry,

- o may I impose upon you, as graduates, one more fifteen-minute lecture,
- o and suggest three ways in which all of us may contribute more fully to the strengthening of the moral fiber of our nation.

II

First, I suggest the time has come for us to underscore the unity of life on this spaceship Earth.

Some years ago at the opening convocation of one of City University of New York's senior institutions, William Arrowsmith declared that the modern university is

- o "unconsciously helping to create a new and special modern chaos in which the environment as a whole is nobody's business and bears nobody's design
- o a conglomerate whose total disorder is exposed by the ruthless unrelatedness of the parts."

There is some truth to this charge.

- o For, with all of our academic subtleties
- o and our countless categories of knowledge,
- o we frequently study all questions except those that matter most.

And while we are doing well the essential business of transmitting fragments of information,

- o there is another obligation that is substantially ignored:
- o searching out and highlighting the interlocking threads of human knowledge.

The fact is that students come to college at a time in their lives when the biggest questions press in on them, and yet rarely in the academic programs are these transcendent issues met head on.

- o And this leads, for some at least, to acute frustration.
- o Somerset Maugham in the "Writer's Notebook" writes poignantly of the mountaineer who struggled to reach the top of the highest peak only to discover that instead of seeing the sunrise he found only fog, at which the writer suggests "he wandered down again."

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It was Tolstoy who, as a young man, troubled himself with such urgent and universal questions as

- o "Why live at all?"
- o "What is the cause of my existence and of everyone else's?"
- o "What is the meaning of the cleavage into good and evil which I feel within myself, and why does this cleavage exist?"

- 6 -

- o "What should be the plan of my life?"
- o "What is death; how can I transcend it?"

Where in the college programs can such universal questions be asked? How can students develop the art of wise decision making which as Walter Lippmann says, "cuts across all specialities."

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The point is clear enough.

- o The learning of our time must engender respect -- not just for the physical ecology of this planet -- but for the delicate balance of our social ecology as well.
- o Unity, not the fragmentation of knowledge, must be central to our search.

III

Second, formal learning must become a truly humanizing experience, a process that stresses the dignity of life and deepens the conviction that people are important.

- o This statement is so simple, it borders on the sentimental.

- 7 -

- o Yet in our busy world of increased emphasis on technology, of pressures and problems on every side, of almost hourly crises, one of our most difficult tasks still remains--that of dealing humanely with one another.

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Surrounded -- even mastered by our inventions -- it becomes all too easy to put people into categories.

- o We tend to speak of "engineers," "professors," "bus drivers," the "middle-class," the "silent majority," and on and on we go.

And as we pigeonhole, we distort, losing sight of the fact that we are talking about people--

- o individuals who laugh, who love, who have unique talents and deep aspirations,
- o who grow old and lonely,
- o who have fears and doubts in the dark of night.

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- 8 -

Even on campus we classify ourselves and colleagues, and here too we become "economists and deans and mathematicians and radicals and administrators and chancellors and students and the office staff."

We live our Eleanor Rigby--popularized in the Beatles' tune.

- o Eleanor, as you'll recall,
waited at the window
"wearing the mask she keeps
in a jar by the door."
- o We, too, wear our masks, acting
out our roles as two-dimensional
people, wearing a "face" we keep
in a jar by the door.

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The point is this. If we are truly concerned about our Earth home,

- o we must demonstrate that we are
depending upon one another,
struggling together, living and
dying on a single globe,
- o and we must reach out to one
another to support our common
cause.

For to talk of saving our Earth while we destroy ourselves is sad mockery indeed. Make no mistake: if we dehumanize ourselves in the process, we spiritually denude our earth.

- o Respect for life--all of life--must be a bedrock principle if we are to rebuild the physical and social and spiritual environment in which we live.

This then is the objective to which liberal learning must be dedicated.

IV

Finally, we must commit ourselves to excellence and to the support of our great institutions of higher learning.

The University of Maryland has consistently pushed for quality and for leadership at every level, as so many of its successful graduates demonstrate.

- o Jane Cahill Pfeiffer, IBM's first woman vice president, was recently named chairman of the board of the National Broadcasting Company.
- o Frederick O'Green is president of Litton Industries.
- o Russell McFall is president of Western Union.

- 10 -

- o Robert Flint Chandler, former president of the University of New Hampshire, developed high yield strains of rice and dramatically improved food reserves in much of Asia.
- o Charles Schultze, President Carter's economic adviser, is not only a graduate but also a member of the faculty.
- o In the arts, Carmen Balthrop has sung to great acclaim at the Metropolitan Opera.
- o And Jim Henson has created Kermit the Frog and his Muppet friends and has shown millions of youngsters that television can be witty, whimsical, and just plain fun.

People like these have one thing in common. They are original and creative and courageous thinkers.

They're the people William Blake must have had in mind nearly 200 years ago, when he wrote:

"Improvement makes straight roads, but
the crooked roads without improvement
are roads of genius."

Arno Penzias and Robert Wilson of Bell Telephone Laboratories are this year's American Nobel laureates in physics, sharing the prize with a Soviet physicist.

- o Penzias and Wilson won for a discovery that was more or less accidental.

Bell Laboratories had asked these two scientists to develop a radio antenna to test the signal from the newly launched Telstar communications satellite.

- o The antenna wasn't much of a problem to build,
- o but when they turned it toward Telstar, whatever its orbital position,
- o they heard a persistent background noise.

At first they assumed the antenna was the trouble.

- o They dismantled it.
- o There certainly was a problem there -- a pair of nesting pigeons.

But, even when the pigeons were evicted and suspicious antenna parts replaced, the noise continued.

Then the Bell scientists heard about the theoretical work of astrophysicist P.J.E. Peebles and his Princeton group, who reasoned that,

- o if the universe had been created by a gigantic explosion of gaseous materials,
- o there should still be residual radiation in the cosmos.

Penzias and Wilson instantly realized what they were hearing -- microwave transmissions -- caused by radiation 15 to 20 billion years ago.

Penzias in commenting on his discovery said that "We knew the find was really important when it was picked up by The New York Times."

As for this being "just an accident"...

The point is that this so called "accident" could happen to a lot of people and nothing would have come of it.

- o Something does come of it when it happens to people who are gifted and single minded and committed absolutely to excellence in their work.

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Being single minded does not mean that one lacks either vision or commitment.

Rachel Carson spent her entire working life as an oceanographer in the U.S. Department of the Interior.

- o In her leisure time she wrote several beautifully evocative books about the sea.
- o She also produced a slim volume called "Silent Spring," a telling indictment of DDT as a killer of birds and other wildlife.

- 13 -

"As crude a weapon as the cave man's club," Rachel Carson wrote, "the chemical barrage has been hurled against the fabric of life."

With this book Miss Carson virtually alone aroused national indignation, and the pesticide was permanently banned.

This big, complex, seemingly impersonal society of ours

- o does respond to a single well-directed voice.
- o Society does respond to a single creative talent that can make us laugh or cry.
- o Society does respond to individuals who increase our knowledge or improve our health or expand the democratic process.

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More than any previous generation, I believe our schools and colleges must support the gifted and creative student.

- o Today these students who are in every social and economic level are shockingly underserved.
- o On a national average 19 out of every 20 gifted students in our schools are not identified.

- o And among disadvantaged and minority students -- a gifted student stands less than 1 chance in 200 of being so identified.
- o Only 34 higher education institutions in the U.S. offer degree programs for students who want to teach the gifted student.

I'm convinced the time has come to give special priority to the gifted and talented student. Creativity is still the driving engine of human progress.

- o We need geologists and engineers to locate and develop new deposits of fossil fuels.
- o We need transportation and marketing specialists who can deliver these fuels efficiently to world markets.
- o We need hydrologists to show us how to use our limited water supplies to best advantage.
- o We need agronomists and soil conservationists to increase food production for an undernourished world.
- o We need seismologists to improve techniques for predicting earthquakes.
- o We need cosmologists -- and I think clergymen -- to explain why an insignificant planet in an insignificant solar system carries human intelligence through space.

- 15 -

- o We need another Einstein to stimulate an quantum leap into the unknown.
- o In diplomacy we need political scientists, linguists, humanists, economists, and historians to reconcile the conflicting needs and aspirations that separate the nations.
- o We need biochemists to search for the causes and cures of diseases that tragically shorten productive lives.
- o We need social workers and physical therapists to serve the ill and aging.
- o We need urban planners and architects and business executives to restore our inner cities.
- o We need painters, musicians, dancers, and writers to bring beauty and meaning to our lives.
- o We need a Woody Guthrie, a Marian Anderson, a James Agee, a Langston Hughes.
- o Above all we need creativity in education.

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For thousands of years man believed

- o the sun revolved around the earth,
 - o that only birds could fly, that disease was inflicted by evil spirits.
- Man was dead wrong on all those counts.
- But it took people who doubted, who sought better answers, to find the truth.

- 16 -

And we must support continued excellence in scientific research and in educating the gifted student in our midst to find still more fundamental truths.

Dr. Lewis Thomas -- author of Lives of a Cell, and a trustee of the Memorial Sloan-Kettering Cancer Center -- said recently at a meeting of the American Association for the Advancement of Science that these are not the best times for the human mind.

All sorts of things seem to be turning out wrong, and the century seems to be slipping through our fingers here at the end, with almost all promises unfilled.

I cannot begin to guess at all the causes of our cultural sadness, not even the most important ones, but I can think of one thing that is wrong with us and eats away at us: We do not know enough about ourselves.

We are ignorant about how we work, about where we fit in, and most of all about the enormous, imponderable system of life in which we are embedded as working parts....it is a new experience for all of us. It's unfamiliar ground.

- 17 -

Just think, two centuries ago we could explain
"everything about everything," out of pure
reason, and now most of that elaborate and
harmonious structure has come apart before our
eyes.

We are dumb.

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