

UR 6807

Remarks of
Ernest L. Boyer
U.S. Commissioner of Education

at the
~~Eastern Michigan University~~ ^{Michigan} Commencement
~~Ypsilanti, Michigan~~

~~April 21, 1979~~

Introduction

~~Certainly is the most recent~~

~~Very special day~~

~~o Graduates~~

~~o Parents~~

I know full well that
we're here to see the ^{he} ^{come}
graduates? 71

~~Let me confess at the outset that~~

~~Let me confess at the outset that~~ I have no illusions
about speaking at commencement. ~~Commencement~~ ^{in occasion such a} Speeches are ^{just}
the least remembered messages on earth. ^{Personally}, I can't
even remember who spoke at my commencement. Let alone what
he said! I'm "just assuming" it was a "HE".

Now, while I still have your attention. Let me confess
that this morning I have just one idea to convey. ^I believe
that education

o while preparing you for work

o must also ~~help you see more broadly~~

o and give you some perspective on our

^{your own} relationship to the planet Earth. ^{to give like I help again indicated}

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One morning -- several years ago shuffling through my
3rd Class Mail -- Stanford student newspaper:

"This new report proposes to remove from
students the right to choose for
themselves. This is not to deny that
courses in Western University are
valuable but to require students to
take a course, carries a strong
illiberal connotation."

It imposes a ~~uniform~~ standard on non uniform people.

Frankly: I was startled by that statement. It struck
me as a staggering comment on our time that this student
after 15 years of formal education, rejected the idea of
relationships and failed to understand that a search for our
common heritage is in no way to be confused with something
he called "uniformity." This incident vividly revealed to
me one of the tragedies of our time.

Somehow our notion of intellectual and cultural
"connectedness" has snapped. Somehow we do not
We fail to understand our heritage &
interdependence on each other.

We do not comprehend our

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And this inclination toward narrowness and self-indulgence has also left us frightfully ignorant about our planet Earth.

Today less than one percent of the college-age group are enrolled in any course which specifically features contemporary international affairs. College enrollments in foreign languages are off 40 percent in the past seven years. A recent national survey revealed that, even after President Carter gave his speech on energy, only half of the public surveyed -- 52 percent to be precise -- even knew that America had to import oil from abroad.

~~And~~ ^{In a recent survey} Fifty percent of all twelfth-graders studied in a recent survey could not choose correctly an Arab country out of four choices they were given, and 40 percent of these twelfth-graders thought that Golda Meir rather than Anwar Sadat was president of Egypt.

~~_____~~
Last year during TV coverage of the Sadat-Begin discussions, which, incidentally, were interspersed with coverage of the Chicago Bears football game, three out of every four spectators interviewed at half time had never heard of Sadat or Begin, but were well aware of the prowess of their local hero, Walter Patton.

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Recently while flying from New Orleans to Orlando, I read in the morning paper, the New Orleans Picayune, that University of California scientists had now concluded that the earth's ozone band is being harmed by contaminants at twice the rate predicted earlier. I thought it symbolic of our time that this important story -- perhaps a life-or-death story -- was reported in a single paragraph buried deep in section II.

Environmentalists are fond of talking about the "vulnerability" of our "ecosystem" but I suspect that because of ignorance "our own" life system may be most fragile and most threatened.

Lewis Thomas, that marvelous science writer, in his remarkable book The Lives of a Cell, said, "It is illusion to think that there's anything fragile about the life of earth; surely this is the toughest membrane imaginable in the universe. We, the human species, are the delicate part, transient and vulnerable as cilia."

And yet with all our vulnerability, we have assumed that in the name of something we call "progress," ^{we could move ahead} without understanding our connectedness to each other and to nature. ~~we could move ahead.~~ And we have assumed that we could do so without understanding there is a "negative" price to pay.

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In the social world as in the physical world there is no free ride; for every action there is an equal and equivalent reaction which inevitably must be faced. There may be a "delayed" time bomb, but the equation somehow, sometime, will be balanced.

I've developed a little tactic in my our office which has temporarily stopped us cold. Whenever I get a proposition which someone said will improve the system, I send it back and say, "Give me the negative side of your assumed progress." What's the price we pay -- It may be worth it of course.

For generations we have assumed that we can gain and never lose. The assumption is false.

II

But enough of these gloomy observations.

I believe that once again a new "sense of urgency" is beginning to emerge.

We are beginning to recognize that the human race is expanding at the rate of 200,000 people every day -- 73 million people every year.

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Painfully we are now reminded that our gas pumps are somehow connected to the Middle East; that American industry is almost wholly dependent on foreign sources for chromium, for cobalt, for bauxite, for magnesium, and for tin; that 40 to 95 percent of our precious metals are imported from Third World countries; that about one-third of the profits of American corporations come from exports or from foreign investments; that one out of every six factory workers in this country is making something for export; and that two million Americans are employed in foreign trade.

We are beginning to comprehend the fact that a child born today into a world of four billion people will, if he attains age 60, be sharing the earth with three times as many human beings.

And I am sure you can give a lot of wisdom by
~~Many of you will be teachers and for educators the print~~
~~of all of this is crystal clear.~~

College & University must understand
~~Students must begin to understand the unity of our world~~

- o not just in a physical sense
- o but in a social sense as well.

~~Students must be taught that all actions on this planet~~
~~-- whether physical or social -- are inextricably~~
~~interlocked.~~

Yogi Berra That Great American
philosopher said on one occasion
you can do a lot of things by just
watching

In a monograph published by the World Affairs Council of Philadelphia, Robert Muller said, "A child born today . . . will be both an actor and a beneficiary or a victim in the total world fabric and he may rightly ask, 'Why was I not warned? Why was I not better educated? Why did my teachers not tell me about these problems and indicate my behavior as a member of an interdependent human race?'"

I believe classroom teachers do have an obligation to educate children about our interdependent world, so the surprises in later life may at least be modestly reduced.

To be still more specific our schools and colleges should give a new priority to science emphasizing not just basic principles but emphasizing also the way science and technology now shape our world.

If Three Mile Island taught us anything at all it taught us how ignorant we are. ^{Three mile island} It also taught us we cannot trust "PR" promoters who in times of crisis seem more concerned with image than with truth. ~~All~~ students must learn more about ~~this~~ world we have created so that our society will be driven more by understanding than by fear. And so that we will be better able to decide the awesome moral choices which must be made.

Richard got some words
we were introduced to a whole new
necessity - word like alien -
which were for most of us a foreign language.

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Several months ago -- Joan Gantz Cooney, the National Science Foundation, I announced a new television program, which will focus on "science" technology and the environment. It's going to be targeted to junior high school children, 10 to 12. It's going to be offered in the middle of the school day so it can be shown in classrooms. And it will be offered in the late afternoon and evenings so parents and children can watch it. We're also financing the preparation of teaching materials -- teachers' guides and student materials -- so that what is presented on TV with all of the power and imagination it can provide can also have followup studies which only classroom teachers can do well.

Incidentally, Joan sent me some disturbing findings, the other day. In doing some of their preproduction research -- they tried to find out what understanding junior high school students have about their world. She found that some children when asked, "Where does electricity come from?" said "the switch." When asked, "Where does the water come from?" they said "the faucet." "Where does the garbage go?" You guessed it . . . "down the chute."

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A bit humorous, perhaps, but startling in that we have increasingly developed a culture in which we are limited in our sense of connectedness to that which we can see, and feel, and touch.

III

Again -- we must begin to learn more about the world, science and technology has created. But scientific knowledge is not enough.

The goal must be to change attitudes as well. President Sadat observed that the misunderstandings between his country and Israel were 70 percent psychological, 70 percent a state of mind. The power of changing attitude was dramatically illustrated just a little over a year ago when President Sadat said he wanted to address the Israeli Parliament. The world was stunned and days later millions of people sat transfixed as an Egyptian plane touched down on Israeli soil.

It is not to diminish the political impact of that visit to say that none of the words that were exchanged, none of the speeches, none of the documents, none of the private meetings, and none of the toasts -- none of these was as significant as the riveting of the whole world's attention on one single, breathtaking symbolic image when two former enemies shook hands.

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Instantly, 500 million people -- and they tell me that's how many saw that encounter -- 500 million people felt their connectedness. Instantly their "perspective" was expanded and, momentarily at least, the world was brought together in a grand gesture on behalf of peace.

Well what does all of this mean? It brings me back to my central message. I hope that during your collegiate years you have developed special skills -- to help you get a job. I also hope that during your collegiate years you have developed a greater respect for the planet Earth and a greater understanding of our dependence on each other.

When our first astronauts came back from outer space with those marvelous photographs of the planet Earth.

Archibald MacLeish wrote in the New York Times--

to see the Earth as it truly is

small and blue

beautiful in that eternal silence *where it floats*

~~where it floats~~

is to see ourselves

as riders on the earth together

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Brothers--

who see now that they are
truly brothers.

As members of the Class of 1979 I congratulate you and
wish you well -- as you continue your journey -- as riders
on the Earth together.

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