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Alma Speech

First, I wish to congratulate the Class of ~~1980~~ 1981

- I congratulate you for ~~choosing~~ ~~a college of distinction~~. being the largest graduating class at Alma since 1974
- ~~And I congratulate you for~~ ~~completing--with success~~ ~~all of your requirements for graduation.~~ and for being the smartest class as well.

I wish also to congratulate the parents of the graduates.

- I congratulate you for the encouragement and for the money you have given.

And I know that you hope the graduates will now leave the campus and go out and get a job!

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Many years ago

- I decided that commencement speeches are the least remembered utterances on earth.

This fact,

- was painfully driven home one day after I had delivered what I thought was a most effective speech.

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I

First, I'd like to know if those of you who graduate today have committed yourselves to lifelong education.

- You see, it's one thing to graduate from college.
- It's quite another thing to have
  - the urge
  - the discipline,
  - and the motivation,
  - to go on learning long after the treats of teachers and final exams and grade cards
  - have faded from the scene.

In Moby Dick, Ishmael says of himself:

- "I have an everlasting itch for things remote."

Those who continue to stay alive long after college are those who remain

- intellectually alert,
- aesthetically thirsty,
- those who continue to "scratch the everlasting itch."

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I stress this point of continued learning simply because the urge to know can be so easily suppressed.

- Korzybski tells us that one way to stop learning is to succomb to what he calls "the mentality of arrogance."

According to Korzybski, there is a type of person who is not interested in investigation.

- For why should they--
- they <u>know</u> it all--
- and they <u>know</u> that they know it all--
- which is all there is to know about it.

Cocksuredness can kill the itch to learn.

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But curiosity also can be destroyed by undue busyness.

- You can scurry about so fast
- and get so caught up in the thick of thin things
- that you fail to see
- or no longer care to see, the mysteries about you.

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Lowell Russell Ditzen tells a beautiful story of the day his granddaughter comes to visit him on the farm. The two of them started to walk together from the house to the barn. On the way the granddaughter

- "stopped to pat the dog goodbye,
- broke away to catch a butterfly,
- paused under the cottonwood tree to watch the wind shake the leaves,
- and she studied a caterpillar that humped his way across our path."

Ditzen then asks rhetorically:

- When and why do we let living stop being fun?
- Why do we quit observing and asking questions?
- How can we permit the self within us that wonders and ponders to be so suffocated?

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And this need for continued education has an urgency as well

- Just ~~one~~ two years ago we sat in front of our television set and heard strange talk about "rems" and "cold shut downs" and for all the world it sounded like a foreign language.
- The truth is it was a foreign language and if Three Mile Island taught us anything at all it taught us how ignorant we are about the technology ~~of our world~~ on which we all depend.
- I am suggesting that we must keep up with the dramatic changes in our world or we will depend increasingly on the "high priests" of technology rather than on our own informed conclusions ~~if we are to participate intelligently in the decisions which affect us all.~~

This means--to put it bluntly--that your education has just begun. In the days ahead,

- all of us must learn more about our universe.
- We must be inspired by the beauties and
- we must in short continue to be scholars long after the doors of formal learning have closed behind them.

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III

And this brings me to question number ~~three~~ two.

As you leave the campus do you clearly understand that people are important.

- This statement--people are important--
  is so simple, it borders on the sentimental.
- And yet in our busy world
  -- of more talk and less communication
  -- one of our most difficult tasks is
  finding ways to deal humanely with
  one another.

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We live in a world where our inventions seem to fulfill our wants--but fail to satisfy our needs.

- We listen more attentively to Walter Cronkite
  than we do to members of our family.
- We know more about the interior of our cars
  than we do about the inner feelings of
  our friends.

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

- Eleanor, as you recall, waited at the window "wearing the mask she keeps in a jar by the door."
- 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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Very often--even on the college campus we are not as honest and we are not as open as we ought to be.

We "classify" ourselves as "economists and deans and mathematicians and radicals and administrators and students and the office staff."

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Several weeks ago, I met with the executives of one of the nation's largest corporations. During that entire session, I was struck by the fact that these officials spent most of the time talking

- not about profits or technology or inflation.
- They spent the morning talking about people and how to improve relationships among their personnel.

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The point is this: To be well prepared for life we all must understand that institutions are comprised of people who laugh and love, who have hope and aspirations and who are lonely in the dark of night.

In that marvelously moving, prize winning production "Raisin in the Sun"

- The family faced a crisis when the son in the family invests unwisely in a life insurance policy.
  The families hopes are shattered and the daughter says of her brother, "I don't love him any more." At which point the mother says, "But I thought I taught you to love him." The daughter replies, "There's nothing left to love."
  At which point the mother states so movingly one of histories most powerful sermons when she says,

  "There's always something left to love and if you ain't learned that you ain't learned nothing."

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In the days ahead you will move into fields of great specialization. Don't become so absorbed with the nuts and bolts of your work that you forget that men and women are freed from labor in order to enhance their dignity--this is the meaning of machines.

Regardless of your goal in life, keep your sensitivity high, direct your energies toward people.

- If you enter medicine,
  keep in mind that doctors heal people.
- If you give yourself to politics,
  keep in mind that governments serve people.
- If you select education,
  remember that teachers teach people.
- If you work on rockets to the moon,
  don't forget that rockets transport people.

Well this is the end of the final examination.
Please pass your papers to the center aisle.
And let me say that I'm confident all of you have passed with flying colors. If--in the days ahead--you commit yourself

- to a life of ceaseless learning,
- to a life of wise, creative action,
- and to a life which makes it very clear
  that people are important.

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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.

I suspect ~~It seems to me~~ that the sickness of our society ~~our environment~~ is, at least in part, a ~~mirror of the sickness in ourselves~~--a reflection of the pervasive notion that life is cheap. ~~Indeed it is here--at this very point--that our~~ And I am convinced that rebirth must begin. 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 is a lesson everyone must learn. ~~This then is the objective to which liberal learning must be dedicated.~~

(new page)

III.

And now let's turn to ~~go~~ turn to question number three.

I ~~now turn to my third suggestion, one that follows logically from the last. Somehow we must begin to weave into the fabric of education the capacity~~ I'd like to know - as you leave campus - if you are prepared to make judgments, to form convictions, and to act boldly ~~upon~~ on the values ~~we~~ that you hold. It is not enough merely to see the world wholly and sensitively--it is not enough simply to respect our fellowman. Rather we must continue to develop and refine the capacity to achieve "what is good and what is best"--to confront seriously the problem of "values."

I recognize that Whenever a discussion turns to values, a strange embarrassment seems to overtake us all. Somehow we have deluded ourselves into believing that we can be responsible people without ever taking sides, without expressing firm convictions about fundamental issues.

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On our campuses we frequently seem ready and willing to talk about any and all subjects, except those that matter most.

In his penetrating book, Faith and Learning, Alexander Miller commented rightly on this curious timidity when he wrote:

> "A decent tentativeness is a wholesome expression of scholarly humility.
>
> We seem to have a sort of dogmatic tentativeness which suggests that (in matters of moral judgment, at least) it is intellectually indecent to make up your minds."

It is true, I suspect, that on our campuses we are too often caught up in the thick of thin things, but there is a hopeful side to all of this.

We now realize that as George Steiner has reminded us, a man who is intellectually advanced can at the same time be morally bankrupt. We now know that such a man can listen to Bach and Schubert at sundown, he can read Goethe in the evening, and the next day go to his daily work at the concentration camp to gas his fellowmen. "What grows up inside literate civilization, Steiner asks, that seems to prepare it for the release of barbarism?"

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Steiner's comment ~~not only highlights our dilemma but also~~ dramatizes the disillusionment ~~that has taken root~~ in our midst. ~~We are beginning to understand that education does not inevitably humanize.~~

We are losing faith in the childish notion that all education, regardless of its quality or thrust or purpose, will lead to virtue.

And we are beginning to understand

~~Increasingly then, it becomes clear~~ that if ~~we in~~ education ~~are~~ is to exercise a moral force in society, then ~~we must insist that the process of education~~ it must take place in a moral context. ~~This is not to suggest a program of indoctrination that suffocates the spirit, neither does it mean theory courses that become only speculative and remote.~~

And students will need what my friend used to call "the courage of their convictions"

What is called for is a framework of inquiry in which the process of wrestling with big issues and complex values is made fully legitimate -- a place where the climate does not push for conclusions, but rather makes honorable the quest.

When all is said and done, we must call for colleges committed to the development within each student of the capacity to judge rightly in matters of life and conduct. In no way do these imperatives replace the need for rigorous study in the disciplines, but neither must this need destroy the human yearning for an education that leads to a reverence for life and a high regard for the dignity of man.

But ~~to live in our convictions takes courage~~ in the day to day world it's hard to stand alone and all too often we do decision - not by our own convictions but by the values of "the group."

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Vachel Lindsay deplored the circumstances ~~in which no one dares be himself.~~ He wrote ~~movingly~~:

"Let not young souls be smothered out
Before they do quaint deeds and fully
flaunt their pride
It is the world's one crime--its babes
grow dull
Not that they starve
but starve so dreamlessly
Not that they sow
but that they seldom reap
Not that they serve
but have no God to serve
Not that they die
but that they die like sheep."

The tragedy of life is not death. The tragedy is to die with visions unfulfilled.

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In the days ahead ~~most of~~ you ~~who graduate truly~~ will be asked

- to solve new problems you fathers never faced.
- And you will be asked to solve old problems your fathers faced but never solved.

Insert from P 15

~~As graduates~~ And I urge you

- to dream imaginatively,
- to think courageously,
- to plan bravely and wisely,

and to recognize that the world still needs those who live by ~~this tradition~~. their convictions

Insert p 15

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Oh, yes.

I have one final suggestion to propose.

In the days ahead, I think it would be very nice if you would call your mother once a week.

I congratulate you and wish you great success in all the days ahead.