

GRADTEACSP, 12/19/88, LSM

A CELEBRATION OF TEACHING

Commencement Address by
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The Carnegie Foundation for
the Advancement of Teaching

Birmingham-Southern College
Birmingham, Alabama

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I congratulate the Class of 1988 for successfully completing your studies at one of the nation's most distinguished higher learning institutions. Birmingham-Southern is known nationally and around the world for its commitment to scholarship, the building of community, and the centrality of teaching--all measures of an institution of higher learning at its very best.

For over 300 years, America has had a love affair with education. Our first college--Little Harvard College--began in 1636 when the colony on Massachusetts Bay was only six years old. Eleven years later, in 1647, that same colony passed a law requiring every town and village of 50 or more souls--that is adult males who owned land--to hire, at public expense, a schoolmaster to teach all the children to read and write. From the very first, education in this land was deemed too important to be left to chance.

George Washington said that knowledge is the "surest basis of public happiness." In the eighteenth century, Thomas Jefferson drew up a plan for universal public education in Virginia. And John Jay declared that knowledge is the "soul of the republic." But there is a darker side to all of this. While Americans have always had a love affair with education, we have been enormously ambivalent about teachers.

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Several years ago, while we were writing a report on the American high school at the Carnegie Foundation, I read a fascinating story about a late-nineteenth century Nebraska school that colorfully described our ambivalence about teachers. The writer, in his autobiography, said that 100 years ago, the first teacher who worked at the little one-room school on the western prairie was "run out of town by boys who used stones as weapons of assault." The second teacher, he said, met the same agony. When the third teacher had soundly thrashed one boy and the father of another, the reign of terror ended. Parents sometimes need to be disciplined, too. Still, many students at that Nebraska school considered the teacher public enemy number one.

Today we don't stone our teachers, or openly run them out of town, but we do expect them to do what our homes, communities, and churches have not been able to accomplish. Today's teachers are called upon not only to teach the basics, but to monitor the playground, police for drugs, reduce teenage pregnancy, and teach students how to drive. When they fall short anywhere along the line, we condemn them for not meeting our idealized expectations.

We hear a lot of talk these days about education in Japan. I do not think we should import their system to the United States, but there are two features of Japanese education that are worth considering. First, in Japan the home and the school are inextricably connected, and second, in Japan, the term sensei or teacher, is a title of great honor. Indeed, a comparison of the

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Japanese sensei and the American teacher would yield a greater understanding of the differences between our systems than any other single variable I know.

I'm suggesting that excellence in education means excellence in teaching. Yet when the Carnegie Foundation surveyed nearly 14,000 teachers in 1987, we discovered that since the so-called reform movement began in 1983, 50 percent of teachers said morale is lower than it was five years ago. The basic problem, they said, is not salaries or merit pay; it is the working conditions of teachers: too many students, too little time for preparation, too much paperwork, and too many mindless interruptions.

I visited a classroom one afternoon and during the 50-minute period, the public address system interrupted three separate times with such urgent announcements as the lunch money of a student had been delivered to the central office, and there would be a pep rally Friday afternoon. The teacher was expected to stand there with equanimity and carry on the lesson. If that teacher had said, "I have had enough," and marched toward the central office, I would have joined her.

When I was United States Commissioner of Education, I called about 20 students from across the country to my office and we spent the day talking about their education. Near the end of our seminar I asked, "How many of you have had a teacher who has consequentially changed your life?" Every hand went up. Then I

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asked, "How many of you have ever thanked a teacher?" Not one hand was raised. Teachers are expected to work day after day to enlighten and inspire their students, yet they don't get one word of thanks. I told the students, "That is asking too much from any human being." I asked them to promise me one thing: "Before you graduate, take a teacher to lunch." They agreed they would.

There are poor teachers in the classroom, and the profession of teaching in this country must begin vigorously to police itself. I think in some ways, an incompetent teacher is worse than an incompetent surgeon because surgeons cut up only one person at a time. But it is also true that no profession, just as no human being, can be made healthy by focusing only on what's bad.

What does all of this have to do with Birmingham-Southern College and the class of 1988 this wonderful afternoon? I believe it means we should be honoring not just the graduates who will be handed a diploma, but also those unremembered first-grade teachers and university professors--the unsung heroes--who have, in a thousand separate, quiet ways, made possible this day of special celebration.

Several years ago I couldn't sleep and instead of counting sheep, I counted all the teachers I had ever had. I remembered rather vividly fifteen or more. There were a few nightmares in the bunch, but I tried to remember the outstanding teachers, the ones

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who truly changed my life. First I thought about Miss Rice, my first-grade teacher. On the first day of school she said, "Good morning class, today we learn to read." Those were the first words I ever heard in school. We spent all day on four words--"I go to school." We traced them, we sang them; we even prayed them. I ran home that night ten-feet tall, and announced proudly to my mother, "Today I learned to read." I doubt I had mastered decoding but I had been taught something much more fundamental. Miss Rice had taught me that language is the centerpiece of learning.

Fifty years later, when I got around to trying to write a book called High School, I had a chapter right up front entitled "Literacy: The Essential Tool." And in our book on College, we have a chapter on the essentialness of language. I say that to pay tribute to an unremembered first-grade teacher--Fairview Avenue Elementary School, Dayton, Ohio, 1930--who said something to me my first day at school that penetrated my understanding of the foundations of formal learning and shakes my thinking to this day. Great teachers live forever.

I remembered Mr. Whitlinger, a high school history teacher who asked me to stop by after class." Well, I had cardiac arrest and sweaty palms. Teachers don't ask you to stop by just to pass the day. I stood there for just a moment and he changed my life. He said, "Ernest, you're doing very well in history; if you keep this up you just might be a student." That was the highest

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accolade I had ever received. Not a basketball player. Not a cowboy. I'm something called a student. I started to redefine who I was and what I might become, at a time when I was very unclear about the destiny of my life. And I suspect that everyone in the audience today--the first-grade students, the grandparents who have assembled--can remember at least one great teacher you have had, a Miss Rice who's changed your life. As one last assignment to the graduates of 1988, may I suggest that before you leave the campus you say thank you to a teacher, or perhaps write a note after you get home.

But to strengthen teaching in this country we need more than thank-yous and private recollections. We also need federally-funded summer fellowships for teachers to keep them intellectually engaged. We need a teacher excellence fund in every school to help teachers implement good ideas. We need career ladders for outstanding teachers. We also need a national teacher corps program that would give full scholarships to top high-school students who agree to teach in the nation's public schools. After all, we send gifted students to Peace Corps assignments overseas, why not recruit the brightest and the best to teach in the inner cities here at home?

We hear a lot of talk these days about the greediness of graduates. I don't believe it for a minute. I'm confident today's young people will have deep convictions and that they are ready to be inspired by a larger vision. I find it reassuring,

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for example, that about 25 members of the graduating class sitting before us here today have chosen teaching as their career. Would I embarrass you if I asked all the seniors who plan to enter teaching to stand right now and receive our recognition? You know who you are. Thank you.

In the days ahead you will have frustration in the classroom, but just remember you will be changing lives forever. On behalf of the Class of '88, I would also like to recognize the faculty at Birmingham-Southern who are outstanding scholars but have a clear understanding of the essentialness of teaching. This is known as a teaching institution with distinction.

Vachel Lindsey wrote on one occasion that "It is the world's one crime its babes grow dull. Not that they sow, but that they seldom reap. Not that they serve, but that they have no God to serve. Not that they die, but that they die like sheep." The tragedy of life is not death. The tragedy of life is to die with commitments undefined, convictions undeclared, and service unfulfilled.

In the days ahead, I challenge each of you--whether in teaching or business, in medicine or law--to serve others and to walk humbly with your God. And I think it would be very nice if you would call your mother at least once a week. Thank you very much.