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THE VALUE OF AN EDUCATION

Remarks by

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Many years ago I learned that no one ever comes to a commencement to listen to a speech.

I love a finished speaker
I mean I really do
I don't mean one whose polished
I just mean one whose through.

But tradition is tradition and in the final moments of this academic year--I'd like to say a word or two about the value of a college education.

First a college education will help you get a job--and frankly this is a fad we should applaud.

After all

- o education has always been a unique blend of inspiration and vocation.
- o And colleges increasingly should recognize the dignity of work.

The truth is that all of us

- o establish our identity
- o and give meaning to our lives through the work we do.

And because you have been to college, you are now better able to be economically and socially secure.

But we also know that preparing for a job also means knowing how to live. And this means that vocational and liberal education must somehow be combined.

Many years ago Josiah Royce observed that

we have become
more knowing
more clever
and more skeptical

but seemingly--

we do not become
more profound or
more reverent.

That statement is the nub of everything I want to say today.

- o I happen to believe that you are not truly educated until you have become "more profound and more reverent."
- o And this means learning more about the interdependence of life of the spaceship of Earth.

My concern about the "breadth" of college education was deepened several years ago, while I was shuffling through my third class mail. The Stanford student newspaper reported that the institution was preparing a required course in Western Civilization. In response, the student editorial said that:

This new report proposes to remove from students the "right" to choose for themselves. This is not to deny that courses in Western Civilization 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."

The hard fact is that on many campuses

- o we frequently study all questions except those that matter most.
- o And while we transmit "fragments of information," we fail to talk about the fundamental questions.

Somerset Maugham in the "Writer's Notebook" writes poignantly of the mountaineer

- o who struggled to reach the top of the highest peak
- o only to discover that instead of seeing the sunrise he found only fog,
- o at which point the writer suggests "he wandered down again."

Many students come to college seeking a broader vision, but finding only fog they wander down again.

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

- o "Why live at all?"
- o "What is the cause of my existence and of everyone elses?"
- o "What should be the plan of my life?"
- o "What is death; how can I transcend it?"

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These may be heavy questions for the college campus,
but I'm convinced we must find ways to

- ° see the wholeness in life.
- ° We must develop the art of wise decisionmaking
which, as Walter Lippmann says, "cuts across
all specialities."
- ° Unity, not the fragmentation of knowledge,
must be central to our search.

And if this perspective is not a part of education,
I'm convinced our students--regardless of vocation--
will live out their lives in quiet desperation.

I have a second suggestion to propose. To be well prepared for productive work, we also must clearly understand that people are important.

- o This statement--people are important-- is so simple, it borders on the sentimental.
- o And 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, sometimes even mastered, by our inventions, it becomes all too easy to put people into categories.

We tend to speak of

- o engineers,
- o professors,
- o bus drivers,
- o the middle-class,
- o the silent majority

and on and on we go.

Even on campus we "classify" ourselves as "economists and deans and mathematicians and radicals and administrators and chancellors and students and the office staff."

We live out 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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Very often--even on the college campus we are not honest and open.

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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

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

The point is this: To be vocationally well prepared, students must understand that institutions are comprised of people who laugh and love, who have respect and aspirations and who are lonely in the dark of night.

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

- o 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."

That great American philosopher Yogi Berra said--

You can do a lot of observing by just watching.
You can do a lot of living, by becoming more sensitive to those with whom we live and work.

III

I now turn to my last suggestion, one that follows logically from the last. To be truly educated we must also develop the capacity to make judgments, to form convictions, and to act boldly upon those values.

- ° It is not enough to have a job.
- ° It is not enough to see the world wholly and sensitively--
- ° It is not enough to respect our fellow man.

We also must have deep convictions consistently to guide our lives.

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Somehow a strange embarrassment seems to overtake us all whenever a discussion turns to values.

- ° Somehow we have deluded ourselves into believing that we can be responsible people without ever taking sides, without expressing firm convictions about fundamental issues.

In his penetrating book, Faith and Learning, Alexander Miller says that

"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."

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But I believe we are beginning to understand that education divorced from values will not do the job.

- o We now realize that, as George Steiner has reminded us, a man who is intellectually advanced can at the same time be morally bankrupt.
- o 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.
- o "What grows up inside "literate civilization," Steiner asks, "that seems to prepare it for the release of barbarism?"

Slowly 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.

The simple truth is this: if education is to exercise a
moral force in society, then the process of education must
take place in a moral context.

- ° A place where the process of wrestling
with big issues is made fully legitimate.
- ° A place where the climate does not push
for conclusions, but rather makes honorable
the quest.

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IV

And this leads me to say a word about this unusual institution. A college is to be judged--not by the greatness of its campus, but by the greatness of its vision.

And I'm convinced Doane College is seeking uniquely to blend the dignity of vocation with the values of liberal education. The goal is to develop what--on another occasion I called the educated heart.

The educated heart, means to me

- o a reaching for mastery without arrogance,
- o the development of an appreciation of beauty,
- o a dedication to fairness and social justice,
- o and a love for graceful expression and audacious intellect.

These may be lofty ideals but they are still, I am convinced, within man's grasp.

And in the end--the best thing about any college is not what is said but rather what is lived out by its graduates.

- o And to those who graduate today you have one final assignment. Your assignment is to live the Doane College ideal which calls for a life of intellect, a life of integrity, and a life of service to your fellow man and to your God.

I wish you well.