Commencement Address
by
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IS THIS A NEW RENAISSANCE?

Do these kaleidoscopic events that pass before us each day
with confusing rapidity mean the snuffing out of a great age, char-
acterized by personal achievements, the rise of Christianity, the
advance of science, the increase in wealth, and the upbuilding of
an integrated civilization; or are they evidences of a deep plough-
ing of the social soil, preliminary to new harvests of human achieve-
ment?

Arthur, Count Gobineau, in his classical book on the Renais-
sance, where he deftly brings to life men and women of all types and
has them speak to us, makes Michael Angelo say as he nears his last
hours,

"We are bequeathing a great legacy, great examples.... The
earth is richer than it was before our coming.... That is to
disappear will not disappear altogether.... The fields can
rest and remain fallow for a while; the seed is in the clods.
The fog may spread and the grey and watery sky become covered
with mist and rain; but the sun is above.... Who knows what
will come again?"

Further he gives the key to the moving impulse of creative
personality and its relationship to religious conceptions when he
has Michael Angelo, in his dialogue with the Marchioness of Pescara,
say,
"Whether a man works upon himself, or applies his activity to inert matter and breathes into it movement and life, the achievement is in both cases the same: he sets up models for his fellow-man. We can say with truth, when we reflect on the similarity of results, that the most virtuous men are those like Polygnotus, Zeuxis, Polycletus, Phidias, these most accomplished artists being as great missionaries as are the philosophers and the saints. If then I, for my part, have succeeded in producing some good in this world, and the world-spirit owes me some new advantages, do not deny me, Marchioness, the glory of comparing myself with you, and permit me to hope that, in the life everlasting, we shall rise on like wings to a perfect equality of rewards."

Before the days of the Renaissance, the individual counted for but little. He was either the soldier or creature of the king and was dominated by overpowering beliefs or held fast in a rigid and stratified social structure. To me the Renaissance has always meant the beginning of wider freedom for man as a unit of society. Then large numbers of men began to be recognized for their own thoughts and achievements, great new steps forward were possible, - for all new thought can only come out of the mind of an individual man standing alone. Men in the mass do not think - they merely feel.

We constantly hear of humanistic education. While there were other great developments in art, architecture, government, and so on, it was to Vittorino da Feltre and some of his contemporaries that we owe the growth in a single generation of a conception of education and of practical procedures which have endured for five
hundred years. In a turbulent period full of ignorance, cruelty, violence, crime, and low standards of living, he stood for the harmonious development of the mind, body, and character, -- the aim of the true humanistic education. He himself lived sanely and wisely in a polluted atmosphere and was among the first of that ever widening group of teachers who sent out young men "to serve God in Church and State." While he was fired with the Greek passion for bodily culture and the dignity of the true outer life there was a very strong element of practical Christianity present in his thought and in his activities. Education to him meant development on the nobler side. He used his studies of the institutions of Rome and Greece not to serve philosophy or religion but to study life and men. From him there came always the conception that learning provided equal footing for all.

The Renaissance matured slowly out of the mire of a distracted Europe. Men began to look forward and into themselves, rather than backward. Leonardo da Vinci used his rare and penetrating mind in a hundred new ways. Astrology began to give way to Tycho Brahe and his interpretation of the facts gathered by the telescope. The physicians began to shake loose from Galen and the ancients. The grip of the past began to relax its strangling clutch on the present. Emphasis on the individual and the expression of personality became possible. There gradually unfolded those urges for self-determination and freedom that have build our modern democracies. Democracies level the rights of individuals but have offered the chance for individual distinction and advance. With education they provide an even opportunity for growth.

Science gave Democracy a propulsive push forward. It hastened the new industrial revolution. It made the Great War so
destructive that we have come out of its active struggles into a period of protracted confusion and uncertainty. We hear the word "chaos" from the mouths of political and economic leaders. Remedies of all sorts are being poured and injected into the body politic. In the drive to rebuild our damaged civilization are we to lose sight of the individual? Are we going backward into a period of human eclipse, or are the signs about us those of a new and radiant spring? The war brought mass into riotous action. If mass action controls the prolonged peace it may damage us more than the war itself. Are we, as free human beings, to be crushed in the name of the people? Is regimentation to replace regulation? Is man to make himself with the help of governments, or is he to be molded and made by a Society obsessed with material aims?

It is true that we have spent years in building up the equipment of civilization and that in spite of war waste we are now ready for its more intelligent use. But are we to be again captured and enslaved, this time by our own contrivances, and become pawns instead of kings? Is democracy to prove a more terrible taskmaster and a greater tyrant than the old autocracies?

Society amounts to nothing if it is made up of ciphers. The qualities of a people, not their mass, is alone of significance in advance. Numbers may merely mean more harvest for war, vice, disease, and crime. The basic elements of human action are vital. Primitive as they may be, if they are guided by high moral, ethical and religious impulses, civilization can continue to blossom. If we are to build a new world it must come through disciplined imagination, digested experience and a high idealistic motivation.
Only through free expression of gifted personality is this possible. Men build governments. Governments must grow with the growth of those pioneers we call research workers. Research has given us our great advances. Science builds up facts for us to use. It takes judgment to use them. The university training tries to show the lessons of history, to inculcate standards in all fields, and to develop judgment. It tries, too, to present the elements of what we call taste. Taste changes in many subtle ways with the change in environment. At times in the seeking for the new we merely distort. Like cubism in art, we follow in other fields fantastic conceptions that show more astigmatism of the imagination than beauty or order. This present seems full of patchwork, failure, dead but not discarded issues and ideas. Can the educated man, as the electrician would say, locate the bugs and get our civilization to humming again?

Is there any other solvent for our difficulties but more education, more understanding, about what we have done and are trying to do? I can see no way to a new Renaissance except through the freeing of the human intelligence from undue emotion, superstition, habit, and tradition.

In spite of disheartening and terrible doubts and dangers I think that the dawn of a new Renaissance can be discerned. Five hundred years ago it was the release of the individual end of the human spirit; now it will be the release of the trained mind to guide men and his many organizations, governmental and other. Unless such guidance comes, disaster lies just ahead.

While there is much blame and soul searching in the air today, it seems to me that a wonderful task has been done in this age of
science. The difficulty is that we have created faster than we have mastered. Growth was almost explosive in its intensity, and it exceeded the bounds of human management still under the sway of antique ideas and the domination of the forces of war. The habit mechanisms, the behavior patterns of men, evolve more slowly than physical changes in the environment.

It is true that we are in more confusion than usual. The mixing up of the war was confusing in itself, and it has been followed by a tangle of governmental, economic, and other relations of individuals and nations in extent beyond anything that the world has ever seen. The war, too, emphasized the power of force to control human action. It hastened the age of the modern petty tyrant, the gangster and the racketeer. Strangely enough, while filled with human courage of the highest sort, it has left us supine under lawlessness.

There is still too much astrology in business, too much buncombe in politics, too much superstition in daily life, too much exaggerated and perverted emotional life. Our proudest boast often is that we have had and do have real men. In the words ascribed to Michael Angelo, they have "set up models for their fellow men." We can multiply their numbers, increase their leadership through education and training. In them we see self-control, well thought-out decisions, idealism, personality, and control through the processes of the mind. Running through life, if it is to be wholesome and satisfying, there must always be an undertone of what we call spirituality. If this is a new Renaissance the intellect must be steered by the spirit.

I have confidence that in such groups as this leaving Stanford
and hundreds of other institutions we have a new type of youth, looking on life with great idealism and courage, and with more ability and willingness to face realities than most of those who have gone before.

Now, then, where do you, as new graduates of this University, stand as you face the "cold, cold world" -- not that of Charley Field and Shirley Baker, but of today.... Above all, I suggest that you avoid self-pity. There has been so much talk about the impending handshakes before you that is would be well for you to gather a sense of proportion. I have had students talk to me as if they were the most unfortunate of all American youth to come up against the world of today. A while ago a student drove up to my office in a spanking little roadster propelled by gasoline from the Tertiary age, ignited by the fiery spark of Galvani and Franklin, and proceeded to tell me that the world was pretty well done for, and no graduates had ever faced such problems as would come to those of today. Think back to the generation that fought our Civil War. Many of our boys then, instead of going to college, were bound out for labor on the farms, or apprenticed to the mills; there was in the South the struggle of free against slave labor. Our schools were primitive, compared to those of today. There were many dark and gloomy days; but out of it came the America we know, - with all of its advantages and with a population more favored than the world has ever seen before.

The tools are available for a great advance. You education has given you the power to use some of them.

The tendency to cast aside convention, while it leads to many temporary abuses, has in it the merit of offering the opportunity
for many changes. To strike a reasonable balance between the old and the new, to avoid extremes, offers the best chance of success. There seems to be no good way to teach judgment; and yet sanity, judgment, and reasonableness are in the lead as personal qualities ensuring enduring success. That you may cultivate them and self-management is our hope. To run oneself is a God given opportunity. To handle yourself badly so that you are not yourself at any time, or under the compulsion of others, is to fail utterly in steering your own craft.

There is a wide choice before you of subjects that may lead to your personal advancement and to public good, even though they do not provide much income. Self cultivation is an ever present opportunity. To confuse "getting on" and living is a common American fault.

A part of the world problem is not only to make adjustments to inventions and discoveries, but to delay death and the need of greater preparation for youth. There are fewer vacant places since people live and are active for longer periods. The extension of the public school system up through the junior college is a response to the need of more training in the presence of sufficient wealth to maintain education. The increased productivity from longer lives provides the income for the better training of youth. You have had such provision made for you.

Your diploma is not a meal ticket, but it is a license to hunt for a job. As a matter of fact, that is all it has ever been; but now the hunting is not so good. If any of you think that the world owes you a living you may find it hard to collect on the debt. What you are is most important. What you do depends upon yourself.
A gangster can get as many miles out of an automobile as a social worker. It is where you are going and for what purpose that is as important as to be on your way.

I have faith in you and your Stanford training.

Just as the generation that is passing harnessed many physical forces and put them to orderly work, capturing the turbulence of the waterfall and transforming it with dynamos into service, so the trained generations of today and tomorrow will put order into the present social turmoil and get our human and national dynamos to purring more smoothly and in greater unison. It will be a great game and full of the new and the unexpected. We ask that you use your heads as well as your hearts - and play it straight!

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