A VISION OF GREATNESS

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I have borrowed the phrase which I use as the title of my address from Sir Richard Livingstone, who in turn borrows it from the philosopher Whitehead. May I give you the text of this statement and of this concept? "Moral education is impossible without the habitual vision of greatness." It could not be put more strongly - "impossible," "habitual vision" (not a chance and occasional glimpse).

Outside Plato there is no profounder saying about education.

A "habitual vision of greatness" is necessary not only to moral education, but to all education. A teacher cannot give an adequate training unless he knows, and can make his pupil see, what is great and first-rate in it. How can you train a surgeon unless you show him the finest technique of surgery; or a teacher, unless he knows the best methods of educational practice; or an architect, unless he is familiar with great examples of his art? So, too, with all subjects from building to farming, from carpentry to Greek prose. Much else may enter the student's training; but there is no stimulus like seeing the best work in the subject which he studies; he will have no standards, no conception of the goal to which he pain-fully struggles, unless he sees the best; he will slip insensibly to lower levels of ideal and practice, unless it is continually before his mind, unless, in fact, he has the "habitual vision of greatness" to attract, direct and inspire. ...
A belief which has marked the United States throughout its history is the emphasis upon the place and importance and worth of the individual human being - and his possibilities of achievement. It is out of this belief and this philosophy that American social democracy has grown. And because of this belief and a society founded upon it America has I believe made its greatest contribution to the human race, greater and more influential than your industrial achievements or mass production - important though they are. ...

I like to think of all education, and particularly higher education, as being made up of many things and of having many objectives. I believe it should be concerned with helping you to understand yourselves as human beings and in every aspect of human behaviour. You should understand your physical nature and being, with a view to being and remaining healthy and happy individuals. You should also learn to use your physical attributes or abilities - gifts if you like - so that you may enjoy life and insure that these contribute during the years to come in which you live and work and play.

As educational institutions we have, of course, a special concern for your mental development and, again, in all of its aspects, for if you are to justify our existence and the money that is spent upon us, you must become, while students, educated young men and women in the best and most complete senses of that term and particularly in respect of the intellect and the mind.

In addition to the physical and the mental, those of us who talk or write about such matters usually include the moral, the spiritual, the religious, the emotional and even the social aspects of human nature and of the developing young person. Certainly all of these, whatever we mean by them, and overlapping as several of them are, are important to any understanding of yourselves and do concern us, your teachers, in the sense that they form part of the being or nature of each of you and their development and the influencing and directing of that development is one of our functions or, at least, one of the results, conscious or unconscious, of what we try to do to you as students. But the individual, that is you and I, important (more)
though we are to each other and, if we are fortunate, to a limited number of others, are not the only items or objectives in the universe. There are other human beings, hundreds of millions of them, and because the habitable portions of the globe are limited in area and because we are gregarious creatures, we usually live together in families, in groups, in communities, and in nations. This makes it important that we should understand what we term our society whether it be local, national or international.

Again I know that society has more than one meaning or definition. I am using it to describe the organized group that lives and works together for the welfare and benefit of the group and, I would hope, of the individuals composing the group. But the existence of an "organized society" or government is bound to have an effect upon the freedom and the development of the nation and the individual and that is why I insist that it is important and necessary that men and women, particularly those with a university education should understand their contemporary society at every level. For you must live in it and where necessary adjust yourselves to it; occasionally, if you disapprove of it, resist it, or more intelligently, take steps to change it so that it not only works but works as you would like it to work. Examples of this will occur to all of you in your own experience and in your own communities, towns, and cities. It will also come to mind as you read about the cold war, Iron Curtain countries, the United Nations and the rest. These are examples of the ways or attempts by which and through which men and women organize their group lives, achieve their own ends or objectives or give expression to their own views or philosophies about life and society or attempt to do so. Perhaps the best illustration for young Americans, in 1956, is the presidential election which takes place next November, for in and through that election various groups within the United States will attempt to shape and control the American society and in that way give expression to their own views and try to achieve their own desires.

And finally, we your teachers should help you to understand the world around you, that is, the physical world of earth, air and water, and the component parts of
each and the influences that can be brought to bear upon them to make them subject to our use and benefit. This area is as wide as the universe itself and each year that passes we are learning more about it even though because we are human beings, our use of it or even our physical contact with it may be a limited and narrow kind and confined to the earth itself and its enveloping atmosphere.

These then are some of the objectives of a university education; to know yourself, to know your society, to know the world around you. A very simple program when expressed in these terms but, because of the magnitude and complexity of each, quite beyond the capacities of any human being to understand or realize completely and to the full. And so as is usual in such situations we must compromise and select and emphasize — this at the expense of that.

Our general and I believe our most important objective is that you be mature, well-balanced, educated and free or independent individual human beings. The world we live in is one in which nearly all of the pressures are in the direction of conformity to a mass pattern, in cars, in clothes, in food, in music, entertainment, and all other aspects of life. This in many respects is good and makes it possible for more people to enjoy what we call "the amenities of life" than ever before, but it has its drawbacks and its dangers, for I do not believe that the chief end of man is to conform to a mass pattern. Certainly this is not the American ideal. It was to escape from these kinds of pressures that many of our forefathers and mothers came to this continent. One great danger in our age is the tyranny of conformity. We tend to read the same books, to reiterate the same second hand opinions without pausing to question their value. My fear is that all this may result in a complacent mediocrity rather than in stimulating intelligence and leadership. These qualities are needed today perhaps more than ever before. You, who are becoming graduates share a tradition which opposes this, and, as such and as a result of your stay and training in Stanford should be in a better position to resist than others who have not had such advantages.

It is perhaps worthwhile again to remind ourselves that the founders of the (more)
American Republic dedicated themselves to an ideal which involved a new concept of
dignity and worth of the human individual. During the years that the American
Republic has existed, this concept of the worth and dignity of the individual, with-
out regard to race, creed or color, has gained wide and enthusiastic acceptance
throughout the world, and is indeed one of the major causes of the ferment that we
see among colonial peoples throughout the world. It is a noble ideal though one
very difficult to give effect to in practice. But because a great deal of its
inspiration is North American, we have special obligations on this continent to
ensure not only that we practice it ourselves, but that we lend every assistance to
a thorough understanding of its implications elsewhere in the world. We have been in
the past, I think, sometimes naive about the ease and readiness with which peoples
can be trained to exercise free and equal responsibilities; about the ease with which
they can be released from the totems and taboos of feudal and more primitive social
structures. In particular we need to remember this concept of the dignity and worth
of the individual is perhaps the most significant contribution of American civiliza-
tion to human progress, and to re-dedicate ourselves to the difficult realization of
the ideal.

The fact that the pressures to conform are more pleasant and more persistent and
less consciously evident than in the past does not affect the result, so that my
concern for you as privileged members of your society is that, while accepting the
facts and the realities of your own age, including the pressures to conform, you
should remain independent, free and discriminating individual human beings, capable
of resisting those things you believe to be undesirable and of giving expression and
effect and leadership to that resistance so that others too, may perhaps join with
you in making and keeping your society and your world a good place for individual
human beings.

Responsibility and integrity are two other terms that I like to talk about and
think about in connection with a university education. All of us and particularly
those of us who have been educated have a responsibility for our society, for our
(more)
community and for our fellow-men because, as I indicated earlier, most of us must live together in groups. A sense of responsibility and the acceptance of it is the keystone and the foundation of the effective working of any organized society.

Integrity includes honesty but it is more different in that it implies an insistence upon the truth and the facts, and upon principles and values and upon using these and giving effect to them even when they affect us as individuals in situations when it will be easier to fool ourselves or to be dishonest. This is not an easy or pleasant role at times but I believe that if we are to be true to the ideas and ideals for which a university education stands, we must each contribute in a personal way to this idea of integrity. ...

Of the three main aspects of university work: (1) the advancement of knowledge, (2) training men and women for the professions, and (3) the enrichment of the lives of its students, I have, without any disparagement of the first two, always considered the third - the enrichment of the lives of the students - the most important. Knowledge could be advanced by a research institute; professional training could be given in a technical school; a liberal education is something which a university alone can provide. ...

My defense of a liberal education is that it is not planned for a foretold future but is designed to enable man to adapt himself to whatever the future may bring. It can be an end in itself, but it can also be the basis for the highest achievement in specialized research and for the most distinguished of professional careers. If you prefer to think of the life or world you and your contemporaries will shape and mould, then my belief is that technical knowledge and professional skill are not enough for your purpose, and that they must be supplemented by a serious cultivation of the minds of men, cultivation which should begin but which should not end in our universities. ...

The intention behind all of these developments as they effect the students is to provide a more comprehensive view of man and his achievements. Graduates are expected to become active participants in human affairs rather than remote (more)
intellectuals who are reluctant to become embroiled in the tangled web of contemporary life. With this in mind university education is becoming more and more directed toward providing the student with the background of knowledge and interpretation and contributes towards judicious action rather than towards the memorization of details of information.

The modern development implies an increased stress upon values and attitudes because these largely determine the goals we set. Values, sentiments and attitudes influence profoundly the use to which knowledge is put and to ignore their significance in an educational program can vitiate much of the instruction that is provided. Of course knowledge in and for itself influences one's direct attitude but a direct concern for values and attitudes is also required to fulfill the purpose of a well-rounded education for contemporary life.

There is a growing recognition that the University is dealing with the student as a person rather than merely with his skills and knowledge. It is not that the latter are unimportant but the aim is to supplement these with wisdom which implies the ability to use one's knowledge for developing worthy aims and one's skill for accomplishing worthy aims. Knowledge that is misused can be menacing rather than helpful.

It seems to me that contemporary society needs, as never before, not only information and skills, but also knowledge and even - if we can come by it - wisdom. It is not an idle nor a hysterical remark to say that we have only in the last decade or two come to realize that it is possible for us, human beings of our time, to make mistakes which could be irreversible. To avoid making such mistakes we need all available knowledge - about ourselves as well as about our physical environment, about ends as well as means. And I need hardly add that the nation which will make perhaps the most potent decisions affecting the future of humanity is precisely your nation, the United States of America.

The strength - and in some practical ways, the weakness of the Western position is that its central article of faith is not a faith in dogma, but a faith in freedom (more)
of the mind, which is to say a faith in criticism, in controversy, in doubt as much as in certitude.

This principle suggests some of the appropriate methods we must use to fill the vacuum at the centre of our academic universe. If there is no religious or political dogma effectively prevailing there now and it is contrary to the basic principles of a free society to impose such dogmas, then we must put our main stress on process rather than end-result; the process in this case being the process of free inquiry and the endless discussion of earnest and informed minds regarding the ultimate questions concerning man - in society and in the cosmos.

I would say that the primary aim is to enable as many of our young people as can benefit from it to engage themselves in the process which is central to the creative life of Western man; the process of inquiry, of criticism, of discussion. And that means in the immensely complex, highly differentiated universe of modern knowledge, to learn both the accurate, precise painstaking methods of investigation in one or more specialized fields and the quite different methods by which these specialisms are related to each other and all of them to the service of Man, this strange creature with so high a potentiality and such tragic capacity to ignore his limitations or, sometimes, to deny his greatness.

The society around us clamours for more scientists, more engineers, more teachers, more social workers, more doctors, more psychiatrists, more lawyers, more qualified men and women in all professions. But it also needs, if it can hardly yet be said to clamour for, men and women who have "seen life steadily and seen it whole" and who therefore know that there are no glib answers. But we of the Western stream of culture have less reason than any human group in the world to doubt that the searching is a high and noble adventure and that the truth does indeed make men free.

Freedom for me means the right or opportunity or power, to do and say, and write, and think, and be whatever we want to or like. Personally, I believe that every individual should have the maximum freedom, subject to two reservations or limitations. One, the fact that we are not alone in the world, and because of that (more)
we must remember that others have rights too, and that all of us must exercise our freedom with due regard for the rights, the persons, the property and interests of others. The second complicating fact, which makes restrictions upon freedom necessary is that none of us is a mature, wise and experienced individual at birth, and, for a period at least, must submit to a measure of external control and discipline. A third grows out of the fact that some individuals are anti-social, mentally unbalanced or criminally inclined. It is more difficult and even dangerous to generalize about these restrictions upon liberty and freedom, for it carries with it the implication that the majority or "ruling" view is right and wise, and should be enforced.

Obviously, this contains a very real threat to the freedom of the individual.

Today, in our world, the existence of totalitarian and authoritarian countries, governments and peoples, and their desire and attempts to impose their wills and their views upon the rest of us, is a further complication, in respect of the exercise of individual freedom. None of us will forget the sacrifices that were necessary to save us from Nazi and Fascist domination - and most of us are aware of the threat which Communism and Communist dominated countries hold for our concepts of freedom and a free society. This creates for us a very real dilemma; shall we deny the principles upon which we stand, or will we endanger our continued existence as free men, by allowing our enemies to plot and organize, and act, against us?

There is no clearcut answer to this question. For myself, I would urge that we take all measures necessary to protect our freedom, but we should also, subject to this, allow the maximum of freedom to everyone. Here, perhaps, it is in order to state that one of the tests of "freedom," and of our belief in it, is our willingness to allow others to do, and say, and write things that we dislike, and even hate, -- and to protect them in the exercise of these activities. And believe me, that is not easy to do. ...

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