THE SOCIAL IMPORTANCE OF MAKING A LIVING

Commencement Address

Augusta College
Augusta, Georgia

June 7, 1970

by

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Dr. Robins, Distinguished Guests, Young Men and Young Women of the Graduating Class, Friends of Augusta College - -

For me, as it must be for you, this is a happy occasion. This is my part of Georgia. I have a great sentimental attachment to this area--to this college. I have known and respected many of the students and many of their parents. From time to time, I have been closely associated with members of the faculty and administration, and particularly with Dr. Robins.

Under these circumstances, I share with Dr. Robins great pride in the growth from an enrollment of about 300 students in 1957, when the Junior College of Augusta became a part of the University System, to the 2,700 students now enrolled in the four-year college, with a faculty of 115.

Today is a milestone marking past successful growth. It is an enormous tribute to Dr. Robins and his leadership. With his many friends across the country I applaud his outstanding achievement.
I don't know why each of you came to college. Perhaps you came because your parents expected you to. Perhaps you came because your friends were going. Perhaps you came because this was one way of postponing the hard decision of how you expect to spend the rest of your life.

I should suspect, however, that most of you came and stayed so that on this day you could emerge with a marketable skill that would earn you higher incomes.

Your graduation today formally recognizes that you have either that marketable skill or the foundation for developing such a skill should you propose to go on to graduate school. I am pretty certain, however, that one of the things uppermost in the mind of each one of you is whether or not it is going to be possible to market that skill and, if so, for how much.

A smoothly functioning democracy requires an educated population. If your education increases your productivity and that of others, the public has concluded there will be more resources to devote to child welfare, roads, and other public purposes, as well as to enable the private sector of the community to have better food, housing, and other goods and services.
This decision to devote public resources to education, I sincerely believe, has paid off. It is one of the reasons that in the State of Georgia we can point to some rather remarkable economic progress in recent years.

This growth did not come by magic--out of thin air. It came by the sweat of the brow of millions of men and women. It came from the existence of a stable government. In short, it resulted from the operations of the American economic system. Should you choose to enter business or work for a business, you will be joining those who have been responsible for economic growth.

If we are going to bring the minorities and disadvantaged into the mainstream of American life, rebuild our cities, work to contain pollution, provide better health care, develop recreation and leisure-time facilities, or strive for the many other worthwhile goals we can set, we are going to have to devote vast economic resources to reaching them. There are two ways this can be done: one is subtraction; the other, addition.

By subtraction, we would stop providing some of the goods and
services now being enjoyed by the American people. By addition, we can provide resources through continued growth in the nation's productivity.

What can be done and what is done are not very often the same things. Our past economic growth occurred under an economic system oriented toward free markets and business enterprise. If we are to continue economic growth, we must continue under that system or find another that will accomplish the same thing.

"Those are just abstract ideas," you may be thinking. "In practice, I have to go to work for a business, and you know there are many business practices that just can't be squared with good moral principles."

I couldn't agree with you more. There are some businesses with which, quite frankly, I would not want to associate myself. I see some businesses that engage in corrupt practices. I see some businesses that profit from misleading advertising. I see some businesses whose aim seems to be profits regardless of the mound of human misery their policies may create.

Yes, but is wholesale condemnation of millions of businessmen because of the actions of a few the kind of discriminative thinking we should expect from an educated person? It is the privilege of any man
or woman to choose the kind of business he or she will work for or conduct, but an educated person especially should exercise some discrimination in making that choice.

The desire to earn more is, of course, not wrong in itself. As a matter of fact, wanting money provides the drive that makes many of us produce more. Making money regardless of the consequences is another matter altogether.

But choosing the kind of business you want to conduct or work for may be the easiest part of reconciling idealism with the practical task of earning a living. The real test will come in your day-to-day decisions. Will your decisions be made solely on the basis of personal gain, or will you weigh the personal benefits against the social consequences? You—not the "system"—will bear the responsibility.

Each one of us may have different interpretations of the unrest in our country today—how it all started, whose fault it is, and how it should be dealt with; nevertheless, I believe we can agree on one thing: this is an era of accelerated change.

Whether or not we desire it, whether or not we are prepared for it, change will continue to be a constant companion of every citizen. We need to observe what is going on around us and filter it through a layer of commonsense so as to decide in what direction and to what extent we have to alter course.
In my younger years, change meant the end of a great world war and genuine promise for peace throughout the world.

Change meant the end of the horse-and-buggy days and the introduction of the automobile.

Change meant the development of a revolutionary new communication medium called radio.

All too often, however, change in the 1970's reflects more ominous overtones, more momentous consequences. Seldom in these dizzying times does far-reaching change descend upon us without a proliferation of new problems, or violent upheavals that tax even our most inventive minds.

This, in one sense of the term, is the price of progress in a technological age, an age in which the wizardry of science and the genius of man seem more adaptable to creation than to solution. The result? A chaotic world, a confused nation, a bewildered society groping desperately for the promised land of progress, peace and security.

Some time ago I read with great interest a thoughtful editorial in one of our national news magazines. Its title summed up - painfully perhaps but nevertheless accurately - the kind of twentieth century world that change has created. "Wherever we look," the editorial proclaimed, "something is wrong."

Is that not a strikingly accurate appraisal of the modern world?
as any perceptive mind would view it? Wherever--north, south, east or west--at home or abroad, nothing seems to be as it should be or as we would wish it to be.

In this year 1970 we see on every hand, more pointedly than ever before, evidences of an embattled world, with individual hopes continually frustrated, national goals thwarted, established order threatened by confusion, and time-honored traditions scattered in disarray across the land.

The logical question is: is this condition of mankind, nearly three-fourths of the way through the twentieth century, the best we can hope for? Or is there something better, some higher aspiration the intelligence of man can achieve?

I believe there is. I know of no universal law by which it has been foreordained that any problem facing mankind shall defy solution. To the contrary, the history of the twentieth century thus far has been a spectacular and continuing record of man's ability to master those problems to which he is willing to apply his full resources, those problems he regards as truly important.

Perhaps, as the editorial has proclaimed, everywhere we look something is wrong. Perhaps, as others have suggested, the modern world faces more crises of greater peril in more areas of the earth than ever before in history. Be that as it may, I cling to the view--
and in many quarters it is a less than fashionable view—that today's educated young people can be equal to this awesome challenge, that today's perils can be transformed into tomorrow's progress by a generation that refuses to settle for anything less.

Let us ponder briefly some of the major problems to which the younger generation can and must address themselves, problems that in all candor represent a burdensome legacy from one generation to another.

First is the problem that eclipses all others; the war in Southeast Asia, a deepening enigma, that probably has inspired more debate and less statesmanship, more emotionalism and less realism than any other event of this century.

Then there is the second great issue of our time, overshadowed only by a full-scale warfare on the conventional battlefield. I refer, of course, to the domestic upheaval in America, in the alleys and streets of every city, pitting citizens versus society, the criminal versus law, the radical versus established order. Whether committed in the name of the poor and downtrodden, or student rights, or civil rights, or free speech, or for any of a hundred other excuses, lawlessness is a potential cancer to society, and without swift and drastic treatment the patient will surely die.
For this poison of rampant crime and widespread disrespect for the law, my generation thus far has failed to devise an effective antidote. Perhaps with the help of today's generation of students a remedy can be found. It is worthy of their full attention and effort.

Let us continue. There is a widespread and growing feeling of alienation among American youth, particularly the college age youth, who have grown impatient with adult inaction and lack of success. There is the continuing problem of poverty in the midst of history's most affluent society, a curious anomaly that no one yet has adequately explained. And finally, there are the twin specters which continue to haunt the modern affluent society, pollution of the air we breathe and the water we drink.

That is my list. No doubt you, as thinking scholars, have already compiled your own. Add them together and there emerges a new kind of pollution, a pollution of a national purpose, a debilitating drain on America's resolve to meet history head on.

To tell it like it is, today's adult generation has been guilty of some grievous mistakes. It has miscalculated from time to time; it has blundered on more occasions than one; it has erred in foresight and in judgment; it may not yet have come to grips with the great issues of our time.

There is one consolation, however: the errors of one generation need not be perpetuated by future generations. The shortcomings of my
generation need not be repeated by those of you young people who soon
will move into positions of leadership.

I do not challenge our youth to trample empires. I challenge
our youth to build a new kind of world. The future of America, a new
America and a new world, will emerge from new ideas, new hopes, and
new aspirations of a new generation able to dream and daring to follow
those dreams.

Regardless of the course on which our new dreams carry us,
regardless of the changes one is able to bring to pass, there remain at
least a few constants in this troubled world. The old virtues that have
sustained mankind through the centuries of adversity and peril find no
less application today.

Honesty, integrity, compassion and love--these are the raw
materials from which enduring dreams are made. Such virtues may be
old-fashioned, possibly even quaint, but so are beards and unshorn
locks, both of which appear to have survived and flourished in spite of
time, technology, and stainless steel blades.

I suggest that these virtues hammered out over the centuries
on the anvil of human experience are still relevant today. They are
worth keeping. They are worth pursuing. They remain the essential
foundations for any truly great civilization, for any inspired personal
commitment, for any worthwhile dream.

We mass produce almost everything in this country, but we cannot mass produce character because that is a matter of personal identity. It belongs to those who have found the part they ought to play, who are doing the work for which they are best endowed, who are satisfied that they are filling a vital need, and who are meeting their obligations.

To have a set of principles is not at all to become a starry-eyed dreamer, but a person who knows simply and convincingly that there are certain things one has to believe in or civilization will die.

There are standards of craftsmanship in every calling. Artists have standards to meet as do carpenters, lawyers, stenographers, operators of bulldozers, surgeons, business managers, and stone masons. Every honest calling, every walk of life, has its own elite, its own aristocracy based on excellence of performance.

One pityes the man or woman whose obsessive dream is not improvement toward excellence but escape from actualities and responsibilities. Such people must feel unwanted, useless, and purposeless, and that is one of life's greatest sufferings.

The anguish of empty and sterile lives far more than any economic condition or political injustice drives men and women to
demonstrate and demand rather than to study and earn.

The man of quality will wish to have his journey through life leave some traces. Instead of denouncing or denying what others bring forth as the truth, great men offer their own truths.

The man of quality lifts his head above the crowd to see a horizon fitting his abilities. He teaches his imagination to play with future possibilities and bends his back to the immediate task that will contribute toward their coming true.

One of the earliest Greek poets said "Before the gates of excellence the high gods have placed sweat." People are not roused to seek excellence by ease or pleasure or any other sugarplum.

We must, of course, develop a sense of the values of things, and, in applying it to our special cases, we learn to tell truth from falsehood, fact from opinion, reality from phoniness and beauty from tawdriness.

There is no need to become cast down if we do not at once attain the super-best. It is a good thing to strive for excellence, but we must realize that the best possible is not too bad.

Most of life is lived by batting averages, not by perfect scores. The research scientist does not expect that his every hypothesis will prove out. The financier does not expect that every investment will return a maximum dividend. People live by making plans and by
putting forth efforts that are, so far as they can see, in line with the results they want. Then, they revise their plan and improve their performance as experience dictates.

What do commencement speakers mean when they repeat year after year "education is a lifelong process." Every youth already knows as he walks down the platform steps with his diploma that he must keep on learning.

What the speakers mean is something beyond keeping up with the techniques of one's profession or business. They have in mind the attributes needed to survive errors, to keep marching on a road that seems to be without end, to rise above disappointment, to lie awake at night staring at broken hopes and frustrated plans and a future that seems wholly dark, and to get up in the morning and go about their business with determination. All of these are part of education.

Speaking in halls of Parliament more than two centuries ago, Edmund Burke advised his colleagues "Tell me what it is in the minds of our young people today and I'll tell you what is to be the character of the next generation."

To this new generation of scholars I would pose one compelling challenge: Chart a new course! Blaze a new path! Follow another dream! Follow a dream that injects the spirit of youth into the crises
of our times. Follow a dream that transforms crisis into opportunity and opportunity into service—service in behalf of a better world for all mankind.

Expressing it appropriately may be the words of a Broadway hit tune in The Man from LaMancha, "The Impossible Dream."

To dream the impossible dream
To fight the unbeatable foe
To bear with unbearable sorrow
To run where the brave dare not go

And the world will be better for this
That one man, scorned and covered with scars,
Still strove with his last ounce of courage
To reach the unreachable stars!