

Address at the University of Michigan Commencement Exercises

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by

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It is with a real sense of privilege that I stand at this rostrum today as a participant in the 113th Commencement Exercises of the University of Michigan. I am so conscious of this privilege that I hasten to assure you that I shall be careful not to abuse it by overextending my remarks, for I am keenly aware that in the minds of every speaker's auditors the uppermost question is not "What will he say?", but rather, "How long will he take to say it?"

The question is particularly appropriate at commencement, when the speaker is apt to make much of the cliché that commencement is not a time of endings, but a time of beginnings. Yet the speaker goes on and on, thereby delaying the persons he is particularly preaching to, the graduates, from proceeding with the business of beginning. While I sympathize with the graduates, their parents, and their friends, I feel obliged to point out that for the most part they are confronted with these speakers only a few times in their lives. Think of the faculty members, the administrators, the members of the boards of these institutions. These unsung heroes must listen to these speeches annually or even more often. In recognition of this, in partial payment for the privilege of being here, and with

gratitude for the welcome and courtesies extended to me, I shall attempt to observe my own maxim, that if brevity is not always the soul of wit, at least no one ever heard a complaint that a speech was too short.

I have said it is a privilege for me to participate in these ceremonies. That was not intended as a concession to the amenities of speech. It was an acknowledgement of the greatness of this institution, a greatness it has displayed throughout its history, a greatness it continues to evidence today and may be confidently expected to maintain in the future. I hope that you, the graduates, have a full understanding of the privilege you have enjoyed in being able to study here. To acknowledge that it has been a privilege does not detract in any way from the abilities you possessed before you came here, as evidenced by your selection for admission, nor does it detract from the proof you have again given of your abilities by the successful completion of your studies, which is the purpose of these ceremonies.

By calling your attention to the reciprocal relationship between intelligent individuals such as yourselves and a great institution of learning such as this, I do not mean to propose the creation of a formal mutual admiration society. I do suggest to the graduates, however, that you retain in your minds and hearts a full measure of the respect and admiration for this world-renowned institution which you surely have gained during your studies here. Having had no little experience with university students, I fully realize that each of you may look back on some instance or situation which occurred during your residence here which was somewhat less than perfect. But having had an equivalent degree of experience with faculty members, administrators, and trustees, I think those charged with directing and conducting the programs of the University of Michigan would be the first to agree that although it is one

of the world's truly great institutions of higher learning, like all human institutions it is less than perfect. So the real question before those associated with this University or any university, and that includes the graduates, is what are we and our friends doing, and what need we further do, to try to perfect the imperfect?

Have no fear; I am not about to make a sales pitch for the Michigan alumni fund. I have raised the question for a purpose that includes your relationship to the University of Michigan but also goes far beyond it. It is, fundamentally, a question that deals with your conception of your relationship to the world you are entering. When you were admitted to this institution, you were afforded the privilege of commencing an educational process designed to help make more perfect one person among the great multitude of imperfect persons who make up this imperfect world. How fully did you take advantage of this opportunity? Not completely, I am sure, because none of us ever has. And if you are honest with yourself, you probably will live out your life in the full and constant knowledge that you never are accomplishing quite as much as you are capable of accomplishing.

In brief, you are never going to perfect the imperfect -- yourself, your alma mater, your society. After all, the largest room in the world is the room for improvement. Some persons find the world's imperfection an intolerable burden; others use it as an excuse for evading their responsibilities to themselves and their fellows. But knowledge of our imperfection is not only the burden of the human race; that knowledge is also the glory of humankind. It is our glory because the human being's consciousness of his own imperfection is unique among all living creatures. It is the badge of a human's special distinction upon this earth and the seed of his progress. From this knowledge and the desire and the courage to

persevere in the attempt to achieve perfection comes every advance that mankind has achieved. We work in the knowledge that we are a little lower than the angels. But we strive nevertheless because we have in front of us a concept of what is possible, a concept of what we can achieve in bettering ourselves and our society.

You have recently had to contend with the realities of final examinations and you are about to undertake the realistic tasks of finding a job, earning a living, and raising a family. Now, as if things weren't tough enough already, I show up at the last moment with an apparent implied request that you concern yourselves also with the perfection of mankind. Well, I should like to say that these matters - the vague and the distant, the concrete and the immediate - are closely related because they all have to do with the business of living our lives in as satisfactory a way as we can devise.

I am not suggesting that you start out to perfect mankind. I am talking about an individual, about you. I am talking about your view of yourself. If you conceive of your future as one composed only of material satisfactions, then I warn you that you are going to miss life. Or if you should decide at some future date that you have come as close to perfecting yourself as you can, then you are going to miss life from that point on. "For when a man imagines, even after years of striving, that he has attained perfection, his decline begins." Note that I am not calling for a plague upon those who fail mankind. I am simply saying that in failing ourselves we miss the most rewarding aspect of life - the striving toward perfection - and it is then that we fail our fellows, our heritage, and our God-given capacity to progress. The moment we fail to strive toward perfection is the moment we die. That is why some persons can be dead at 21 and yet not physically pass from among us for another half century.

Some of you may recall that Walt Whitman became editor of the old Brooklyn Eagle at a relatively early age. It seemed then to him, as it might seem to any of us, that he had, as we now put it, "arrived." At that time he wrote to a friend saying that the job he held was, as he expressed it, "a good sit." Fortunately, Walt Whitman did not sit out the good sit for the rest of his years. He gave it up and in doing so he became a greater man.

You are entering upon adult life at a time of unparalleled prosperity, at a time when success seems easy and the road ahead of the individual appears to harbor hardly a pitfall. In this situation we can be tempted - and in fact on almost every side are tempted - to settle for what Whitman called the good sit. If, as is often intimated, our nation's progress is inevitable, then you and I and everyone else can relax and enjoy it. We have "a good sit" and the morrow can take care of itself.

But the morrow will not take care of itself. History's lesson is that progress is not inevitable. History's lesson is that progress - whether of an individual, an institution, or a nation - does not occur by happenstance. Rather, it occurs through unceasing labor, through a conscious effort of the human will. It is not military or natural disasters which offer the basic explanation of why the archives of history are strewn with the wreckage of once-great societies. These societies failed not because they neglected the state of their armaments but because their citizens - rich, powerful, and filled with pride - neglected the conditions of their hearts and spirits. These people thought they had "arrived," and thinking this they settled for the "good sit." In that act of surrender they decreed their own demise and wrote their own epitaph.

The builders of this nation - the first settlers; the pioneers who opened this vast continent; the leaders in government, in science, in

industry, in the arts - these builders did not assume that progress was inevitable. What drove them was their confidence in their ability to forge their own future in a bountiful land where law and liberty reign together in harmony. They knew that optimism about the future is justified only to the extent that it is matched by faith, courage, and the will-to-achieve.

It was not very long ago that this country entered upon its own national history. You would not have to dig far into the bottom of Lake Michigan - less than a foot in fact - to come upon the stratum of deposits laid down in the same year that our country proclaimed its independence and asserted its destiny as the homeland of individual freedom and opportunity for all. Not only in geologic time but in historic time also, the era between then and now is but a moment.

This nation, the "great hope of mankind," is still in transition. Whether we shall be able to preserve our freedom is a moot question. Whether in this age of rapid material advancement we can prevent a regression to the all-powerful state, to an ant-hill society, is in your hands and the hands of the thousands of other educated men and women who are the products of our colleges and universities. The technician cannot cure the ills of society or prevent future ones. It is the liberally educated, thoughtful citizen, intent on perfecting himself and the world he lives in, who is the hope of this country, and for that matter the hope of mankind.

The direction which our age will eventually take - toward freedom or away from it, toward world-wide progress or toward an international cataclysm - is a greater mystery than any uncharted sea, a greater challenge than uncrossed prairies stretching to ranges of unscaled mountains. It is a mystery, but it is here, waiting to be defined. The late Gutzon Borglum, who sculptured the gigantic masterpieces on the face of Mount Rushmore,

said that the figures of Washington, Lincoln, Jefferson, and Theodore Roosevelt had been there in the mountain for the whole forty million years of its existence. All he had to do, he said, was to dynamite away 400,000 tons of granite to bring the heroic figures into view. If wealth consists not only of horsepower and productivity but of spiritual values, moral integrity, and unlimited possibilities of action, then the present age offers more opportunities to you men and women than humanity has ever before enjoyed. But make certain that your children, when they graduate from college, enjoy at least the same freedoms you enjoy.

As I bring my remarks to a conclusion, I remind you that I emphasized that you have been privileged to attend this University. I did that because I wished to recall for you that education is not a natural right. The opportunity to attend this institution had to be won for you by others, and into the building of this University or any other great institution there went the lives of human beings. These institutions are built with the minds, the hearts, and the spirits of persons like yourselves - some of them of superior attainments, some of them better-than-average, some of them average - who hoped to leave this world a little bit better than they found it. They did their part to assist in the process of perfecting the imperfect, and all that a free society asks in exchange for the rights, privileges, and advantages you enjoy is that you do what you can to make a good future for others as others have labored to make one possible for you.

I join the faculty and administration of this University, your family, and your friends in congratulating you upon your accomplishments. And I know that they join me in my expression of confidence in your ability and your readiness to fulfill your responsibility to yourself, and thus to our common humanity, by continuing to strive toward perfecting the imperfect. Again, I thank you for the privilege of being among you today.