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"TWO HERESIES"

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Speaker at the 116th annual June Commencement Exercises at

THE UNIVERSITY OF MICHIGAN

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Provisional text of address to be made by Sir Geoffrey Crowther at The University of Michigan, Ann Arbor, Michigan, June 11, 1960.

I have been coming to Ann Arbor, on and off, for more than thirty years. I have made many friendships here. I have played some part in sending you a steady stream of graduate students from my own country. I have watched with affection and amazement the gigantic growth of this great institution. Of all the great state universities of America, this is the one where I feel most at home.

Yet never in my wildest moments did I dream that I should receive the honor of becoming an honorary graduate of The University of Michigan, and I am still overwhelmed by it. It is impossible to stand here, in this great stadium, before such a gathering, surrounded as we are by the spreading buildings of a great campus, without feelings of deep emotion, of humility but also of pride to know that one has been made a member of your body. I know that in this I can speak for all my fellow honorary graduates. In the words of the Prayer Book, for being made partakers in all this, we give you most humble and hearty thanks.

On me you have conferred the supreme privilege of being permitted to address you. I would not for the world miss the honor. But it carries a very heavy burden with it. For what can be said in a commencement address that has not been said a thousand times before? Shall I extol the glories of the tradition of learning that leads from the monks' cells of the Middle Ages to the great universities of today? Those glories would gain nothing from anything I could say. Shall I sound the alarm for academic freedom? It seems to me to be in less danger today than at many other times. Should I perhaps address myself chiefly to the graduating class? Should I preach the ancient moral virtues to you? It would be an impertinence. Should I remind you of your duty to the community that has done so much for you? It would be an insult. Should I take the oldest and most shopworn theme of all, and remind you that this is a commencement, a beginning not an ending? You wouldn't listen to me if I did. Should I try to give you the only thing that the old can give to the young--that is, the fruits of experience. But the chief thing you learn from experience is that no one will learn from other people's experience. No, members of the class of 1960, I can do nothing for you. The campuses of the country have been ringing all week with high moral sentiments, and I haven't the heart to try to add to them.

I must presume, Mr. President, that you had some deliberate purpose in choosing for your speaker this afternoon a foreigner--and one, moreover, who has been engaged for some years past in an intensive study of the educational system of his own country. I read in that a hint that you wanted to hear something of what an American university looks like from the outside to one who has been put by chance in the position to make some comparison between American universities and those of other countries. If that is your wish, I shall try to comply.

But even then my dilemma is not quite resolved. Shall I speak of what I admire in the American university? That, indeed, would be easy. The words would come quickly to my mouth, because I spend so much of my time when I am at home in England pressing on our own universities some of your practices. I admire so much your generosity--not only your generosity of money, but your generosity of spirit, your deep sense of service to the community, the way you convince the individual--be he freshman or doctor--that you exist to serve him, not he to serve the institution. I admire the way you are forever breaking down the barriers between you and the rest of the community--not hiding behind hedges of aloofness and superiority, as too many of the academic institutions in my own country do. I admire the eagerness with which the pursuit of knowledge is carried on here. In Europe one is sometimes made to feel that the pursuit is over, that knowledge has been caught and tamed and made to live comfortably ever after. I admire the structure of graduate schools superimposed on a liberal arts college--a structure that we should do well to adopt in England.

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There is so much I admire. But it would be a poor compliment to you to assume that all you wanted to hear was praise. The purpose of an address, after all, is communication from one mind to another, and if I am to set you thinking, I must give you something to think about. So, as I pondered what I should say to you this afternoon, I slowly screwed up my courage to the conviction that I can best return the compliment you pay me by telling you of some of the things in the American university to which, in my opinion, you should be giving your serious critical attention. Having so often landed into trouble at home for singing the praises of the American university too loud, I had better run the risk of getting into trouble here for the opposite reason. So I determined to pick out this afternoon a couple of points on which I find myself beset with doubts. I am the more emboldened to do this because they are points which, so far as I can observe, do not seem to disturb you. That is why I gave myself the title of "Two Heresies" because I am going to challenge what is usually taken for granted.

Let me state my two heresies quite bluntly so that you will see what I am getting at, and then I will try to defend them one after the other. My first heresy is to think that there are too many college students. And my second heresy is to think that they work too hard.

Now when I say there are too many college students, I don't mean here, at Michigan. There are, indeed, a goodly number here, but I would not presume to say there are too many. There is a great deal to be said for the small college. And there is a great deal also to be said for the big college--though it is much less often said. From what I know of Michigan, I would not say that it is too big--not yet, at least. In any case, that is not my argument. I am not arguing about big colleges and small colleges. I am asking whether, in the United States, there are not too many college students altogether--whether the proportion of the population that goes to college is not too large.

Now I know that it has always been one of the fundamental doctrines of the American people that there must be no special privileges, no select class, that every boy and girl has a right to go to college if he or she can make the grade and earn enough to stay alive. I am not challenging that great American principle. Heretic though I may be, I am not trying to preach any old world doctrine of a privileged aristocracy. No, I am trying, now that you have admitted me to your society, to be a good American democrat. Certainly, the right exists. But then it always has existed. What is new--within the past decade or so--what is new and different and doubtful is the doctrine that almost every American boy or girl should be encouraged and assisted to claim his right. There is a right to travel freely on the highway. But even in Michigan you can't all do it at once. It is possible to believe passionately in the existence of a right, and yet to hope that everyone won't claim it.

Where is the process of universal education to stop? I have had no opportunity to go back to the statistics, but my impression is that college-going, as a percentage of the age group, is now in this country just about where high school-going was two generations ago. You know what has happened to the high school. I believe the nation wide figure is that 85% of the eighteen year olds are in high school. The same thing is now visibly happening to college-going. If you include the junior colleges, it won't be long before the proportion reaches the halfway mark, and there is no reason to suppose that it will stop there.

In my observation most Americans seem to take it for granted that this is a good thing. Perhaps it is--but not self-evidently so. There must, after all, be a limit somewhere. There must be some age at which universal education--the keeping of everyone in school--should stop. It is not conceivable that the limit has been reached?

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Why do I say this? Not, I assure you, because of the cost. That is your affair, and if as a nation you are willing to find the money to keep all your young people at school until 20 or 21 or 22, no one will do other than admire you for doing so. But I am concerned with the effect that this movement towards universal college education is having on the colleges themselves. I will single out two of its effects. The first is that it must be lowering the average intellectual standard of the colleges. That follows almost mathematically. If the process goes on until every boy and girl is in college, then the average standard of intelligence in the colleges in the country as a whole will be an I.Q. of exactly 100, which is a great deal lower than it has been hitherto. Moreover, it cannot help the colleges if more and more of their students come there not because of any genuine desire to continue their education in any real sense of the word, but because it is socially the thing to do. If this is the general picture, then colleges like this one which want to maintain and even improve their standards, are forced into being more and more selective. Every good college in the country is besieged by applicants and at its wit's end to know how to choose among them. I do not think it is good for the front-rank colleges if everyone who gets in has the feeling that he has had to go through the eye of a needle to get there. And I do not think it is good for the country. Thus this great democratic principle of everyone having a college education is in fact creating a new privileged class--those who manage to get a good college education.

The second consequence is this--that if nearly everybody goes to college, then increasingly all those who aspire to enter the professions or the higher ranks of business and administration--in a word all those who want to follow one of the careers for which college used to be the preparation--all these are now forced to go to a graduate school as well. Now, as I said before, I have nothing but admiration for the graduate schools. But they were never intended to serve 15 or 20 per cent of the age group. Moreover, what will happen to them when more and more of their students are there, not because they have any real interest in more study, not even because what they learn will do them good, but simply because they can't get the sort of job they want without a second degree?

More and more careers, for this reason, cannot begin until the age of 24--or even 26 if there is Selective Service to be done. Now think what this means. I suppose one can say that active life--that is, the life of the conscious mind--begins at about the age of 6 when one learns to read. At the other end retirement from gainful occupation is more and more being pushed down towards 60. In other words, in the normal life, there are only 54 years or so between infancy and retirement. Is it really good sense that for the intellectual leaders of the country--the most intelligent quarter of the whole--as many as 20 out of those 54 years should be spent in learning and only 34 in doing? Is that really a rational employment of the scarciest of all scarce resources--human talent? Isn't there something to be said for the view that there should be less preparation for life and more living? Is America right to keep its young longer and longer on the leash, and rely for the productive work of the nation more and more on the middle aged? Only a very rich country could do it at all. But is it a wise application of your riches?

Let me quickly turn, before the brickbats begin to fly, to my second heresy. In saying that the student of today has to work too hard, I can, I think, reasonably anticipate the sympathy of at least part of my audience. But perhaps I don't mean quite what they think I mean.

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I was speaking just a moment ago of the pressure that the good colleges are under to defend their standards. The same circumstances present them with an opportunity to raise their standards. It is their duty to do so. If it is a privilege to be admitted to one of these great institutions, then no student should be allowed to remain there who does not continue to measure up to the highest standards. I am not criticizing this concern for standards. Indeed, I am supporting it.

But how, by what means, have the standards been enforced and maintained? From what I see and hear I suspect that far too many colleges are doing it by what is the easy way for them--by demanding an ever higher total of hours put in--of hours, what is more, that have to be devoted to doing what the professor says must be done. Assignments become heavier and are more rigorously enforced. I have no doubt at all that the student of today who wants to secure a good average has to work for much longer hours than he did 30 years ago when I first knew the American colleges. I do not mean that the student of the last generation led an easy life. His mind was active for as many hours a day as now. But I do think that he didn't have his nose held so close to the grindstone of requirements. He was freer to roam and follow his fancy. Now, it seems to me, he goes very much more in harness. Indeed, I have heard the head of a famous institution--not in Michigan--openly boast that the schedule of assigned study in the first year is deliberately made almost impossibly heavy in order to weed out the weaklings.

Now all this seems to me to be a great mistake. Let us indeed have high standards, the highest possible. But high standards of what? Of diligence? Or of intelligence? The two are by no means the same thing. Indeed, they can be, and I suspect often are at variance with each other, since the high intelligence, the really original mind, is likely to revolt against a drudgery which, in his case at least, is pointless and unnecessary.

Let us get back to the fundamentals. What does a university exist for? What is the purpose of education? Is it to absorb a defined quantity of instruction? Or to learn how to think? Is it to accumulate knowledge? Or to acquire understanding? No doubt you know the old comparison between the two different ways of regarding the student's mind. You can either regard it as a pot that has to be filled up or else you can regard it as a fire that has to be set alight. Put it in that way, and the right choice, I think, immediately becomes clear. The proper question for educators to be asking themselves every day is this--what will best serve to light the fire? And we all know that what is needed for a good roaring blaze is plenty of fresh air.

Please don't misunderstand me. I am not asking for soft options. I don't want the students to live lives of leisure. I want them to have to meet the severest tests. But let them be tests of intellect, of understanding, of expression, of imagination, of judgment, of purpose--and not just of the ability to stay awake.

I have one special reason for this plea. We hear a great deal nowadays of the danger of over-specialization, of the confining of the academic world within narrow compartments which are unable, or unwilling, to say anything to each other. This is a real danger. There has been much discussion in my own country of the emergence of two cultures, the scientific and the humanitarian, which are increasingly separate from, and even hostile, to each other. I think this is an understatement of the danger. It is not two cultures with which we are threatened, but 22. There is nothing in the world of learning more urgent than to find means of breaking down this separatism and of moving back, so far as we can, to the time when educated men could travel in each other's territories without passports or interpreters. This is the authentic university tradition. It is indeed what the word means. This great institution is a university. It ought not to be allowed to become a diversity.

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Now I am simple enough to believe that the way to get a meeting of minds is to let them meet. You cannot solve the problem by prescribing courses, chemistry for the historian, or aesthetics for the engineer. You can prescribe the course all right but you can't prescribe the interest in the subject which alone makes it worthwhile. The only way you can get a real cross-fertilization between the different disciplines is to allow a generous allowance of time for people of varying interests to explore each other's minds. I would plead that everyone in a university, from the freshman to the president, should make himself much less busy. He will find as a result--of this I am sure--that his mind is much more active.

I hope I shall be forgiven for asking you to think about my two heresies. Of course, I have exaggerated. I have been trying to use that powerful stimulus to thought, indignation. But why, after all, should I try to make you cross? There is so very much more to admire than to criticize. It is precisely because so much depends on the American universities that one wants to see them perfect. It is on you, more than on anyone else, that the hopes of liberal civilization in the world rest. You will remember that during the war the United States was often described as the arsenal of freedom--and how rightly. But the moral is in the long run so much more important than the material, and what will in the end determine the shape of the world in which our grandchildren live is not how many rockets or space ships or tanks America can build but the ideas to which Americans attach their faith. You attract to yourselves in your universities, and nowhere more than here in Michigan, so much of the best in the outside world--and you give it back with such generosity. It is here that the links are forged that bind the free world together.

So you must not think of me as a critic, or even as a candid friend, but simply as the most recent of your graduates, full of ambition for the growth in grace and power of his Alma Mater. My prayer for this great university is the prayer that Kipling uttered for his native country.

Benson

Land of Hope and Glory, Mother of the Free!  
How can we extol thee, who are born of thee?  
Wider yet and wider may thy bounds be set,  
God, who made the<sup>e</sup> mighty, make thee mightier yet.

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