

TO RENEW OUR FAITH

An Address by Professor John Hope Franklin of the
University of Chicago at the Commencement Exercises
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On this occasion, if I had the talent, I would do something like Johannes Brahms did when he wrote the Academic Festival Overture in response to receiving an honorary degree at the University of Breslau in 1879. Whenever I hear that overture I am virtually lifted out of my seat by its beauty and sublimity; and if I had my way it would constitute the main fare at every commencement. Unfortunately, I had nothing to do with planning this commencement, and I am unable to respond in the manner of Brahms. You will, therefore, have to bear with me as I attempt to make some remarks on this important and exciting occasion.

It is good to be here today to participate in this ritual. In doing so we pay tribute to the agencies of government, the administration and faculties of the University, and to the relatives and friends of the graduates, all of whom have done so much to make this day possible. In your behalf I am pleased to extend congratulations and best wishes to the graduates who have done their part in renewing our faith in the promise as well as the effectiveness of

the educational enterprise. In arriving at this significant point in their intellectual and professional development, they have expressed a confidence in the importance of what they have been doing that is not always shared by others.

It is not altogether heartwarming to compare the manifestations of faith in education expressed by the men and women of the generation in which this University was founded with the faith in education of those living today. It took faith, courage, and foresight for the people of Michigan to establish this university in 1817, twenty years before the state was admitted to the Union. They seemed to be saying to the world that if they had any future at all it rested upon the careful accumulation and wide diffusion of knowledge through a system of education extending from the rudiments to the most advanced levels of learning. There was, of course, the constant battle to eliminate elitist tendencies in education and to place opportunities for learning within the reach of every person.

It was not that this early generation achieved equality of opportunity in education, or even came close to it. It was that it was committed to the ideal of equality and to

work unceasingly for it. In 1822 Nathan Guilford of Cincinnati caught the spirit of the times when he observed that free schools were supported by means of a tax levied and raised as other taxes. And "such has been their salutary effects upon both sexes, and all classes of the community, that instead of considering the taxes raised for their support as a burden, the people ... pay them with the greatest cheerfulness, and consider their free schools not only their greatest pride and ornament, but the most useful and salutary of all their free institutions."

There was, indeed, faith in the future of America as well as in education as a vehicle for shaping that future. "Let our intellectual motto be, that naught is done while aught remains to be done," declared Charles Ingersoll in 1823; "and our study to prove to the world that the best patronage of religion, science, literature, and the arts, of whatever the mind can achieve, is self-government." Less than two decades later Ralph Waldo Emerson was celebrating the unlimited possibilities that education held out to any American. "We have listened too long to the courtly muses of Europe.... We will walk on our own feet; we will work with

our own hands; we will speak our own minds. The study of letters shall be no longer a name for pity, for doubt, and for sensual indulgence. The dread of man and the love of man shall be a wall of defense and a wreath of joy around all. A nation of men will for the first time exist, because each believes himself inspired by the Divine Soul which also inspires all men."

The Ingersolls and the Emersons of a century and a half ago were doing what they could to inspire confidence in this nation and in the educational process by which Americans could reap the greatest benefit from living here. To be sure, neither Ingersoll nor Emerson gave much attention to whether education was actually available to every American, including Negro Americans. Had they done so they would have discovered that nowhere in the United States was there equal educational opportunity as far as blacks were concerned. In Connecticut, in 1831, a white woman's life was endangered by her invitation to one black child to attend her school. In Detroit, in 1837, Negroes paid school taxes but were barred from the public schools and had to fund their own school out of their own resources. But neither Ingersoll nor Emerson

would have countenanced such undemocratic practices and would look to the day when they would not exist.

Regardless of the imperfections of the past, it is fair to say that the ideal of equality was clearly and forcefully articulated by those who believed in the ideal. And regardless of the ambivalences that characterized past Americans' attitudes as to who should and who should not be educated, this generation of ours has neither the reason nor the need to be equivocal on such a matter. There has been a long history of struggle, to a considerable extent successful, against inequality of opportunity in education. Institutions as well as laws now protect present-day Americans from abuse, mistreatment, or discrimination in education on account of class, race, religion, sex, and the like. Thanks to a series of landmark decisions in the courts, and to executive orders by presidents and governors, we have moved significantly forward on the road to equality of opportunity in education.

The new problem, one of the most acute that we face today, is no longer equality of opportunity in education, but the adequacy of the education that is provided. As the

long, nightmarish fight to achieve equality nears its end, it is enough to make one sick at heart to discover that the victory consists of equality of opportunity to secure an education that is mediocre or worse! In order to secure a really superior pre-collegiate education one must be lucky enough to live in one of the comparatively few school districts where teaching staff, equipment and facilities, and highly motivated parents and students combine to produce a climate where real learning takes place. But our school districts are little principalities walled off from each other, with no opportunity to share or pool resources such as personnel and facilities. In the name of the high principle of decentralization, every move to break down the barriers or establish programs of cooperation is met with studied and vehement resistance. Consequently, the few schools that are good remain good, while the many that are poor remain poor. The child who grows up in a poor school district is not only crippled for life but, as a result, finds himself ineligible to enter many areas of employment or, indeed, to move to a good school district where his children can secure a better education than the one he received.

Worse still is the unwillingness of the American people to do anything substantial to improve educational conditions across the land. In the average school district, any special programs for the gifted child or for the physically or mentally handicapped student are out of the question. Special classes or other curricular innovations to provide enriching experiences are no longer seriously considered. School superintendents and school boards spend much of their time these days with three very difficult problems. One is the problem of negotiating with leaders of powerful teachers' unions who know as well as anyone what funds, if any, are available for any increases in teachers' salaries. They make demands, nevertheless, on school boards even if their coffers are entirely empty. And by striking or threatening to strike at the beginning of term, they contribute their share to the atmosphere of disengagement that pervades the school for the remainder of the year. Teachers are notoriously, even scandalously underpaid; and as one of them I deplore low and inadequate salaries. What is disturbing is the preoccupation of both the school officials and the teaching personnel with a matter that could be solved in a less

destructive manner.

Another problem of school officials, related in part to the first, is that of trying to come up with adequate funds for the operation of the schools. Public schools in many parts of the country are having to close the year without completing the regular term because they lack the funds to pay the expenses of maintaining the school plants and paying the teachers. The spectacle of one American community after another pondering the very difficult problem of where to get the funds to finance the schools of the community is almost beyond belief. Who in the world would believe that the richest country in the world -- a country known for its prodigality with its own vast resources -- would be hard pressed to find money to educate its children. In some communities it is virtually impossible for officials to find money to keep the schools open to make up the week it lost at the beginning of the year when the teachers were on strike. The price that our children will have to pay in terms of shortened school terms, inadequate facilities, incompetent instruction, and an atmosphere hostile to the educative process is something that none of us would want to imagine or contemplate.

A third problem is that of trying to discover ways and means of educating our children without regard to race. One cannot imagine how much time and energy and, perish the thought, resources are expended in the effort to maintain such euphemisms as freedom of choice, neighborhood schools, no forced busing, and cultural pluralism. This is one of the areas where creativity and ingenuity are put to the test. The conniving and scheming to keep black and white children apart negate a very basic objective of the educational enterprise, that of learning to live in a real world and to deal with problems that inevitably will arise. Forced busing, as we refer to the process of moving children from one school to another in order to have a racial mix similar to the national racial mix, is not the worst curse that can befall a nation. A much worse curse would be to raise up a generation of men and women who have been taught that one is better than the other because of race, that a neighborhood belongs exclusively to a particular racial or ethnic group, and that the Constitution should be made to say thou shalt not bus, despite the fact that 50% of all school children in the United States are bused daily and only 3.6% are bused

for purposes of desegregation.

In higher education the picture is not any better; and the example of the City University of New York is merely the most dramatic example of the economic and spiritual depression among our colleges and universities. Philanthropists who once vied with each other to see who could be the most generous in their support of higher education, have ceased to support their favorite institutions in the style to which they have become accustomed. In extenuation the philanthropists plead that their responsibilities as well as their taxes have increased enormously and that they can no longer afford to provide the support they once did. Consequently, there are few private colleges and universities today that can come even near to balancing their books. They are plagued with cash-flow problems, shortage of funds, inadequately maintained physical plants, and salary schedules that do not pretend to keep pace with the rate of inflation.

Meanwhile, our public institutions of higher education are suffering depressions that are much greater than the general financial stringency imposed by the economy. Planning for the future is out of the question as legislatures

cannot or will not provide adequate appropriations. Taxes have become so unpopular that few candidates for public office will risk supporting educational or other programs whose implementation would require greater tax burdens on the general public. Indeed, we have reached the point of political vacuity where the worth of a so-called statesman is measured in terms of how eloquently and in how many different ways he can oppose increased taxes for educational and other purposes.

We who have the responsibility to train teachers for the next generation are faced with a situation that is inaccurately called an over-supply of teachers. As a matter of fact this is patently untrue. What is true is that with inadequate funds to employ an effective and viable teaching corps, educational institutions at every level have had to crowd large numbers of students into one teacher's class, thus making successful teaching virtually impossible. When a freshman college history course contains a thousand students and one teacher -- together with a dozen inexperienced teaching assistants -- a strong argument can be made that there is a teacher shortage, not an over-supply of teachers.

Instead of our paying for improved education through a more efficient operation and, where necessary, increased taxes, our sons and daughters are paying the price in the less-than-adequate educational experiences they are having.

Obviously, actions such as these point to a loss of faith in the value of education and, indeed, in the whole educational enterprise. In the small group that founded Harvard College in 1636 this faith was unshakeable. It was an act of faith on the part of those who drew up the bill for the establishment of the University of Michigan in 1817. Through the years, from the 16th to the 20th century, Americans have expressed some faith in education, in its importance in the assimilation and transmission of culture, in the training of a sensitive and intelligent citizenry, and in the preparation of students for the professions and other pursuits. The enthusiasm with which the faith has been expressed has fluctuated from time to time, to be sure, but only in quite recent years have the attitudes of Americans indicated a decided loss of faith in education as a central, even critical feature in our lives.

Obviously, you who go down from this place today have

escaped the worst ravages of this loss of faith. But you must surely have been sensitive to its crushing and tragic influences even in this state, if I may be so bold as to say so. If you were and if you know how destructive such a loss of faith can be in the long run, then you must surely want to do something about an enterprise in which you have invested so heavily. I would suggest, first of all, that you make certain that your own faith is secure. And as you take stock of what these years at this University have meant to you, this is a good time to renew your own faith in the very process with which you have been concerned here. Secondly, it would be a lavish display of public service if you rallied others, especially the general citizenry, to renew their faith in this major vehicle for the improvement, preservation, and transmission of the best aspects of our civilization. Finally, it would be an act of great courage, even heroism, if you insisted that the resources of this country could not be spent better than in the building of an effective, successful educational apparatus. Tell everyone, including our political leaders, that you will bear any burden, pay any price (including taxes) to protect and strengthen the educa-

tional institutions of this land.

As you say farewell to this University and to those who have become a part of your lives here, I invite you to join the company of those who believe in and work for the improvement of the human condition through the pervasive power of education. If you do, you may discover that the company is ever growing and that with your renewed faith the battle may, indeed, be won.