

HANNA HOLBORN GRAY'S COMMENCEMENT ADDRESS

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"The Real World and Other Academic Problems"

There is a famous story, famous at any rate in the Connecticut River Valley, which has to do with a crusty and patriotic old Vermonter who lived on an island in the Connecticut River through which runs the boundary that separates Vermont from New Hampshire. One year a surveying team was sent out in order to survey that boundary, and its members discovered unexpectedly that the old man lived not (as it had always been thought) on the Vermont, but rather on the New Hampshire side of that line. In a state of some anxiety and trepidation they went to confront him with the news that he lived in New Hampshire. And to their astonishment he replied, "Well thank the good Lord. I was beginning to think I'd never be able to tolerate another of those goddamn Vermont winters."

Members of the graduating class: Yours is the exact analog to the old man's position. The boundary that separates you from another Ann Arbor winter has been drawn. You have been surveyed, found to be BA's, BS's, MA's, MS's, JD's, MD's - I could go on - but at any case you have been surveyed and found to be those things, and therefore citizens of some state which is popularly known as the "real world". Yet tomorrow your spiritual terrain will be roughly the same and so will you, quite undramatically unchanged, if perhaps somewhat gratified to have survived into your new citizenship.

In the meantime, unkind fates have decreed that your passage must be marked by the rite of the Commencement Speech.

Now this rhetoric of occasion must take into account a fundamental and well documented fact: almost no one listens to and absolutely no one can ever recall the substance of such an oration. But that, of course, is not its point. Its function is to prolong the ceremony in order to make it appear that something really has happened and also to assert the transforming significance of what has supposedly taken place. One might call the talk (so to speak) "the eighteen-and-a-half-minute length" on the Commencement tape. The Commencement speech is surely one of the awful forms of rhetoric spawned by what we like to call the tradition of western civilization, as the caplet puts it, "such labored nothings in so strange a style amaze the unlearned and make the learned smile."

I am somewhat sobered by the fact that I remember not a word spoken at my own Commencement. I am still more sobered by the fact that my then future, and now present past, have brought me neither those styles of private wisdom nor those clarities of public philosophy that it was probably said to me would be the ultimate reward of my education.

Those who spoke then of contemporary crisis and future hope, those who spoke of the revered and by no means contemptible cliches of exhortation and affirmation, seemed to us impatient, slightly world-weary, slightly embarrassed by the rituals of graduation, seemed to us to be speaking to themselves rather than to our condition. Some Commencement speakers at that time spoke to the nation or to a cause, or even dizzyingly to the world in larger declarations and newsmaking pronouncements. In one way or another, distinguished figures lamented (as our teachers had done) the complacency

of our generation - its complacency, its reflection, or even acceptance of a social universe where urgent issues cried out for attention. They voiced guarded concern and sometimes tentative confidence about our bringing energy and commitment to the tasks and responsibilities that our education demanded as its fruit and justification. At that time (in those vanished days) it was the college which was meant to liberalize its students, not the other way around, and the college worried as to whether or not it had succeeded.

And after it was all over, I went out into the world and became a Renaissance historian.

I would argue that the world that I chose is most certainly the "real one". By that I am not making simple parallels, trying to assert the easy translations one might make between studying the politics of the Italian city-state and that of academic departments; or even the kind of translation one might make between the reading of Machiavelli and the life of a university president. More importantly, I think there is a relationship between thinking historically and analyzing the complicated questions of the present and the future.

The world of the intellect, the world of culture and its products, the world of civilization, the world of the continuing dialog with other minds, the world of scientific method and discovery, of ideas of literature, of art - all that is a real world, the most enduring of the real worlds that we know. We must each try to make it our own (even though) we can never fully comprehend it. Then, too, what we call "the real world," the real, "real world" is, above all, a changing, moving, complex and mystifying one. It calls for

us to look beyond our particular role or to see how its issues link to others in the world around us. It calls for attempting to master the new and to balance the new against the old. It calls for our capacity to bring values and principles to bear with a critical and informed judgment and with disciplined imagination in every aspect of the life of the human community and its enduring issues. It calls for us to be able to sift what is essential from what is trivial.

Robert Frost said once that "education doesn't change life much, it just lifts trouble to a higher plain of regard." That is what this ceremony symbolizes, and is one of the gifts given to us as thinking beings, that of "raising trouble to a higher plain of regard." Now ideally, all those good things are what education helps equip us to do, however imperfectly, and to continue doing in making our own world. That activity, that process is the "real world".

People talk about the real world as though it is meeting a payroll, getting a job, acquiring those technical skills that will enable us to get a job or to meet a payroll. And there are those who see in the notion of education a relationship to some purpose that is practical and who try to answer the questions of parents and friends: "Why are you studying the History of Art? What are you going to do with it? How do you meet a payroll with the History of Art?" We answer by saying that, of course, the History of Art is relevant. It is relevant to our capacity to develop those powers of thoughtfulness, those powers of discriminating judgment, those powers of seeing relationships, those powers of having a life and sharing it in ways that go beyond life's most narrow confines.

And how could those powers not be relevant to the ultimate objectives of our private and social existences, of our careers and technical skills, of our attention to social institutions and to the improvement of our own society in the "real world"?

They are real because they are part of the larger world which includes those powers, those capacities, those processes, and those enduring products which, to some degree, we can make our own. We live then within a larger framework which extends before us and beyond our time, beyond our particular lives and our particular choices. And therefore the theme of Commencement is to remind you that the voices of poets and philosophers and historians, voices of that sort you have heard all this time, are real, and their echoes as they continue to resonate in your lives are real. The problems addressed by poets and philosophers and historians, and so many others - the enduring problems of life and death, of choice, of the balancing of many values, of the struggle to define social justice and freedom - are real. They press upon us.

The life of the mind is full of paradox-like life itself. What we call boundaries surrounding intellectual space are, in fact, our own constructions. And this occasion is a reminder to us all that liberal learning is not a compartment, but a dimension of our existence and, hence, of the reality of things. How that is so and how we may shape the coherence that we seek as we move from one stage of certification to another will vary in innumerable ways. The difficult injunction that we celebrate today is one that is laid on each of us individually.

Wisdom is the principle thing; therefore get wisdom. And with all thy getting, get understanding. At the same time, to think about that coherence is often to separate these worlds even as we seek to harmonize them. It is often paradoxically the intensity of our desire to achieve coherence, to acquire a common rather than a divided citizenship, that leads to radical separation in so many styles of thought and feeling.

We are all aware that learning does not in itself confer wisdom, virtue, or happiness. The images of the wise fool and of the idiot pedant are insistently before us. We assume that a little learning is a dangerous thing and that the increase of knowledge may indeed increase sorrow, and in the meantime centuries of philosophers, moralists and theologians have taught us that the arrogance, isolation, and abuse of learning constitute a degraded form of human pride and pretense, inimical to reason, destructive of committed purpose and action. And yet these ideas and the language in which they are expressed have always been double edged. The wise fool may be the hapless James the First or the saintly abjurer of the world's foolishness in the name of a higher wisdom. The idiot pedant may be the man who is in Milton's phrase "deep versed in books and shallow in himself" or he may be the nonconformist seeker after Truth. And the wisdom gained from experience or from the school of hard knocks may have as its obverse the supposed wisdom of mere cunning or the wisdom of worldliness as a technique of survival or success, or the asserted wisdom of accepting things as they are and not struggling vainly for what ought to be.

Since you are all successful candidates for the degree, you will have noticed by now that my theme has to do with the

role of the liberal arts or, one might say, of liberal learning, or the liberal arts have to do not only with an undergraduate curriculum, liberal learning has to do with the approach to learning that will permeate the curricula and the approaches of professional as well as undergraduate school and that will, above all, permeate the spirit and the environment of a great university. Nowadays it is widely believed that learning of a liberal sort is under terrible assault.

As you all probably remember, there was a gentleman in the Fifth Century, A.D. named Martianus Capella, who wrote a work which for complicated reasons we don't have time for this afternoon was entitled The Marriage of Mercury and Philology. For many centuries this Latin text was the text that handily defined the canon of the liberal arts and also provided the basic iconography for the representation of the liberal arts. Each of the seven liberal arts, for there were seven, was presented as a lady. Each was depicted allegorically as a lady, each differently costumed and carrying around with her different symbols of office and of function. Now if we are to read the newspapers and to listen to the Jeremiads of educators, we would see that a new Martianus Capella, a twentieth century Martianus Capella would produce a different canon of the liberal arts, for that canon of the liberal arts has broadened considerably.

There would be a different number of the liberal arts. Would it be seventeen, twenty-seven? It is very hard to know. In some universities I suppose it is whatever number of credit hours are needed to bring you to Commencement. But, in any

case, that Martianus Capella, whatever number of people he showed, would also be likely to show these ladies with their backs to the wall, weeping and perhaps even facing a firing squad.

The firing squad would be composed of new and rather mean looking allegorical figures, some representing qualities, others representing subjects or technologies, all of them carrying computers, and rather soberly clad. A lot of them would be wearing pin-striped suits and little certificates that say MBA, and each of these figures would be carrying symbols of money, efficiency and whatever it is that connotes Philistinism, together with their diploma and certificate. This is the prevalent view of what is happening in the world of liberal learning.

The concern with vocationalism, the fear that what we have known as liberal learning will give way to the tides of vocationalism, to the narrow interest in a practical and perhaps self-interested result, that liberal learning has her back to the wall and that the vocational tides are thundering against it is now a prevalent view. I think it is overstated. I am sure you think it's overstated also. I also think that it is not only overstated, but that the liberal arts have always to be in crises. There is not a single tradition of liberal learning that is in some sense there to be seized. Instead, there is a developing tradition of liberal learning which needs continually to be defined and redefined; which needs regularly to be articulated and justified; which needs, above all, that balance between continuity and new ways of approach which has to do precisely with the way we think about the forms of knowledge most worth having; the forms of knowledge



we wish we had been exposed to at an earlier time; the forms of knowledge which we think will be appropriate to our children and to the future. In short, to think about liberal learning, to think about those forms of knowledge most worth having within the human community is a way of sketching out our ideal of life, our ideal of a human society, our ideal of what may be possible for those yet to come.

It is for those reasons above all that I would argue that the language which is used about liberal learning, labeling it not relevant to the real world, is language we must abandon. A liberal arts education should be a liberating experience, and that play on words is not playful. The ancients defined liberal arts as those arts suitable for free men. (I regret to say that they meant quite literally free - as opposed to slave, and men rather than women - but by extension that has come to pertain to spiritual conditions for all of us.)

Such freedom might have reference to a liberation from the constraints of prejudice and of unexamined assumptions. It might refer to the freedom to choose, to define our own values and purposes, and to follow them freely. It could have to do with the freedom to do what we must to follow the imperatives of our own nature and our own principles. And above all, then, the spirit of liberal learning which has to do with that conception of liberation, which has to do with a sense of the connectedness of things, which has to do with a going beyond narrow present-mindedness, is one which may liberate us from what someone once called "cheap and simple interpretations of life and of history." Cheap and simple interpretations of life and of history are those which the

liberally educated are forced at all times to avoid. A liberal education must instill in us the conscience about that particular trap. And if we can struggle to evade that trap, then the consequences of liberal learning, other than those already stressed, have as high a social value as one can imagine.

What, what again, you may ask me, does all this have to do with "the real world"? Once again I would argue that the enduring world of liberal learning is a dimension of that world and is the world's interpreter. It binds us to the world while never allowing us quite to accept it as it is. And how, you may ask me, can an education in the liberal arts prepare us for that "real world"? And again I think we should answer not simply in terms of civic and professional relevance, but should point out again that the real, real world is not only the present, but a world to some extent unknown and mystifying. The power to deal with and to make sense of that world, to understand change, to perceive connections, to master the new and to rethink the old, may be the most important preparations we can even hope for.

There's a line of Euripides that says, "Who so neglects learning in his youth loses the past and is dead for the future." And that precept remains, I think, as good as any for expressing the role of liberal learning and the constant need for its renewal in each of us and for our own successors.

But there is a more recent philosopher who has also spoken to this point, one Charles Dillon Stingle, known to some of you as "Cassie". He had the following to say on the relationship of education to the "real world." He was talking about the pitcher on his staff when he said, "He has

wonderful stuff and wonderful control and throws strikes, which shows he's educated." But then, say you are educated and you can't throw strikes, then they don't leave you in too long.

I hope you all have home runs. Thank you very much.