

**THE UNIVERSITY OF MICHIGAN  
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**Harold T. Shapiro, President**

Members of the Board of Regents, Distinguished Members of the Platform Party, Members of the Faculty, Graduates, Families, and Friends:

Commencement is one of the special moments of the academic year, and this Commencement feels particularly special, since it marks a significant moment of transition for me as well as for the graduates. After twenty-three years at The University of Michigan as a faculty member and more recently as Vice President for Academic Affairs and, for the last eight years, as President, my wife, Vivian--also a member of the University's faculty--and I, like today's graduates, are changing our relationship with The University of Michigan. You will discover that one does not leave The University of Michigan. One may leave Ann Arbor, one may pursue various kinds of challenges in life's journey, but a part of us will always remain attached and dedicated to this great University. In return, the University will not leave us, but will always remain a living influence in our lives.

As most of you are probably aware, I will become President of Princeton University in January. Thus, Vivian and I share with the graduates today the pangs of saying farewell to a world that is a challenging, but a familiar and a gratifying one. We also share, however, the exhilaration and apprehension of entering a new arena filled with new issues and new people. Changes are often exciting, but they are rarely easy to make. The familiarity of Ann Arbor and The University of Michigan, however, together with the growth and attachments we experienced

here, will be important factors in enabling all of us to transform our future challenges into opportunities for further growth.

I thought carefully about the nature of my final, formal comments to University of Michigan students while serving as President of this great institution. Because there is a rising concern regarding ethics and values in America today, I decided to focus my remarks on what we, you and I, can do to give greater meaning and moral significance to our lives in the rapidly changing world within which we live.

The simple fact is that, despite the great growth in our material welfare, we are afflicted with a certain unease regarding the moral aspects of our public and private lives. I want to spend a few moments addressing this issue with you. I will attempt to make the following points:

- o We all need to give our lives meaning and moral significance.
- o We achieve such meaning primarily through bonds to each other and to the future of mankind, and not simply through the march of science and material progress.
- o American society, with its diverse commitments, will always exhibit a restless anxiety on these issues. That is, in a just society committed to change and progress, there is a never-ending struggle to find meaning in our lives as the environment in which we live changes.
- o It is our individual responsibility to ensure that we support a commitment to a coherent set of values that serves to both honor our diversity and bond us to each other and the future of mankind.

We can begin with a question. Why is it that there is a rising level of concern in America about certain aspects of our

national life? There are many answers to this question, but I can suggest some of the sources of this concern. We are puzzled by the level of hypocrisy and dishonesty apparent in public life; we are perplexed by the level of self-interest and self-satisfaction displayed in private life; and we are unsure, therefore, of how we are bound to others in our society and to the future of mankind. To put the concern in a nutshell, we seem increasingly unable to give moral significance to our lives.

It is not that we fail to appreciate the release from the countless ancient burdens that is the result of the many triumphs of modern science. It is not that we fail to appreciate the great expansion in individual rights and liberties that characterize contemporary life in our republic. It is not only our sense of outrage at our apparent paralysis in correcting obvious injustices in our society. It is not only that our sense of decency and fairness are affronted by the blatant hypocrisy of pledging commitment to equal opportunity and simultaneously refusing to share our national wealth in a manner that would make such rhetoric meaningful. It is not only that we often allow the many real glories of our history to obscure our failure to ensure the full participation of minorities and women in our national life and in our national wealth. It is all these things, but it is, most of all, that the pace of change and the cumulative impact of new technology, despite its continued power of liberation, have produced a certain turmoil in our spiritual lives. This turmoil is symbolized by our growing incapacity to transmit our values from one generation to another.

This turmoil stems primarily from the feeling that we have lost a sense of stability in our personal relationship with the world about us. With nothing in contemporary life that remains unquestionable, our sense of stability and permanence begins to evaporate. The very dynamism of our society which we justifiably celebrate has another side--a side which generates within it a longing for a cultural form that provides a more stable relationship with our environment. We sense that this might meet our needs for a greater level of spiritual security and moral significance.

It is useful, especially as we celebrate the bicentennial of our constitution, that we recall some aspects of American history on these matters. What we discover is that this concern over the importance, nature and meaning of a common set of values and their associated commitments has been a constant element in American life. What escaped attention at the founding of our republic was that the struggle to give moral significance to our lives would be a never-ending aspect of a free and pluralistic society that was committed to progress and change, but also bound to other important Western traditions such as classicism and Biblical faith. Thus, a kind of restless anxiety on issues of values and the moral order is one of the inevitable costs of a culturally diverse society that was committed to change and progress and unable and/or unwilling to forget moral commitments that originated in the ancient world and were further developed by the various Biblical faiths.

We often forget that even at the founding of our republic the tension between Biblical faith and rationalism, self-interest and community interest, individual liberty of conscience and the need for common values and commitments was very real. Simply put, it has never been clear that the great Western traditions of classicism and Biblical faith could easily coexist with the newer Western traditions of rationalism, liberalism and progress. The rising contemporary interest in Biblical fundamentalism is a current symptom of this tension and represents--for some--a possible answer to it.

Our founding "fathers," however, selected a different path. They settled for an uneasy compromise between a belief in moral certainties--for them, largely Calvinistic Protestantism--and the belief in the desirability of change and progress. Their solution could be described as a secular regime buttressed in important ways by a civil religion.

The critical point here is to understand the role of this civil religion. Its role was to provide a set of background values and commitments that would balance the general interest against the weight of private interests and to provide the necessary moral meaning to our individual and joint efforts. What was not fully appreciated, then or now, was the basic fragility of such an arrangement and how much the harmony of liberty and religion depended on religious uniformity.

The reality of American society, however, has always been characterized as one of increasing diversity of all kinds. As a result, we have tried to sustain social harmony through a

commitment to pluralism and representative government as opposed to other solutions such as official moral orthodoxies and/or totalitarianism.

Thus, the most redeeming and important aspect of the liberal institutions that characterize our society is that they are at least designed to allow different groups to get along together without complete, uniform agreement as to what is good, just and worthy. The question is whether all this continues to be possible. Can the liberal institutions of our society continue to generate a morally energizing and binding commitment for us all? Can the liberal institutions of our increasingly diverse society continue to enlarge the mutual/reciprocal sympathies of the various groups that characterize our society not only to fully admit them to the complete enjoyment of our system of justice and our spectrum of opportunities, but to infuse them with a common purpose and sense of moral significance? These are the questions we must turn our attention to. If we are to leave a meaningful legacy to our children, we must make our own lives meaningful by extending our personal and political commitment to others, especially those who have not fully participated in our society's many gains. This unfilled promise to our children is the source of our current unease.

In recent years our spectacular success in expanding and exploiting our understanding of the natural world has caused us to exaggerate the redemptive power of the advancement of knowledge. As a result, we have increasingly avoided the renovation of and recommitment to those values that most inform

our public and private lives. We have avoided the struggle of articulating the difference between good and bad and, thus, have failed in the task of providing the greatest possible meaning to our lives.

I am not one of those who believes that the past was better than the present. Indeed, our eagerness to idealize the past has become rather dangerous. The truth is that for most of us the present is far better than the past in almost every way. Some, however, are worse off--for example, children in poverty. Such contrary evidence, however, should not be used to obscure the genuine progress we have made or be allowed to serve as an excuse to postpone much needed new initiatives. The proper interpretation of our uneven progress is to acknowledge that the struggle to extend and make more meaningful our human commitments to each other, in a society such as ours, is never-ending. We must recognize and accept that in a society such as ours, the struggle, responsibility and need to extend more widely the benefits of our society and to make more meaningful our human commitments to each other are never-ending and should be regarded as fundamental to our individual and collective well-being.

To me a very troubling attribute of our modern life is the new autonomy of the individual--our capacity (indeed, our right) to do anything we please, with little concern for society's needs. We spend too much time trying to expand those areas of personal initiative, where the government has no right to intervene, and too little time worrying about what behavior is appropriate, whether or not the community has a right to

intervene. In such a world it is not surprising that traditional unifying forces such as country, religion and family--forces that bound us to each other, to history and to the "cosmos"--have lost much of their compelling force. It is not surprising, in such an environment, that we have fewer common objectives and shared values. Modernism is almost affronted at the very idea of the constraints of shared commitments.

But what about all of us as individual citizens? What will we do to help our country face the moral and ethical challenges ahead of us? As alumni of Michigan, we have the obligation to be leaders--not laggards--on these issues. We must insist that our families and our communities understand the imperative before us of continuously reestablishing a sense of moral significance to our lives. This will require careful--even deep--thought and great courage, but you and I must be great booming voices in insisting that our material progress be invested with meaning and moral significance.

We, as educated men and women, cannot be a self-satisfied chorus of whisperers. You have all been achievers here at Michigan. You must now be achievers in other matters as well. You must become leading voices in the search for justice, peace and the dedication of human spirit that gives all of us a place in the ultimate history of mankind. For you and I, this is the season of our responsibility. We must help our communities reach out to each other to form those bonds that make us realize the ultimate significance of being human.



I hope that one of the enduring legacies of your Michigan experience will be an unswerving commitment to intellectual activism and social commitment. By intellectual activism, I mean a commitment to a consistently questioning, thoughtful approach to life in its multiple dimensions. I believe this is the hallmark of an educated individual. By social commitment, I mean the readiness to personally participate in initiatives designed to change and improve the world according to one's beliefs and values. In short, I hope your experience here has taught you both to care and to think carefully about matters of importance in our national life.

As we celebrate each of your accomplishments as graduates, I eagerly welcome you to the challenges of maintaining our most redeeming values and traditions and otherwise enhancing the human journey through increased understanding and commitment to each other. These are the tasks that give our lives their deepest meaning and purpose.

If you will permit me to end on a personal note, I wish to thank my family--especially my wife, Vivian, and my children--and the faculty, staff, students and Board of Regents of The University of Michigan for allowing me to have had the extraordinary privilege and pleasure of serving as President for these past eight years.

To today's graduates, I leave you with an ancient Celtic blessing:

May the road lie straight before you;  
May the wind be at your back; and  
May God hold you in the cup of his hand.

Good luck and Godspeed to you all.