

Winter Convocation
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THE WORLD AND ITS PROBLEMS

No one can deny that the title which I have chosen leaves me sufficient scope. The only enlargement possible would be the universe and its problems. Happily I am not asked, within the limits of this half hour, either to settle the problems of the world or even to enumerate them. My reference to them will be a general one, which does not preclude, I hope, a measure of directness and concreteness.

I do not know how many graduation addresses will be delivered during this season of early spring commencements. But I venture to guess that in ten out of ten the speaker will tell you that you are entering upon life's duties at a particularly serious moment in history.

In a measure I agree, when the whole world is at war the moment is serious. But, if the whole world had been at peace this period in history might still be serious, very serious. It would be serious for you at any rate because, whatever the nature of the times in general, the particular moment of which I am now speaking, this 19th day of March in this city of Columbus is your moment. It is your hour for entering upon the duties of your life. Any hour which is particularly and exclusively my own is always serious.

From now on you will have to prove whether your intellect is clear enough to recognize the problems which the world will present to you, whether you can deal with them, whether you will

deal with them. The soundness of your intellect and the strength of your will are about to undergo a test.

They have been tested before in connection with your preparation for life, but this is a different kind of a test. Thus far your teachers have told you about the intellectual tools which men use in this business of living, how, according to the accumulated experience of men, they can best be employed. Your task was to recognize those tools and to describe their use, should anyone enquire into that matter. But you were not asked to employ them independently. You will be asked to do so now.

Any moment when a human being changes from theory to practice is important and serious, it matters not at all whether the world is at war or at peace.

But the world is at war and it is maintained that for that reason your task will be far harder than normally would be the case. This I deny. True, your personal risks will be greater, particularly at the moment when at the call of your country you enter into its armed service. The sacrifices which you will be asked to make will be greater than usual because they may even include the supreme sacrifice. All this is of great solemnity, I shall be the first to admit it.

But I am not speaking to those who will be asked to make that supreme sacrifice, my words are addressed to that vast majority among you who will live and who will struggle throughout the days to come with the problems of society which will press for solution. And I maintain that for the very reason of this

war the solution of these questions will not be more difficult but in a measure easier. I have no intention of startling you with paradoxes which as a rule find their origin in the artificial turn of a phrase through which words and concepts come to mean what normally they do not signify at all. I heartily dislike that sort of argument. I mean literally what I am saying. The war will help you to answer questions and to solve problems rather than make it more difficult for you. This is the one bright side which I can find to this horrible catastrophe.

The reason is simple, you cannot solve a problem until you know it nor answer a question until someone has asked it. In prosperous times there seem to be no problems and hence no one asks a question since it obviously is useless to make inquiry with respect to a problem which is not even recognized as such.

But in dark times the problems become clear; when the water is low the rocks become visible. But, remember that those rocks were there all the time, even when the water was high. They were even then a source of possible danger, though no one saw them, just because no one did see them. When the times are good, whether they are recognized or not, the problems are there. If they were not, and if even in good times they furnished no source of possible danger, how would it be possible that bad times should ever come to us. For they are the result of problems left unsolved in so-called good times.

I know of few periods in history more quiet and peaceful than the end of the 19th century and the beginning of our century. The differences among the nations seemed to have been ironed out, two peace conferences followed one another at the Hague. The curve of prosperity was upward, the population of the world increased, but the relative prosperity increased even faster than the population.

In this country this was particularly true, it proved to be a land of unlimited possibilities indeed. I remember my first impressions when as a young man of 20 years old I came to Meadville in western Pennsylvania to study theology at the Unitarian Theological School there. A small town, not over 10,000 inhabitants, but how complete in itself, how satisfied with its pleasant, sunny mode of living. And not without reason indeed. There must have been cares and sorrows among the people living there but I was not aware of that.

Europe was prosperous, the Netherlands, where I was born, very much so; but this was a different kind of prosperity. At home, in spite of great and ever increasing welfare, there were always reasons why things could not be done but here there seem to be ever reasons why things could happen. There was always more than one could use, always more, always more. People gave readily of what they possessed in such great abundance.

The general atmosphere, even the American climate, contributed toward creating this illusion. In Holland the light was tempered by many clouds when the fall of the year came, but here

the autumn sun poured out its radiance and turned the very landscape into gold. Yes, that was it, Holland was green in summer and in autumn its green turned into brown and the pale blue of the summer sky into grey. But here, when autumn came, it all turned into gold, land and sky both. Of such an abundance poured out by nature I had no conception, no understanding. It seemed like the golden ripeness of a fruit when it is ready to eat but, perhaps, too ripe to keep.

We recognized no dangers. Truly, I said to myself this country has achieved, it has reached its ultimate goal. There is naught further to be done except to enjoy what it has. These things are here to remain forever, they have the aspect of the lasting.

But they remained not, they were taken away from us 25 years ago, and then given back after a measure, and then taken again. What was the cause? Was it anything that we had done in these United States, or left undone? Or was it simply the result of the fact that we were a part of a larger world in whose misfortune we share? Were we like men who drown when the ship sinks on which they sail, quite independent of any action of theirs.

The detailed answer would require a number of lectures, not a half hour talk. But this much was clear, the building of our life could not have tumbled down unless its foundation had been shaken, and we unaware of it. In those prosperous times there were problems not recognized and hence left unsolved.

The basic problem was that we did not know that the world had shrunk to one-tenth of its size. We measured distances as we had measured them three hundred years ago. We thought that we were separated from Europe by three thousand miles and from Asia by twice that distance. We therefore carried on our affairs much as we had done for centuries, when distances had been real, that is we lived as a nation apart from others.

But that was a falacy because the meaning of distance had changed, those countries once far removed now were our next door neighbors. The true distance is determined by the time it takes to make our influence felt at any given remote point. This means that not global distance but the time needed to establish connections is the true measure. We are removed from England not 3,000 miles but eight minutes because that is the time needed to establish telephonic connections. We are all next door neighbors: Canada and Russia, China and Mexico, Brazil and the Argentines. And being next door neighbors we depend upon one another as neighbors will. A separate life is impossible for any of us.

But this fact was not recognized and we endeavored to continue the separate life which we had always lived. This is proven by the concept of sovereignty with which we operated in the conduct of international affairs. Sovereignty was explained as the right to do in our own land whatever we wished without reference to any one else. It was an outmoded notion but, ignoring the interdependence of nations we failed to discover this. No one

has the right to live as he wishes without reference to anything that happens outside of the frontiers of his country. He can claim the right but it means nothing because he cannot exercise it. The world has shrunk to such an extent that we are now practically living in the same house and what effects one effects all.

The nonrecognition of that fact has brought about this conflict. Men do not believe this and they continue to look for the causes of this war where they are not to be found. They prefer an easy, handy solution less taxing to the brain. They confuse causes with consequences and they blame men rather than conditions for the catastrophe which has come upon us. If they are German they blame Churchill and Roosevelt and if they are English Hitler. But men are never causes but always consequences. Not even the evil genius of a Hitler, the destroyer and oppressor of my native country, can unleash a world war unless the world is ready for it. When a patient has scarlet fever the red spots are not the causes but the consequences of the disease. The causes lie much deeper, in the blood stream.

My generation did not solve its problems, young friends; it did not even look with sufficient earnestness for problems to solve. But they were there.

Now the water have run very low and you can see plainly the stones which have crushed the bow of our ship. You can see them if you will but use your eyes. Men frequently have eyes and cannot see therewith. It takes training to do that, and more than

training, courage, for we are often timid and turn our eyes away from ugly sights.

You must not do that. It was a mistake of my generation that it ignored the existence of dangers and that hence it made no preparations to meet them. Again you must not do that. The rocks are in plain sight. Many of us, who belong to the older generation, now see them too. But, since our years have grown many we no longer have the power to lift them out of their places, or if we had the power we have grown too timid with our own mistakes to do much lifting.

You still have the power. Every generation has the strength to rectify much that was done ill by the preceding generation; not all, but much. You have the strength, you have the time and now you have the training too. True, you have no different tools from the ones which we tried to use. You as we must operate with the intellect, the will and the use of patience, but you can use those tools in a different manner from the one which we employed.

There is no rule that errors once begun should be continued, evil times are no necessity. The German historian Spengler would like you to believe that that is so but this is not a fact. People used to think that small pox were inevitable but they proved not to be. If good times are interrupted it is not by reason of the operation of the law of nature but only because of bad judgment on the part of men. There is no need of bad judgment.

There was no need for the bad judgment of my own generation, there is still less need why you should be in error. You can profit by our mistakes; I repeat, the waters are low and you can see the rocks, they are in plain sight. Lift them, take them out of the way, you are strong enough to do it. Deepen the channel, change its course so that the great ships may enter into the harbor unhindered. This war has destroyed so much of the past that you can do an entirely new piece of work.

I was born in an old city, a thousand years old. It had great beauty, but it was the beauty of the long ago. We revered it over much and we forgot that there was also a beauty of the present, a new beauty; and therefore, since beauty and truth are the same, a truth of the present in which the new generation must live. When houses crumbled we raised them up and rebuilt them, but always as they had been before. There was a fitness in that perhaps, a reverence for what the past had given us, but there was a danger too for we continued to look at beauty and truth through the eyes of a dead generation.

Now that city has been bombed out of existence by the enemy, and it is a great loss, but perhaps there is a great gain too. Young men will come with young brains and young ideas and create young things at which perhaps the future will marvel as I marveled at the work of my far away ancestors.

You are in the same condition. Here too the structure of life of the old world has crashed because its time was gone. It had to crash, there was no help for it. All things which no longer serve

good use do go. The law of spiritual gravitation pulls them down.

But after the crash there is something left, the building blocks, the materials out of which we once constructed our house of life. Those materials are always the same, they are: the physical world which we inhabit and the mental qualities through which out of the physical world we create our own ideal world, wisdom, courage and above all patience.

It is easy to speak to young people about courage since, being young they have that in abundance. But patience and wisdom is something they still must acquire, and yet, without those nothing can be built, no house, no nation, no world. With them all things can be built, all things, for there is not one thing, however, unyielding, that does not succumb to their compelling power.

We left you the building blocks, now go and build your world. Do not follow our blue prints, they are not good enough for you, they proved to be not good enough for us.

I do not mean to exaggerate, not all we did was bad, of course not. The past has left you many things you will want to keep. Generations do err but they are never in total error. If the past had failed utterly then this University would not be of which you are a part, nor this city, nor this country in the creation of which much wisdom has gone, much courage and much patience. A part of the inheritance we left you you would not wish to renounce. Jesus has lived and spoken, Homer has left you

the rhythmic beauty of his lines and men and women long forgotten, have handed on to you the fruits of their simple endeavor and heroic patience.

It is not all wrong, but an inheritance, however good, is not something merely to be accepted. It is there to be used for your purposes, which will find there concrete expression in your world.

The times are evil but that gives you your chance, a better chance than my generation ever had. The past held upon us its restraining hand far too much. But that past has largely gone. It has crumbled throughout the twenty five years of almost constant war which lie behind us. It need not restrain you. Use your opportunity, fail not, the number of failures have been too many already. Fail not, you need not fail, you are young.