

Commencement Address
The Ohio State University
December 8, 1989

Gerald M. Reagan

President Jennings,
Honored Guests,
Members of the Autumn Quarter, 1989 Graduating Class,
Colleagues,
Ladies and Gentlemen:

The standard opening line is, I believe, is "I'm very pleased to be here." In my case this would be a great understatement. I am absolutely delighted to have been selected as the faculty representative to give these remarks today. And if my selection led me to puffery and self-congratulation that could have diverted my attention from the fact that it is the graduating class that is being honored by this ceremony today, my humility and perspective were restored by the wonderfully honest and direct Lantern reporter who, after what must have been a frustrating telephone interview, asked, "Do you have any idea why you were selected to give the commencement address?"

This is a new sort of experience for me, and I have turned to colleagues for counsel. The most common advice received was that I should be brief. I will attempt to follow this advice, but as all who are or have been university students know, brevity is not a well-practiced virtue in the professoriate. I am reminded of the old story of the professor who was invited to give an after-dinner address, and seized the opportunity to speak at great length on a topic which interested almost no one but him. As this professor droned on into the night, showing no mercy for his captive audience, a restive gentleman in the back of the room who had had far too

much of both the dinner wine and the speech, staggered forward brandishing an empty wine bottle as a club. He walked up to the podium and took a swing at the professor's head. Inebriation had taken its toll, and the bottle missed the professor but struck with full force the head of an honored guest sitting next to the podium. The guest crashed to the floor, and the shocked professor looked down and asked, "Are you hurt?" The unsteady voice of the honoree came back just loudly enough for all to hear, "Hit me again, I can still hear him." Not wishing to endanger either myself or any of our honored guests, I will take care to finish my comments in the allotted time.

A second piece of advice offered me was that a commencement address should be appropriate for the occasion. Commencement is a solemn, serious, and yet joyous occasion. Comments should recognize the seriousness and should yet be positive and encouraging--indeed with a more capable and polished speaker it would be expected that the remarks would be inspirational. Perhaps this advice was given to me because colleagues feared I would be pedantic and cynical and deliver seriously the sort of address Woody Allen wrote in poking fun at commencement speeches. In his "My Speech to the Graduates." Allen began:

"More than any other time in history, mankind faces a crossroads. One path leads to despair and utter hopelessness, the other, to total extinction. Let us pray we have the wisdom to choose correctly." (p. 81, Woody Allen, Side Effects. New York: Ballantine Books, 1975.)

Now we may face a crossroads, and the paths open to us may be littered with problems, but they are paths of promise as well. And it is the promise more than the problems that I want to focus on here. You are indeed an important part of that promise, and I want both to congratulate you and to encourage and perhaps even prod you to continue to work long and hard to transform promise into reality.

First then, my congratulations. As you graduate today, you join a minority of our population in reaching one of the current central goals in the American Dream--you have succeeded in earning a college degree. Your achievement is not minor, and we know that you deserve to be applauded. We are proud of you. In addition to the pride and applause, I think we might recall the anecdote told about one of the great baseball pitchers in an earlier era. When asked "To what do you attribute your great success?" he reportedly responded "Clean living." Then, after pausing, he added, "and a fast, friendly outfield." You too, we will assume, can attribute some of your success to clean living, and much more of that success to your own hard work and diligent effort. And most of you would agree, I think, that you have had a fast and friendly outfield. The staff, faculty, and administration hope that we have, at least on occasion, been a minor part of that outfield. However, the stars in your outfield, as you know and appreciate, have been your families who have provided you with encouragement and support. And you have friends who have added their loyalty, concern, and support to that of your families. And in recognizing and thanking your outfielders, we ought to remember your elementary and secondary school teachers who worked hard those many years to prepare you for your university education. Nor should we overlook the citizens of this State who have established and supported the development of this great institution, The Ohio State University. And so I say congratulations to the Autumn Quarter Graduating class, and I join members of the class in thanking their crowded, but friendly outfields.

And now for the encouragement and the prodding for you to continue to transform opportunity and promise into achievement and progress. Some of you will embark immediately on career work while others will pursue advanced

study and professional preparation. In either case, many, if not most of you, will enter into career paths requiring you to become fairly specialized and demanding that you continue to learn and develop. The knowledge and the skills which you now have will provide you a basis upon which to build, but without continued and continuing learning that knowledge base will quickly become inadequate. We are living in what some writers have termed "the expert society." To be an effective part of that society will require that you not only work at your job, but also that you work on yourselves; that one "product" that will require your attention and effort is your own improved and enhanced competence. "Lifelong learning" may have been in the past a mere slogan of some educators, but today it is a necessity.

In addition to the need for us all to continually bring up to date our knowledge and skill, it seems to me that we also would benefit from some renewed attention to our attitudes about the use of our professional abilities. Thomas F. Green, a friend and colleague at Syracuse University, has written about what he calls "the conscience of craft." His concern, as I understand it, centers on our obligation not simply to acquire the knowledge and skill to perform our jobs, but to care deeply that we do our jobs well. The pride of Green's ideal craftsman is not satisfied by approval of superiors or others: it is satisfied only by a performance that meets the stricter standards imposed by the master craftsman herself or himself. In your world of work then, I am suggesting that you have an educational base upon which you will need to continue to build, and that the competence which results will be much greater still if combined with a deep caring that your craft or profession be practiced well.

As important as is our professional and occupational competence and caring, our responsibilities as educated persons are more far-reaching. In his Educating the Expert Society (1962) Burton Clark warned the society in general and higher education in particular about what he called "technical barbarism." Clark's concern was that the need for high level technical expertise and intense specialization might well lead schools and colleges to overlook or minimize their obligation to root the needed specialized education in a more general educational context. The more general education context, he argued, was needed to provide broader understanding and intellectual perspective. Clark said, "The efforts to bring liberal education to the expert constitutes...an attempt to avoid a barbarism of men [sic] acute in technical judgment, but myopic and social affairs, politics, and cultural understanding." (p. 291) We believe that we have provided you with this broader education as well as with an appropriately specialized preparation. Our current move to revise the general education curriculum in the University attests to our commitment to continue to provide our undergraduate students with a sound liberal education to complement and support more specialized study.

Our obligations as educated persons require this sort of education. A truly human community requires more than workers who function effectively within a set of roles and relationships. The human community requires that we work on those relationships, that we strive to make the community more human and more humane. And this, I think, suggests that the educated person ought be not only the highly-skilled and caring professional, but ought as well be concerned, informed, understanding, and active as citizen, family member and friend. This too requires that you view your university education as but a beginning to a life-long process of learning, developing, and acting.

I'm nearing the end of my allotted time, and although I see no one approaching with an empty wine bottle, I will finish very shortly. I have appreciated the opportunity to have one last chance to lecture to a graduating class. I feel a little like Tom Sawyer in Tom Sawyer Abroad when he lectured Jim on the topic of what we can and what we cannot learn by experience. Tom said:

"Well, I ain't denying that a thing's a lesson if it's a thing that can happen twice just the same way. There's lots of such things, and they educate a person, that's what Uncle Abner always said, but there's forty million lots of the other kind--the kind that don't happen the same way twice--and they ain't no real use, they ain't no more instructive than the small-pox. When you've got it, it ain't no good to find out you ought to been vaccinated, and it ain't no good to get vaccinated afterward, because the small-pox don't come but once. But, on the other hand, Uncle Abner said that the person that had took a bull by the tail once had learned sixty or seventy times as much as a person that hadn't, and said a person that started to carry a cat home by the tail was gitting knowledge that was always going to be useful to him. But I can tell you, Jim, Uncle Abner was down on them people that's all the time trying to dig a lesson out of everything that happens, no matter whether....."

But Jim was asleep. Tom looked kind of ashamed, because you know a person always feels bad when he is talking uncommon fine and thinks the other person is admiring, and the other person goes to sleep that way.

Mark Twain, Tom Sawyer Abroad

I doubt that I've been talking uncommon fine, and I'll leave it to you to decide whether my comments are more like carrying a cat home by the tail or more like having small-pox. Again, my congratulations and best wishes to you, the Autumn Quarter 1989, graduating class of The Ohio State University.