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47th Commencement Address

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Connecticut College

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Miss Eastburn

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Commencement Address
Connecticut College, New London
By August Heckscher, Director
The Twentieth Century Fund
Sunday, June 6, 1965

One day this spring I was motoring through New England and had stopped for refreshment outside of a small village. It was the kind of day which comes but once in a year and is known even more rarely to those of us who live in cities. A perfect peace was over the land. Nature was rich with the promise which summer always seems to betray - but then it would perhaps be asking too much of summer, or any earthly season, to fulfill and perfect what seemed to be hinted at there.

Two boys came by on bicycles. They had evidently been fishing. As they vanished from sight down a small lane I heard the voice of the one in front calling back: "Shall we take the long way home?" And then, like an echo, as the two vanished forever from my sight: "Yes, let's take the long way home."

The incident came to mind as I thought about this gathering and of what I might say here. "To take the long way home" - is not that what a college education is all about? It would obviously be possible to learn more rapidly and more efficiently the bits of knowledge you carry with you from this place. Perhaps in some day not too far off college students will be packaged and processed as befits the style of a technological civilization - the facts they need injected in small drops, made palatable and easily digestible;

their questions answered by a system of rapid information retrieval. But that day, for better or worse, isn't here quite yet. And you yourselves, even for the present age, have been woefully and rather wonderfully inefficient in getting your education.

For you "the long way" has seemed most rewarding. It has been your privilege in this springtime of your lives to follow many pleasant by-ways as you searched for knowledge of yourselves and some knowledge of the world. You have paused by many a glade or waterfall; here or there, at some crossroad, you have found a wise man who seemed worth engaging in conversation. And if this Commencement day is not really a home for you - indeed it is only a moment's pause - yet in the best sense it is perhaps as much a home as man or woman can know in this world, giving you as it does some momentary sense of peace and accomplishment, some fleeting awareness of those things the knowledge whereof shall endure even unto the Heavens.

"The Long Way Home" - perhaps I should let that stand as the title of my remarks today, and let the whole matter end there - undoubtedly the shortest and, if I may say so, one of the best, Commencement addresses on record. But custom decrees that I should continue. Moreover, custom prescribes the precise form which my ensuing remarks should take. According to the tradition of the occasion I should enumerate for you all the ills and problems of the age. And then, having harrowed up your souls, I should bow out, announcing that all this is for you to solve and to set right. ~~again~~ The older generation has done its worst - now it is for youth to take over.

In certain respects, at least, I shall depart from tradition. My thought is to tell you not everything about the world - but to dwell upon merely three aspects of it. And then I shall propose a remedy. In fact I shall tell you the remedy right now - even before I have had time to diagnose the ills. The remedy, in brief, is a cultivation of the arts; a hopeful, ardent, lifelong pursuit of the things that have their own kind of beauty; a devotion to what is made as opposed to what is fabricated or concocted.

You will sense that I interpret the arts rather broadly. I have never thought that they consisted exclusively of those expressions of man's vision which had been sanctified by such traditional forms as the opera, the symphony concert, the three-act drama, etc. I have never been convinced that the so-called liberal arts should live in a house of their own, not on speaking terms with the "fine" or "creative" arts. Indeed in the best days the creative and the liberal arts have been as one. Young men and women studied literature because they were concerned with the truth that was in it - not because they wanted to count up its commas or to psychoanalyze its author. They studied history because they believed that in its light they would be better able to build in their own time, and politics because they held it was relevant to their tasks as men and citizens. The idea that these were behavioral sciences, to be studied for their own sakes and to be treated as if they were unconnected with the ends and purposes of life had not seriously occurred to Aristotle, to Hobbes, to Locke, or to the generation of great men who used their classical learning to create a new society on this continent.

The danger has been that we would not only reduce the liberal arts to a narrow pedantry, to a false imitation of the scientific method, but that we would domesticate the wild forces of the creative arts by turning them into "art history" or "art appreciation."

I believe we are escaping these dangers. This country has got a new vision of the arts: it begins to see them as something related to life - not apart from it, the preoccupation of a small segment of society morally suspect and of dubious mentality. Nowadays we all want to be creative, and we begin to realize that nearly all of us, in our way and degree, can be. As for science, we have begun to learn that even it is creative: that its greatest men don't plod along looking for the last fact and expecting the generalization to emerge automatically. We see the scientists as poets, too: they have their leaps of the imagination, their dazzling visions - and out of their visions come the hypotheses by which the world is made over.

With such a glimpse of the arts - what they mean and how they pervade our society - let us now look at three principal features of the age.

(1) Today's youth is born into an environment in which all the tangible objects tend to run together into one muddy wash. Private and public spaces intermingle without definition or form. The town, which once stood comprehensibly upon the landscape - its boundaries marked, the woods and green fields never wholly lost from view, and reminding the city-dweller of the world of nature from which the human habitation had been shaped - this has today grown to be one with the neighboring

city. It has no sense of place. Seen from above, it is part of an encompassing blur of houses. What exists in these outward forms (or lack of forms) is mirrored in the interior landscape of the individual's life. Experience has lost, like the landscape, its clear outlines and discernible reality. One sensation merges with the next, without periods of quiet between them. One sound competes with another, without the underlying silence which could have given them meaning and effect.

The individual, if he is to be sane, must find himself in this kind of environment. Can it be denied that art is a saving force in this quest? In my mind's eye I can see even the youngest child taught to distinguish between the intimate realm which is his own, the realm of the household where he must learn to live with others, the neighborhood of friends, and the wide universe beyond. He can begin to feel that the satisfying existence requires a different kind of conduct and vision as he moves from one space to the next. Perhaps he will begin to see, even in our muddled setting, hints of limits and clarifications. He may even grow up to be a city planner and help reform the outward scene until it comes into some kind of conformity with the desired quality of the inner life.

(2) Secondly, the individual grows up in a context which does not hesitate to give itself the rather chilling name of a "consumer society." As if the chief end of man were to annihilate all that comes his way; to acquire and to dispose of the objects he produces in tune with the remorseless rhythms of the machine! It is perhaps necessary that we

be consumers; indeed there is something quite wonderful in getting away from the bourgeois ethic which dictated that everything should be kept and hoarded. I would go further, and suggest that many of the objects which are now thought of as "durable" - though in fact they are often not durable at all - should be made frankly disposable. Men's suits, and kitchen crockery, umbrellas and amateur works of art - all these could be created for the moment only, for its utility or its joy, and being impermanent could be the more colorful and bold in form. Yet in a world that makes sense, something must abide. Something must stand outside the eternal flux of acquisition and annihilation. The true work of art, the created object with its unique relationship to the creator, answers to this need. The young person who has really understood art will never be at the mercy of the forces of consumption. The society which makes of art something more than a fad or a status symbol will retain at its core the saving sense of something hard and clear, something indigestible and incapable of being wholly destroyed.

(3) Yet it is not in a sense of place, and not in a sense of the inviolability of the created object, that the modern man or woman will find ultimate salvation. These things have always been important to the good life, and will always remain so. But modern man lives to a unique degree in a world of change and motion. Unless within this motion he can find a new kind of poise, and within this changefulness a meaning and beauty, he will not be at home in his epoch. Art in other periods has sensed the fact that man, being a creature who moves about, must apprehend the world in glimpses and sequences. The sculptor has

always expected his work to be seen by someone passing by; certain forms of architecture have known that the totality must be something more than can be caught in any single view or from any one perspective. The contemporary artist has gone much further. Indeed the art of the present century could be interpreted in many of its aspects to be the prophetic man's effort to come to terms with a universe that does not stand still.

The Impressionists foresaw what was to be characteristic of our time; and they were attacked with the violence which invariably falls to those who see what is really happening. Their paintings catch an instant of time; but before that instant there was motion, and afterwards motion will resume its interrupted sway. The fleeting light, the falling gesture, the sense (which the old Greeks knew) of Time being a river into which no man steps twice: these they captured in paintings which seem familiar and adorable to us today. Later artists have been more adventurous in their experiments with motion. Sometimes the work of art itself moves, as in the mobiles of Calder; sometimes the object stands still but the individual moves through and around it. Sometimes, as in this season's Op Art, there may be stillness on the part both of ~~the~~ object and beholder, but such a communication set up between them that the intensity of things moving ceaselessly is created within the eye.

As for the contemporary architect, he has taken the hints of old masters before him, and has made his buildings only comprehensible in terms of images that envelop a man and are superimposed upon his consciousness. There is no point at which one can view a modern building. Indeed there is no building if one tries to view it from one point alone - just as there is no America except that which one grasps intuitively moving amid its confusions and sensations.

That is as far as I have time to go. I hope this has seemed like a reasonably hopeful address. One can be gloomy about many things - especially about the future. But the present lies around us with its tantalizing wealth of choice, its seductive pleasures and enticements, so that one summer day, or one moment such as this where we gather as friends, can make unreal and insignificant all the dark predictions of the prophets or even the grim realities which wait below the surface to rise up and smite us. It seems in the spirit of the occasion to end with a couplet of Robert Herrick. Herrick lived, like us, in a period of convulsive progress and of harsh civil war. He perhaps didn't get the whole truth about his or any age into his verse, so filled with delight in the fragrances and colors of life; but he got more of it than some of our gloomier sons: -

Praise they that will Times past, I joy to see

My selfe now live: this age best pleaseth mee.