

1971

Commencement address

Douglas M. Knight

Follow this and additional works at: http://lux.lawrence.edu/addresses_commcement

© Copyright is owned by the author of this document.

Recommended Citation

Knight, Douglas M., "Commencement address" (1971). *Commencement Addresses*. 7.
http://lux.lawrence.edu/addresses_commcement/7

This Speech is brought to you for free and open access by the University Archives at Lux. It has been accepted for inclusion in Commencement Addresses by an authorized administrator of Lux. For more information, please contact colette.brautigam@lawrence.edu.

COMMENCEMENT ADDRESS

by

DOUGLAS M. KNIGHT

(June 12, 1991)

It's a very special kind of welcome, though I must say, Miss Toycen, to be put down before I begin by a lovely young woman and one of my three favorite authors It's very difficult to follow you and Lewis Carroll. I think everyone here will appreciate that fact.

You know one reason why you let the Commencement speaker speak early is so there won't be too many embarrassing incidents of that sort. You protect him, which I am grateful for. I am in debt to you men and women of Lawrence for asking me to come. If your elders had asked, they and you know I would have come; but that you troubled to do so means a great deal to me. I set my delight against a general determination to speak less and enjoy it more, I must admit. Because for many years I suffered that infirmity of university presidents -- an infirmity of too much speaking which, as one of the emeritus trustees of Lawrence told me many years ago, is like strong drink; sooner or later it will get to a man. And he was right. After a while you really think maybe you have something to say all the time, and that is a fatal delusion. For you I will break the rule of not speaking much at all very happily. But not the rule that the best of my secondary school teachers gave me when he first discovered I was going to be involved in the crazy profession of college administration. He said, "If you must, then you will have to do too much speaking. Often you will have nothing to say, but you can ease the pain if you never talk for more than seventeen minutes, preferably for no more than fifteen.

He was right. I'll try to obey him this evening. Often one has nothing to say. I'll hope he wasn't right about that; we'll see fifteen minutes from now.

One thing none of my wise older friends told me that I must tell you. No one knows -- until he tries to think about a complicated subject, a complicated audience, a complicated world -- that speeches tend to take matters into their own hands; that a subject will grow in unexpected, even mysterious ways, sometimes frustrating ways; that often you will start with what you think is a peacock and wind up with a plow horse. And in some ways I can recognize that as happening to me. I haven't set out this evening to try to find golden words for you. I've set out to talk with you for a few moments about this "Alice" world that all of us inhabit. I have tried also to suggest to you a little bit of the way my own mind works as I try to confront this kind of complexity, this kind of puzzlement, because I know you know that this nonsense about generation gap is a mere screen really for the things that we ought to be sharing as we confront the urgent demands of this late 20th century. If there is a gap, it's tragic for all of us; and the sooner we remedy it, the better off we'll be.

The changes that have taken place in the last twenty years in the college and university world are almost bewildering to those of us who have lived through them. You represent to some of us, I suspect, one aspect of an astonishing shift and change in American university life. There once was a word called apathy. In the 1950's when I came to Lawrence, this was the cry when we complained and lamented in faculty meetings or in

other ghetto gatherings, "Why are the students so apathetic? They don't appreciate the ^{great and} creative things we have to offer them here. There were those of us in the 1960's who bitterly regretted our lack of foresight in the 1950's, because whatever drove the 1960's, it was not apathy. Sometimes hysteria; sometimes, I think, a desperate awakening to the real nature of our world; a violent -- sometimes effective, sometimes destructive -- attempt to come to grips with that world, to change history by mere effort of the will, really. There was nothing apathetic about it; there was often something courageous, sometimes something outrageous. But it was a time of great peaks and great valleys, and I would not wish a single horror away. I also would never wish to go through some of those horrors again if I could honorably avoid it.

Now I seem to see in you the interior and personal world opening not as a retreat from reality, but as a further way of acting in a time when some of the simpler forms of action which your predecessors took as adequate to their world, at a time when some of those simpler forms of action seem ineffective or outmoded. When I say inner, I am not talking about the plastic forms of Eastern religion that sometimes pass for inner experience. I am not talking about the plastic forms of Western religion, for that matter. We can play games with those things. I am speaking of something else. I am speaking really of what I see in the best of you: a development of the interior consciousness, which is a 75-cent phrase that actually should point to the true life of the self. It seems to me that you're making progress toward more effective and more rewarding individual lives. Here your own style often shows a good deal of sense, though

we have, you know, petty tribal wars about style these days, and I can see out in front of me the demonstration of what I'm about to say: the very diversity in your style protects you against the mad lemming-rush of fashion, whether in clothes or in ideas. I don't see you as a generation of lemmings, somehow; at least this evening you don't look to me that way. And I don't think your ideas are any more easily conformist than your clothes or your tastes or your amusements. Sometimes I admit I find you still a little utopian, and that can be wearing when a man is trying to make the world a little better even though he can't make it completely better. Sometimes utopianism is tough to live with for some of the rest of us. But far more important than the question of whether it's tough or not is the fact that your utopian vision of what the world might be leads you toward new relations between individuals, new ideas of small communities, hopefully new ideas about large communities. Because I am afraid we can't wish the large ones away, though I happen to believe that some of the ideas of your generation can help us survive the large community, which my own peers have not done too well with so far.

I don't want to cheer you up too much here, but before I drop an axe or two may I say that I seem also to see you moving often toward career decisions which may be unconventional but may be equally admirable, because they fit you as people. And you know there has been nothing more tragic in the university world of the last generation than a kind of stereotype expectation: a) that as many people as possible would go to college, and b) that there would be standard things for all of them to do when they graduated. To call both these propositions into question seems to me one

road back to hell. Not everyone should go to this kind of institution or any one other kind of institution, and the idea that we know what careers are appropriate for you when you graduate is arrogant. And all of us have enough arrogance to fight against without having to fight against that.

I hope that you'll find you can persist in this individual way of thinking. It seems to me one remedy for the periodic diseases of democracy which every now and then gets afraid of its own diversity, and tries to run and hide in some dogma of the moment. It's up to you, as well as up to the rest of us, to keep that from happening again more effectively than we've managed in the past few years. I've feared, as I think many of you have, some of the conformities that many among us have attempted to force on all of society. Your own independence of judgment is the greatest cure for that.

Now I've spoken about a rather massive change in taste, attitudes, view of the world -- which really is my subject tonight. I'm not remotely interested in arguing the merits of Phase A or C or D prime in that sequence of change. But the fact of change is so remarkable for all of us, the shift from unconcern to passionate action to your public privacy, if I may call it so, is so remarkable a change of attitude that only a trivial mind could look on it calmly or fail to see it as major evidence of those continuous changes of attitude which will mark life for the rest of this century and the one beyond it, which will also be your century.

One danger to this shifting sand of our world: we may be so pressed by change of self today that there will be exerted on us the

pressure to accept mere change, to accept the mere fact of change as, oddly enough, itself the value judgment about change; as though our minds, taken together, showed some curious Brownian movement -- out of control even though obvious, active but without meaning or direction, and with nothing that we could do about that fact. I have run into this puzzle of the mind over and over again in the last year or two. At some level of great abstraction I suppose I might understand such a view: that change itself is the god who rules us. But when I see that each shift of attitude in you or in your elders represents some genuine struggle for significance in all of us -- some struggle toward meaning, no matter if our success is very partial -- then I feel safe in asking what these changes mean when we take them as a cluster, when we seek in them ~~for~~ the patterns and images which "hurt and connect," to use W. H. Auden's great phrase for it. When we seek in them ~~for~~ the patterns and images of life which hurt and connect, we start to search in our changing, shifting world for those patterns. As we do, we can experience -- as Auden experiences the poetry -- we can experience for life a searching out of the images where it's the relations of people or events or ideas which are to have meaning or to have pattern, not just individual units of experience or sensation but relationships of ideas and people and convictions. Major shifts of attitude or style are not disturbing to me if we accept the pain and effort of relating them to the growth of our experience. What's alarming is to have sudden, abrupt changes of style and attitude with no perceptual meaning in the change; then you have a right to worry.

The images which hurt and connect in our world do so because they

strike and shock us alive to that order and growth which we would not see without them. They couldn't reach us, however, these images couldn't reach us, if we were truly isolated from one another or if we lived outside a common, shared structure of time and space. With all these changes, we still inhabit a common world. And it's crucial to remember that, at a time when societies vary so much and yet intersect in a daily way, when people vary so much and yet must endure one another -- its crucial to remember that the common world is still inhabited by us, no matter how much we differ and disagree.

(interruption with emergency message)

.... the images that hurt and connect.

I am glad that I have picked this poem.

THE HILL FARMER SPEAKS

I am the farmer, stripped of love
And thought and grace by the land's hardness;
But what I am saying over the fields'
Desolate acres, rough with dew,
Is Listen, listen, I am a man like you.

The wind goes over the hill pastures
Year after year, and the ewes starve,
Milkless, for want of the new grass.
And I starve, too, for something the spring
Can never foster in veins run dry.

The pig is a friend, the cattle's breath
Mingles with mine in the still lanes;
I wear it willingly like a cloak
To shelter me from your curious gaze.

The hens go in and out at the door
From sun to shadow, as stray thoughts pass
Over the floor of my wide skull.
The dirt is under my cracked nails;
The tale of my life is smirched with dung;
The phlegm rattles. But what I am saying
Over the grasses, rough with dew,
Is Listen, listen, I am a man like you.

The illusion of separateness shatters, if we lay ourselves open to such a poem, and the far more complex illusions and fears of isolation, futility, non-direction. The illusions of our own age, our own time, can also be broken by the connecting, hurting, revealing power of such a major work of art as "War and Peace." Now it happens at this point Mrs. Knight didn't know I would get to "War and Peace" just now, but she may well quiver; because "War and Peace" is one of those battle flags for me -- the book I have taught many times and which I always swear I will never refer to again as the greatest novel in the Western tradition. And I find that something compels me to do it, simply because it happens to be so, you understand. But I could devour the rest of your evening with this book; tonight I will not; sometime I'd like the chance, but not this evening. Instead I simply want to say that so great a novel can illuminate, just as the hill farmer's speech can illuminate, this relationship among disparate people, disparate insight. So a great novel like "War and Peace" in a most curious way illuminates the changes and shifts of these very years we've been living through. And does so through a great artist's power to involve us in his act to make us part of it, to incorporate it in a web of meaning which is not that of our own lives but illuminating of our own

lives, revealing of our own lives, and in that way an extension of those lives.

As I say, it's curious that Tolstoy should happen to have written a novel which starts with what you might call an apathetic society, takes you through the overwhelming wave of war and social revolution, emerges at last in a new, far more thoughtful, far more active world of peace than was alive at the start of the book. He takes us, in fact, through an agony of change, intimately related to our own. I don't have to force the parallel in that case. The parallel forces me instead to look at all of us with the one question which no work of art can answer. I've implied that it can answer many questions, that it can illuminate us, that it can shape us. It does all those things, but there's one question it can't answer. We see ourselves in the looking glass of a great novel, but we don't see the future there; the one thing we don't see is our future. We see possibilities, dangers, uncertainties which for us as for Tolstoy's characters are the means of triumph or the road to disaster. But we see no simple answers. Instead, if we really understand the work of art, we see a question, we hear a question. What will you do? At one certain point in the turning wheel of time, what can you do and what will you do? No work of art has the right to answer that question, but at least it can tell us how to answer it, even if it can't tell us what. And this 'how,' I think, is the greatest gift that any artist can make to the rest of us. It is, in fact, the greatest gift that anyone could make to you. For the artist is saying: If you're to live in the world of time and finiteness and change -- this world of these last years, this finite and yet changing world -- if

you're to live in the world of mortality, as you must, then you can only keep from being wasted (to use that horrible word out of Vietnam) -- you can only keep from being wasted if you yourselves are willing to create, as I have been willing to create. And what does it mean? That act of creation can be glib, or it can be masterful: glib and finally a failure if we are self-centered about what we make, if we assume that we are truly the masters of what we make; masterful, paradoxically enough, if we recognize that the only road to true creation is somehow through, but then more importantly beyond the self. Beyond whatever self we've been.

I should remind you that the gods, even the gods themselves, become creative only as they move from the universe of infinities to the world of time and action.

In the beginning God created the heaven and the earth. ... And God said, "Let there be light," and there was light. ... And God called the light Day, and the darkness he called Night. And the evening and the morning were the first day.

There at the very beginning, at its most mythic and primal, is the creation of time -- the evening and the morning were the first day -- in which we have our crucial role to play. Remember that time is not only our limit; time is our means, time is our freedom. We, after all, are not only creatures of time. All of us know that, and those of us who are your elders know it even better than you do; but you know it, clearly you know it already. We are also creators within this little web of time which is ours.

It seems to me that many other great cultures have felt as we do: within the temporal world something can be done which God himself cannot do in any other way. It is no blasphemy to say, after all, that Christ became man to do what he could not do as God. It is no false reading of Homer to say that Homer's heroes bring into reality what his gods can foresee but themselves cannot enact, because they can't live as we do in the world of time, of real events with real results, real conclusions. It's not too much to say that the great artist, the great prophets have always known that we men have a share in creating history. History is not something laid on us; we create it. The terrible and wonderful fact is that we may not know until too late what history we've created. Tragedy would not exist, either as art or as life, if we could foresee the full meaning of our acts. On the other hand we can notice much, and you can notice much this evening. No man who truly cares about his neighbor has created an evil society. No man with love in his heart has ever justified evil means by some supposed good end. No man of love has ever consistently thought power was pleasure. At the end of a savage and triumphant battle Robert E. Lee remarked once, "It is good that war is so horrible; otherwise we might come to love it far too much." Only a sensitive and brutally honest man could say this in recognition that creation is twin to destruction -- something also which none of us must ever forget in the world we inhabit: creation is the twin to destruction. His remark and all that I have said this evening put the burden on you, put an equal burden on us all -- but not a gloomy one. Even after that remark about war, not a gloomy burden but a joyous one.

We have, as I see it, not only the chance but the mandate to create the good things which would not exist without us. The incredible chemistry of the world has been at that creation for nearly five billion years, so far as we can tell at the moment. We have the great privilege, you have the great privilege -- though only for a little while, only for your few years -- the privilege of being the creators in your term. And this one privilege, in addition, of knowing that you are, even though you cannot know fully what you create. You know that within your limit, in your time, in your world, you do create what was not there before. And no one can wish that away. It's arrogant to ask for more, it's playing God to ask for more. But I think it's cowardly and weak to settle for anything less than that fact of your own creative power. Since, as Mr. Auden says again, "You shall bless your crooked neighbor with your crooked heart," let me -- having laid on you a joyous but a difficult burden and not only laid it on you but on everyone else who is here with you, on this full family and community of educated men and women -- let me, from my own crooked heart, say to you: We must love and bless one another as we go, as we go to be human beings -- creative, suffering, struggling beings, who must make the world green where it has been burned, tender where it is hard, alive where it is dead; and in all things to have courage, to have honor of the true sort, and -- God help us -- to have, I hope, the blessed gift of humor to save us from ourselves and the storms that come on June nights.

Thank you so much.

Saturday evening, June 12, 1971