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# Commencement address

Carl P. Wellman

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## COMMENCEMENT ADDRESS

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### *Preface*

On this day of mourning for Senator Robert Kennedy, it would be entirely proper for us to cancel all activities and pause to meditate on our loss. But it is equally proper, and perhaps more appropriate, that we carry on, turning our attention to the causes of this personal and national tragedy and dedicating our efforts to the task of removing these causes. Among them is a growing imperfection, or set of vices, in the American character. There are increasingly evident in the people of this land a loss of faith in the wisdom and justice of democracy, a tendency to impose by brute force the minority opinion upon the majority, an impatience with the traditional procedures of lawful government, an unwillingness to accept responsibility for the constructive efforts required to solve social problems, a lack of respect for impersonal justice, and an insistence on the alleged right of personal and mob violence. If this very partial diagnosis of our national illness is correct, then surely it is more than appropriate, it is urgently required, that we turn today to an examination of the education that forms, for better or worse, the American character. It is in this spirit that we may celebrate the graduation of those who will continue the life of this nation and that we must reflect on how adequately we have prepared them for their task. Sometimes satirical, my remarks will be light in tone, but their substance, I can assure you, will be serious enough for even this solemn occasion.

"COMMENCE . . . AT THE COMMENCEMENT"

I see from the program, and our summery attire, that this is Commencement. The very name of the occasion is a comforting one. On this last day of carefree pleasures, on this sad day of parting from roommates, classmates, and beloved professors, it is reassuring to know that this ceremony does not mark the end of everything, but only the beginning. The beginning of what? If this is Commencement, what commences today?

The obvious answer is *life*. I like to imagine that life begins at forty; you may prefer to believe that life begins at graduation. We are both mistaken. Your life does not literally begin today. You have been living here at Lawrence, off and on, for four years now. It is rumored that some of you were alive for sixteen or seventeen years before you came here. If not life, what does commence today?

The generally accepted answer is *real life*. To be sure, you have been alive in some rudimentary biological fashion for years, but this was not really living. These past four years, to say nothing of that oblivion before you matriculated, were merely a preparation for real life. Why? "Why wasn't I alive?" you may ask in youthful innocence or adolescent outrage. If I may speak for an older, and therefore wiser, generation, I will tell you why. Until today you were too young to be trusted with important decisions, and for the past four years you have been in residence in an ivory tower. I do not ask you to take my word on such profound matters. Let us examine the facts together.

Are undergraduates too young to be trusted with important decisions? University practice declares it so. Typically students are told when to consult their advisers. It would never do to let them ask advice only when they feel the need of it. The Downer Women's Association sets the hour when young ladies are to be locked up at night. Girls never do know when they need sleep—or protection. Detailed rules prescribe how men and women are to dress for meals. Someone, I shudder to think of it, might even wear blue jeans to dinner. Such difficult decisions are too momentous for the undergraduate.

He is mature enough for trivial choices only. Whom shall I date? Perhaps, whom shall I marry? What shall my major be? What shall my vocation be, that is, to what work shall I devote the rest of my life? Shall I do my best or shall I study just hard enough to get by? What kind of a person shall I become? The contrast is ludicrous. The student is allowed, even pressured by impatient advisers and parents, to make some of the most crucial choices he will ever face.

Undergraduates are *not* too young to be trusted with important decisions. Admittedly, they are not always wise or virtuous enough to make the right choices. Who is? Nevertheless, undergraduates are at least as intelligent and responsible as those who do not continue their education and who, therefore, accept the responsibilities of adult life as soon as they graduate from high school. There is nothing anyone can do to protect the undergraduate from important decisions, and it is he who must bear the primary burden if the wrong choice is made. Finally, he can learn to make decisions only by the process of making them. For an educational institution, this is the decisive consideration.

Well, maybe. This is all very well if one chooses to think of an undergraduate as a person, but remember that first and foremost he is here to be a student. *As a student* his sole concern is with his studies, and academic subjects are, by definition, purely academic, that is to say, purely intellectual and irrelevant to practical affairs. The pursuit of the liberal arts is an escape from real life. Lawrence, like any academic institution, is an ivory tower.

Are the liberal arts irrelevant to real life? Let us look at philosophy. I choose this subject because I am most familiar with it and because it is obviously the most useless of all the liberal arts. What do I teach my students? Since philosophy is found in the writings of the great philosophers, I must begin by teaching them to read, to grasp the meaning between the lines and formulate the arguments implicit in the text and then to recognize the strengths and weaknesses of the position they uncover. Now it may not matter, practically speaking, whether we can strengthen the dollar, whether or not we become more entangled in Viet Nam, whether we can solve the economic and human crises in our major cities. But if it does, then it matters

who gets elected to public office and how wisely and carefully our politicians have thought through their policies. In a democracy, this implies that it matters whether those who vote can read between the lines of a newspaper editorial or detect the fallacies in a public address. The skills I teach are not entirely useless in an election year.

One can teach a person to think philosophically only by teaching him to write clearly and precisely. In my classes he is writing about philosophy, but the skills he acquires can be used in other forms of communication. Communication is becoming increasingly important as the organizations in our world grow in size and complexity. Government bureaus, huge industries, and large businesses cannot exist without reams of directives and reports; they cannot function efficiently unless these are written clearly and precisely.

"Come, come," you may mutter, "let's talk about the subject-matter of philosophy." Who am I to pass up that invitation? Its content is a bewildering array of weird theories, each supported by a number of plausible, but somehow specious, arguments. What on earth can one learn from such inconsistent and speculative philosophies? Well, one might learn that even the wildest idea may be sincerely believed by a highly intelligent person and that dogmatic assertion is no substitute for critical reasoning. I like to think that this spirit of tolerance for new and strange ideas, together with a respect for people who differ from oneself, is not irrelevant to the problems of intolerance and discrimination facing this country today. Even the most academic of subjects need not be irrelevant to real life.

I have tried to refute two prejudices about undergraduate life: that undergraduates are too young to be trusted with important decisions and that they reside in an ivory tower. It is not just that these notions are false; they are pernicious. They are pernicious because they lead to a misconception of higher education. They suggest that education is only a preparation for real life. Not life itself, but a purely intellectual training of immature children. Education cannot be *only* a preparation for life. If education is not life, it is no preparation for life either.

The first principle of university education is that it is the student who bears the primary responsibility. We often imagine that we,

faculty and administrators, are responsible for the student. We must decide what and how the student studies. We must rule out every opportunity for foolish or immoral action. The truth is that we cannot force the student to become educated. We may require him to study a certain subject and make him perform routine academic tasks. But learning about a subject falls far short of becoming involved in it. It is he who does, or does not, become interested in a discipline. It is he who may, with interest, pursue it so vigorously that he becomes, almost by accident, competent in it and dedicated to it. The truth is that no set of rules can prevent foolish and immoral action. We, faculty and administrators, cannot keep students from making decisions, and if we could, we would only hinder their moral and intellectual growth. What we can and should do is to provide the greatest opportunity for rewarding choices and occasionally help the student to choose more wisely and more responsibly. I am not proposing the abolition of all rules and regulations. I do say that they should give the student the greatest possible freedom *and* that they are justified only when absolutely required by the educational goals of this institution or the protection of the members of this academic community.

The second principle of university education is that the student is a person. It might be more convenient for us if he lived at home and sent his intellect to Lawrence in a little plastic box. These boxes could be filed alphabetically, male and female together, and brought out periodically for instruction only. Lawrence would not need to build luxurious dormitories, expensive feeding centers, or large athletic fields. We could return the student's intellect, with diploma, after four years. He would hardly miss it for such a short time, since intellectual matters are irrelevant to real life.

In point of fact, the whole person comes to Lawrence, and *all* of him needs education. It is not true that the freshman has developed all the physical skills he needs, that his emotions are mature and his attitudes enlightened, that his tastes are fully cultivated, that his character is completely moral and his will rational, that only his intellect remains to be perfected. Hence, our purpose as educators must be to provide an environment in which every side of the student's person develops as fully as possible. I am not suggesting that the traditional curriculum be abandoned. Quite the contrary, I have

tried to defend the relevance of academic studies. At the same time, I would add that extracurricular life is equally essential to education and, more radically, that the liberal arts are relevant to life beyond the campus only as they transform life within the university. The study of literature is to be judged by whether our students choose to read novels in their spare time or take their dates to productions of the Lawrence University Theatre. Courses in government and economics are effective to the degree that our students become more interested in the newspapers and more understanding of current events. Only as education becomes a living thing is it an adequate preparation for adult life.

What does commence today? Not real life, but *adult life*. Commencement, more than any other single day, marks the end of living under the supervision of parents and educators. From now on you will be on your own. Even if you continue your education, most of you will be expected to earn your own way, and you will succeed or fail by your own efforts. Even if you get a job, your boss will supervise your work and not your life.

My advice to you, for by tradition I am expected to give you one last bit of unrequested advice, is that on this, your Commencement, you commence to live *as adults*—that is, to take, seize if necessary, full responsibility for your decisions, to choose as wisely and maturely as you are able, and to use to the fullest every capacity of your person. Only if you live in this way will your education bear fruit; only if you live as adults will you live life at its best.