

1954

Commencement address

John Schoff Millis

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

© Copyright is owned by the author of this document.

Recommended Citation

Millis, John Schoff, "Commencement address" (1954). *Commencement Addresses*. 22.
http://lux.lawrence.edu/addresses_commencement/22

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.

MILLIS, JOHN S.

WESTERN RESERVE UNIVERSITY
CLEVELAND 6, OHIO

LAWRENCE COLLEGE COMMENCEMENT

June 13, 1954

- - - -

The task of making a commencement address is not one to be approached lightly. The occasion is one of signal importance to the members of the graduating class, marking the end of a most important phase of education and experience - and the commencement of another with even greater challenge, opportunity, and responsibility. Yet there is very little that a speaker can add in twenty minutes to the knowledge, the understanding, or the appreciation of a college senior. But there is one thing that can be done. That is to add one cubit to the stature of faith - faith in yourselves as rational, moral, and capable free men and women.

Both scholarly historians and working journalists like to describe an age, and particularly a decade, by a label. We always refer to the Gay Nineties, the Flaming Twenties, the Depression Thirties. I do not know how the historian will label this decade - your decade - but right now I would like to suggest the title "The Fearful Fifties". If there is any one universal characteristic of the thoughts, the emotions, and the actions of most people in this world in these times, it is that of fear. We are

afraid of big things and we are afraid of little things; we are afraid of real dangers and afraid of imagined dangers. Our fears run the whole gamut from the sublime to the ridiculous, from the hydrogen bomb to falling hair, from the fear of death to the fear of being seen in last season's hat. Fear is corrosive and fear is destructive. Fear poisons the mind, dulls the conscience, and paralyzes the will. Fear is incurable but for one antidote - that is faith. Faith casts out fear as light conquers darkness.

It is not simple to replace fear with faith nor to dispel darkness with light. First one must understand fear and then through effort of the mind, comprehend that fear is implausible and illogical - while faith is plausible, logical, and supported by observance of fact. Let us, therefore, direct our attention to identifying and describing some of our fears. There are so many that time allows the consideration of but a very few. These I would describe under three general headings.

The first common fear of our time is fear of the power of the free human mind. In the field of economics and business this takes the form of fear that a product or process will become obsolete, that a particular

material will be replaced by another more efficient and cheaper. There is the fear that a particular skill or technique will be no longer needed and that there will be technological unemployment. At least once in every decade since the dawn of the industrial revolution some business leader, some captain of industry, has demanded that the scientist and the engineer stop thinking, stop discovering new data, stop inventing new products and processes. The free human mind is productive, inquiring, and ingenious. It makes other people think and this is always painful. It destroys prejudices, superstitions, and preconceptions. Some men are afraid to know more.

Fear of the power of the free human mind is also displayed in the field of statesmanship. A recent very serious proposal has been made to prohibit any further research in the field of atomic energy. The statesmen of the world are afraid to trust the creative mind of man and would prefer that this area of his inquiry be limited because the statesmen have not sufficient skill to conceive of a plan to direct atomic energy to peaceful ends.

Fear of the power of the free human mind is also evident in the political sphere. Orthodoxy is being substituted for the free interchange of political opinion. The non-conformist, the inquirer, the adventurous mind, the dissenter is being labeled as traitor. Discussion of current affairs, the give-and-take of debate, is being displaced by slogan-thinking, epithet-hurling, and name-calling. All of this is the result of refusing to believe that the mind of man may be capable of new and clearer concepts of freedom and political liberty.

The second common fear of our time is doubt of the adequacy of the human conscience. The pessimists of our time state that man is at best amoral and probably downright immoral. More and more laws are being placed upon the statute books that define in legal terms that which is right and thereby relieve the human conscience of the responsibility of making its own decisions. It is true that we abandoned prohibition but the same distrust is present today in the modern drive for censorship of literature, of the movies, of the drama, of television, and radio. Our great talent for

propaganda is turned loose to tell us how to act as well as how to distinguish the true from the false. Conformity in politics is not the only phenomenon of our time.

Conformity in religion is being advocated as well. Perhaps the greatest evidence of fear about the inadequacy of the human moral sense is the increasing reliance we place upon compelling people to think right and do right by the force of law. Our anti-discrimination laws are evidence that we do not trust ourselves to be fair, decent, and Christian.

The third common fear of our time is that the human will is impotent. We seriously doubt the capacity of men to provide for themselves and their families. Therefore we search for security and not for freedom. We fear that man left alone cannot bring about progress or advance himself. Therefore, the State takes more responsibility for business, industry, power development, banking, and transportation. The all-powerful State is but the logical result of the fear that the individual human will is not to be trusted and is actually impotent.

Another aspect of this fear is the high degree of organization of our lives and communities. We must have societies for this and committees for that in order to guarantee that the individual will shall never be called upon. We unconsciously collectivize our lives, voluntarily to be sure, rather than place any reliance on individual human will power.

Perhaps I have overdrawn the picture in my hasty description of some of our current fears. It is remarkable that we have few, if any, of the fears which our ancestors had and which are prevalent now in younger societies. We do not fear demons nor devils nor even gods. We do not fear nature - for we have learned to control her - even the weather. We do not fear wild animals, nor even germs or virus. We do not fear the physical strength of man or his primitive savagery. All of these fears have been cast out by knowledge, by understanding, and by human activity. Some of these fears have proven to be based upon sheer superstition the fear of things unknown. Some have disappeared as knowledge and skill have developed to master and to control them. In short, older fears have disappeared

under the impact of the human mind, the human moral sense, the human free will.

All this is true but still we have not abolished fear. We have actually substituted the fear of those human powers which proved our older fears unfounded and ridiculous. Today we fear only one thing - man - ourselves. We don't fear physical strength, nor savage emotion - but we do fear men's minds, men's spirits, men's wills. We no longer fear wild animals but we do fear those attributes which differentiate us from those animals. We fear man's humanness or, rather, his god-like powers.

These are our fears. The real question, however, is "What are we going to do about them?" Fear cannot be destroyed. If one fear disappears, another always appears to take its place. Fear is permanently removed only when replaced with faith. Only faith casts out fear. But what is faith? Is it a blind acceptance of but another and more optimistic dogma? Is it the unswerving following of a line of belief dictated from above? Faith is not either of these. Faith is the acceptance of the reality of man, of nature, and of God. Faith is the

acceptance of the observations of both our minds and our spirits.

The members of this graduating class have learned enough history to know that the mind of man has produced material and economic progress. We are better fed, housed, and clothed than our ancestors. We live longer and enjoy better health. We have comforts and luxuries beyond the dreams of our grandparents. We also know that the mind of man produced the Magna Charta, the Bill of Rights, the Constitution. The mind of man produced the atomic bomb which killed thousands of people. But a few crumbs of the same knowledge made grudgingly available to scientists have already saved more lives in American hospitals than were lost at Hiroshima and Nagasaki.

There is ugliness in the world but there is far more beauty. The mind and spirit of man have created the masterpieces of art, have composed great symphonies, have written lovely poems and powerful prose.

There is evil in this world. But there is also good in great abundance. For every crime you can recount I can

recount five incidents of unselfishness, of sacrifice, and heroism. The human spirit has throughout the ages reached lofty heights and does so daily in both small and large affairs.

Today there are millions of men who have surrendered freedom in order to escape the awful responsibility of a free will. Yet history tells us that no real progress - intellectual, artistic, religious, or moral - has ever occurred in a slave society. The human will has created, has accomplished, has overcome great obstacles.

Actually our ancestors were much more logical than we are. They feared famine, floods, disease, cold, and the attacks of wild beasts. There was good reason for such fears for they did not know enough to overcome these perils. They feared the possibility of slavery, the loss of property, the aggressions of neighbors because man's mind and spirit had not yet conceived of political freedom and responsible self government. We fear none of these things because the mind of man and his eternal spirit have conquered them. Rather we fear the power of the mind. We cannot trust his moral sense and we discredit his free will.

We are the illogical and the naive. We refuse to believe in those things for which the whole record of history attests, evidenced by every aspect of the physical and spiritual world in which we live.

There is but one thought I would leave with you - one impression I could hope to make. Accept the evidence of your knowledge, believe the experience of your senses. Seize upon the realization that men's minds, spirits, and wills are the only dependable human forces. Know that those minds, spirits, and wills, kept free of the shackles of fear, will continue to aspire, to conquer, and to create. Have faith in your humanness, believe in yourself. May this decade be for you, years, not of paralyzing fear, but of joyful faith.