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Freedom for Scholarship

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Freedom For Scholarship

by

*C. A. Elvehjem**

PRESIDENT PUSEY, GRADUATING SENIORS, PARENTS AND FRIENDS:

I am happy to be with you at your commencement. These occasions bring a thrill to anyone interested in youth and in progress. It is a time of congratulations for work well done, a time for hopes and prayers for the future, and a time for some misgivings regarding the realities of life that lie ahead. Your parents, teachers, and friends may express their congratulations to you in different ways, but underlying all those given at this as well as previous commencements are the wishes that you will be blessed with good health and a happy life; that you will succeed in your chosen field; and that you will not only continue to enjoy the benefits of a free country but that you will help establish more firmly the principles of freedom.

These earnest wishes have been fulfilled for many. Life expectancy has for all practical purposes reached three score and ten. Jobs for graduates have become plentiful, and to those of us who graduated in the early twenties, the salaries appear fabulous. However, in spite of these hopeful signs our greatest concern for you and for our country relates to certain encroachments upon our freedoms.

Why do these threats come at a time when there has been the greatest expansion of research and scholarship ever experienced in history? It is unnecessary to tell you that research has given us better health, longer life, new products, new industries, greater diversity of jobs, greatly improved methods of communication, etc. Let us not forget that the degree to

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which we can enjoy these benefits depends upon our degree of freedom in thought and action.

The two words "research" and "freedom" have much in common. In the first place both terms are loosely used and may have different meaning for different people under different situations. To some, research may mean the most basic type of experimental procedure or the testing of hypothesis. To others it may merely designate the superficial attempt to find that one cigarette is less irritating than another. Similarly, freedom has varying degrees of meaning to most people in this country, to say nothing of what it means to people in other parts of the world. If we look for a definition we find that freedom means "the state of being free." Free means "not under another's control, having liberty, able to do, act or think as one pleases." Fortunately, most of us have grown up in a free country. We have been educated in school systems that have been free to a very large extent, including both the cost of education and the freedom to believe what we want to believe. It is obvious that someone has carried the cost of our education, and this cost has been increasing to such an extent that some suggest it is encroaching upon our freedom. However, our schools have been built on the philosophy that the greatest barrier to freedom is ignorance. Ignorance, doubt, fear, and intolerance all go together.

How can we think if we do not have the facts? How can we make our thoughts known if we are unable to communicate with one another? It takes training to think clearly and intelligently. In this training we have been influenced by parents, teachers, and associates. Because this country has been a "melting pot" of nationalities, we have encountered points of view from many parts of the world. Not only is the world divided by incongruous ideologies and opposing political forces, but we divide ourselves into divisions by peculiar boundaries. Someone recently remarked, "The sordid truth is that the fellowship of educated man has become increasingly to resemble a zoo, with each of us duly labeled chemist, or poet, or economist, or whatnot blatantly parading his uniqueness in his appropriate cage." These divisions are erected for temporary convenience but unfortunately often

tend to become permanent or are continued for too long periods of time. Science happens to be riding the crest of the wave today because of its power of regenerating knowledge. But the boundaries between science, philosophy, and religion must be shifted continuously if we are to use our knowledge for freedom.

You have been fortunate in obtaining your education in an institution where these boundaries have been eliminated to a very large extent. Your president has not only insisted upon a liberal education for each of you, but has taken the leadership in re-establishing these principles in modern education.

We have come to recognize our universities and colleges as places for freedom in research and freedom in scholarship. The freedom of the academic teacher is essential to the preservation of free society itself. Basic knowledge does not flourish if its main support comes only from those interested in its uses or if the main performers are carrying on for their own selfish interests.

However, the freedom we talk about is largely a matter of degree. Some of you have already had your freedom restricted; others will have their freedom limited to the top sergeant upon graduation in order that we may continue to maintain our democracy. Fortunately, this temporary restriction has not altered the thinking of our young men and women. The greatest hope for our future, I believe, is the enthusiasm with which veterans of military service have returned to colleges for further training. The records of these returned G. I.'s and their accomplishments following their training will always stand as a monument to the program of a free country.

As individuals you will experience greater freedom as you leave these exercises. You will no longer have to attend classes or meet deadlines for term papers. Your new job may be confining, but in this modern age of 35 to 40 hour weeks you will have much leisure time. You are now ready to carry the responsibilities of a citizen in a free society, and the manner in which you use your leisure time will be an important measure of the efficacy of your education. As graduates of a liberal college men will expect you to help maintain freedom

for scholars and scholarship. I hope that you will use your best efforts in these areas.

May I make a few comments on the importance of freedom for the scholar, for our educational institutions, and for our society as a whole. As many have pointed out, the scientist and scholar today do not suffer so much from actual restrictions as from fear of restrictions which they may encounter. Therefore freedom in research and scholarship must be in the mind of the scholar. I have tried to define this feeling in very simple words as follows: He must be free to think without interruption; he must be free to investigate without limitation; he must be free to use past recorded knowledge without too much difficulty; and he must be free to disseminate his findings and his discoveries as he sees fit. It is important to emphasize that these are obligations as well as opportunities. Benjamin Franklin used the following question in admitting candidates into the earliest learned society in this country: "Do you love truth for truth's sake and will you endeavor impartially to find and receive it for yourself and communicate it to others?" Dr. Chester I. Barnard of the Rockefeller Foundation has expressed it this way: "A scholar may object that he cannot fulfill his responsibility in research unless he can freely communicate with other scholars and share their discoveries. In that case it is his responsibility to the nation and society either to accept the restrictions recognizing it as unavoidable evil, or else to withdraw from the sensitive area and work in some other field which does not involve weapons or other factors related to security. And on their part the nation and society must recognize that secrecy is costly. By shutting off communication amongst scientists they may impair our scholarship, our discoveries, and development in the very field they seek to protect." Let us then as individuals fight for those degrees of freedom which affect us most adversely and which may be of greatest detriment to society.

We are all concerned with investigations of our schools for subversive influence. I believe everyone will agree that the extent of any subversive influence in our educational institutions is insignificant in comparison to the emphasis which is

being placed on it. However, the problem cannot be ignored, but I believe the best solution to the problem relates to the emphasis on truth. If the investigating committees were interested in securing actual truth in the shortest time possible, I am sure that much confusion and misunderstanding would be eliminated. From the point of view of our academic institutions, I also believe that anyone attempting to cover up the truth should receive no support from those interested in academic freedom. In some instances it has been difficult to face these committees. It is always difficult to admit that one has made a mistake. However, the truth cannot be sacrificed. In this connection I might relate a situation regarding a well-recognized biochemist in England. He had isolated a new chemical compound from biological material and had published not only the method of isolation but what he believed to be the chemical structure. His work was heralded as one of the important discoveries of the period. A little later, however, workers in this country as well as in Canada could not reconcile certain of their findings with the structure that this professor had proposed. This gentleman did not enter into any polemic. He immediately set aside all his other studies and with diligence went back and restudied his compound. After a period of a year he found that the structure was different from that which he had proposed. He modestly withdrew his original conclusion and presented a new structure which has been amply confirmed during the past two decades. I happen to know that he could have blamed this entire error on one of his laboratory assistants, but he took the blame himself. I doubt that this error handicapped him in any way since shortly after his restudy he was awarded the Nobel Prize.

Emphasis on truth should start very early in our educational program, and I was very happy to hear the other day an elementary school teacher state that the function of the three R's was to bring the child and truth happily together. Sir Hector Hetherington, Vice-Chancellor of the University of Glasgow, has made this statement regarding truth at the higher levels of education: "Truth may not be the highest human value. But it is the value which above all else is committed to the university and to which the university is com-

mitted; and the only way to get at it is by free inquiry, if need be by the conflict of the free sincere opinion. There can be no test of orthodoxy save the single test of devotion to truth and sincerity; and the teacher has the right and duty to expound the truth as he sees it."

Now just a few words about freedom as it relates to society as a whole. I have already mentioned that society has gained much from research carried out in our modern environment, but these gains cannot be used if they are not properly controlled. Every new development resulting from research increases the amount of control which must be carried out either by ourselves or by our government. In this connection I am not just thinking about atomic bombs and bacteriological warfare, but about such simple things as the use of chemicals in foods or chemicals for controlling insects. When we deal with these more potent materials, whether they are new chemicals or new forms of energy, many problems arise. We must learn how to institute these controls without adding unnecessary burdens to our activities. I am sure that none of us objects to limitations placed upon us in an attempt to decrease the traffic fatalities on our highways, nor do we object to reasonable standards and ethics established by our professional workers. I am sure that we would not want everyone who had an idea about the control of disease to practice medicine. Here I can give you a personal example. Due to circumstances I have had an opportunity to learn a great deal about a vitamin known as niacin, which is necessary for the prevention of the disease known as pellagra. However, as a result of medical ethics, call it restriction if you wish, I would be severely criticized if I were to prescribe niacin for the treatment of this disease. I doubt if this restricts my opportunity to study the vitamin nor does it in any way affect the value of my contribution to science. If someone should say that I could not recommend a level of niacin which might be effective for the treatment of pellagra, then I would object to this restriction on the freedom of an investigator.

In spite of our great advances in knowledge and in our attempts to use this knowledge correctly some have little

confidence in the future. The most pessimistic view has been taken by Sir Charles Galton Darwin in his book, **The Next Million Years**. In a talk at a convocation on science and human values at Mount Holyoke College last fall he stated it this way: "The past history of the human race on earth may be very closely described as most of the time having been an untidy mess. I see no reason whatever to expect that it will be different for most of the future time." This is interesting since his forefather Charles Robert Darwin did more to emphasize the orderliness of nature than anyone else. It was good to have a botanist, Dr. Paul Burkholder of Yale, challenge this view in the following words, "The accent of intelligent cooperation has been almost unheard in the din of a biological doctrine of conflict." He concludes, "With their best thinking and spiritual insight, men can find a way toward cooperation and mutual aid across the barriers of class, race, religion, and nationality."

This emphasizes the importance of values in a society, and you may have guessed by this time that value is what I have been trying to emphasize. When this is done the fear of indoctrination often arises. Professor Oates, of Princeton, has used the word "affirmation" rather than "indoctrination" and distinguishes between the two as follows: "Indoctrination proposes to create a fixed result in a captive audience whereas affirmation proposes to create a dynamic result in a free audience." He concludes, "It will take a little reflection for him to realize that each age and each individual must discover, rediscover, and actualize the values and the principles that are in the heart of things." This, then, is my challenge to you today. But in taking your stand may I remind you of the simple words of Dr. DuBridge, "Intellectual slavery is fatal to progress. Make no mistake about that! Freedom to think and to investigate unfettered by coercion has been at the core of all advances man has made. It has been so. It will be so. In this age-long war against ignorance, superstition, fear, and confusion our weapons are ideas and ideals — **a trained inquiring mind and a stout but tender heart.**"