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Things That Remain

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Carl Wicks
Commencement Address
June 1946

Things That Remain

When James Bryce made his last revision of The American Commonwealth, certainly one of the best appraisals of American institutions ever made, and by one of our greatest admirers, he ventured the prophecy that the United States was destined to enter soon upon a "time of mists and shadows."

Two years ago, one of my most thoughtful students wrote me a letter, just before graduating, which contained this paragraph,

"Those of us of the present college generation, during our 'thinking' existence, have seen only depression, turmoil and war. We have come almost to accept such a state of affairs as normal. We have been hardened to a degree where we can pass off disagreeable fact without much bother. We have recognized little which is 'good' and growing, to which we could compare this dismal scene, and from which we could get encouragement."

Is there any one among us to-day who is not baffled and confused by the pressure of the world-shattering events of the last two decades. Millions of our fellow-men have been but recently locked in the embrace of death. Millions more face starvation, frustration and despair. Millions cry for bread, and the roads are choked with the homeless and the dispossessed. It doesn't matter whether they are Poles or Hungarians, French, Germans, Jews or Christians--their drawn and haggard faces are the faces of human beings like you and me, and no matter who was responsible for their miseries, they stare across the sea to us for help and understanding. They are not abstractions, to be described in terms of this or that nationality--they are all the victims of a criminal appeal to force. It is becoming apparent that the Potsdam settlement is no settlement at all, because it is

based on blind vengeance and dismemberment, and if continued, can only mean paralysis for Central Europe. The Atlantic Charter has been submerged in a resurgence of national rivalries and old-fashioned power politics. After centuries of painful effort to produce a so-called Christian society, we are still far away from a rule of reason and justice and brotherhood. An age seems to be ending in terror and death--an age to which we made the last contribution in the form of the greatest instrument for destruction which the world has ever seen, and a weapon, which by its very nature, will be essentially a weapon of aggression.

But if it be true that one age is coming to an end, then we must also be witnessing the birth of another, for history is a seamless web. It is the record of what human beings have been able to do about a long series

of emergencies which mankind has had to face over the years.

In all the long history of civilized man, somewhere, somehow, there has always persisted an irrepressible desire for a scheme of living which should rest on truth and honor, equal opportunity and peace. In all ages, there have been larger or smaller groups who caught the vision of a society which should lift the weight of economic injustice from the shoulders of the common man, and make life richer and nobler through intelligence and a devotion to social justice. Ours is neither the first nor the last generation to face the task of preserving the world's loyalties to something better than cheap materialism and barbarian force. History is full of examples when, amid a shattered temporal order, new leaders have clung tenaciously to certain permanent, inner values,

handed them on to new generations, and provided the perspective which can only be provided by men who are idealists without illusion, and realists without cynicism.

Human beings alone can deal with human problems. The important thing is not to be resigned, not to feel sorry for ourselves, and not to become cynical. Men and women who have had the advantages of education are under a special obligation to face the future with fortitude, for they must provide the spiritual oxygen that will keep the flame of humane living from snuffing out.

Truth, integrity, tolerance, freedom, and the search for beauty are virtues that men recognize as good today, as they have always recognized them. It is inconceivable that they should perish from the earth,

as long as this planet endures. The urge for peace and happiness is far more fundamental in the hearts of men than the desire to destroy and kill, and the conviction continues to grow with each generation, and especially with ours, that war is the most cruel and the most stupid way to deal with human problems. Perhaps our very fears magnified a thousand fold by this last war, will push us along the road to world government. But spiritual and moral power is not measured by mechanical devices. It is relatively easy to draw diagrams of the perfect world organization, and I would not for a moment speak disparagingly of the efforts made at San Francisco, Bretton Woods, London and New York to bring order and peace to this chaotic world, but let us not forget that if we seek salvation by politics and diplomacy, it is the spirit in the hearts of men which will prove

decisive.

The conviction is also growing that racism and nationalism must yield to a new concept of the oneness of civilization and the moral unity of all mankind.

The record of America in this respect is such that it should be capable of providing leadership for the rest of the world. For three hundred years, this has been a continent of many races, and the United States to-day is a political unity built upon cultural diversity, with a patriotism that really represents a kind of cultural pluralism. Our political unity was not created by a political theorist or a government bureaucrat. It was welded out of the satisfying experiences of our fathers and their forefathers who came here, because they chose this land above

their fatherland, as a country where men of many diverse origins could build a nation based on the respect of each for the other's equal rights, and where the right of each immigrant to use his own language, and cherish for a time his own cultural origins, was regarded as one of the civil rights which America guaranteed to all her native and adopted citizens alike.

We have escaped the bitter divisions of Europe. We are all Americans because we all have helped build America, and because we are united by a like-mindedness of devotion to freedom, equality, opportunity and personal liberty. Indeed, it was immigration which led us to expand our vision of democracy until it became a haven of refuge for all the peoples of the western world. We may thank the gods that we have never had ^a "pure _^ race" in America, and we may take pride in the history of a people that

kept its doors open to the weak and the oppressed of all the world. Perhaps because of this unique experience, the American people eventually may have a special contribution to make to the building of that concept of "one world" which must subordinate the life and desires of all individual nations to the greater good of the common human enterprise.

There are many things that are good and beautiful and of good report which must and will remain in a world as shattered to its foundations as ours is today. There are many institutions which seek to preserve these abiding values, but none are more important than those dedicated to learning, for the primary concern of education is the quest for the good life in a world that shall be a good world to live in.

No matter what happens, ~~the~~ institutions like the one from which I come,

and this one of which I now have become a part, must be preserved, undefiled by passing crises and unyielding to popular hysterias, as islands of refuge for the human spirit and as reservoirs of faith from which we may draw new strength for every genuine humanitarian effort.

The right kind of education seeks to anchor a people in righteousness and justice. It trains its students for contemplation, as well as for action. It is not content with the perfection of mechanical skills and it will never surrender its right to examine, to reflect and to act courageously in matters of public morality.

We must demand for our educational institutions complete academic freedom in peace and in war for their first obligation is to find and teach the truth. They must provide the sounding board and the proving

ground for majorities and minorities alike. They belong to no race or class or creed. They are instruments of the body politic, by which it seeks the good life. The freedom they grant to teacher and student is a sacred privilege, and it should not be surrendered in any emergency, and it must be used with a deep sense of responsibility.

Liberal arts colleges like this are especially important, for we need institutions which will defend to the utmost in this machine age their conviction that history, law, art, philosophy, pure science, and literature, are, in the long run, more important and more enduring than technocracy, and even this mechanical civilization must be made to serve a noble human venture. The liberal arts colleges have made a unique contribution to the culture of our free America, far greater even than their mere numbers

would suggest. ^{They}~~It~~ must refuse to surrender to the mechanics of our presentday society. ^{They}~~It~~ ~~do~~ not underestimate the value of the practical, but ~~is~~ insist on engineers who will understand that they must not practice their profession in a social vacuum; on lawyers who become social engineers and are primarily concerned with what Cicero called the science of the just and the unjust, on medical men who understand the tremendous social responsibilities their profession should impose upon them, and upon teachers who realize they have enlisted in a great army devoted to the search for truth.

What these colleges must stress, and what the world needs desperately, is the training of men and women whose minds have been truly liberated, until intelligent, critical thinking has become for them a "conspicuously

acquired habit", and who can relate all they have learned and all they do to a philosophical matrix that is concerned ^{with} right conduct and with values that are basic to good citizenship and decent living.

We are agreed that intellectual and moral discipline is indispensable to human progress. Good will without intelligence, and intelligence without good will, may prove equally dangerous. We are concerned with learning facts, so that we may understand that respect for facts implies learning to respect the rights of others.

Woodrow Wilson once said that "The college is for the training of the men who are to rise above the ranks." In college halls, there sounds the "eternal voice of the human race", and here we stand guard over the fortress of right reason, "defended by personal integrity."

Our biggest task to-day is not vocational or even scientific, though the scientific method is essential to all intelligent action, but building an honorable and decent world to live in. Teachers and students are obligated to explore the ultimate meaning of things, so that they may keep the torch of learning burning, even for its own sake. Thus, eventually, we may rekindle the fires of decency and humaneness in a world where twice in less than one generation every practical vocational skill has been directed to the destruction of all that man has built so painfully through the ages, and the instrument panel of a bomber or an atomic bomb, ~~seems~~ ~~for the moment,~~ to represent our highest level of achievement.

Our old faith in an immutable eternal law of progress has been badly shaken in recent years, and yet we must believe that out of our

present disorder and despair must come the germs to fertilize new ideas for a better social and international order. I cannot believe, either as a historian or as a rational human being, that somewhere the things that have always remained, will not be preserved again, for they are the things that have always started men again in search of a more satisfying life for themselves and ~~among~~ their fellow men. There is an undying fire that burns in the souls of men, there are things that are constantly reborn in the cathedral of the mind. In the collective mind of man, and despite ~~of~~ disintegrating institutions all around us, there has always been room for new plans for the pursuit of happiness, goodness and right reason. There have always been, and there will always be, men and women who hunger for righteousness, as much as they do for material comforts, and who crave

a world of justice and peace, and a chance to help build it.

We must walk along this road with courage, and by sight and knowledge wherever we can, and as far as we can. But it is also true that there is not a man living, who, whatever he may profess, does not walk part of the way by faith. Young people especially must remember that they can believe too much, but they also can believe too little. Men live not in a material world alone; their hopes and dreams have been powerful factors in fashioning civilization. These hopes exist; they are real; they are part of the Universe; and just as real is man's undying faith in his ultimate ability to achieve them.

Is it not a sound and even a rational faith to hold that the values that make life good and beautiful have always remained, even in some of

the world's darkest night, and that they will continue to abide with men of every race and creed?

The sanctity of human personality must be made to transcend all the blighting limitations of class or nationality. There is power in the gospel of human brotherhood and the moral unity of mankind. Recent history gives ample proof that men cannot really be free unless they will cooperate in freedom with others who are equally free. Civilization will live as long as men believe that human beings have the power within themselves to generate ideals that will soften men's hearts and high purposes that will make them their "brothers'" keepers.