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Commencement address

Stanley Pargellis

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LAWRENCE COLLEGE
COMMENCEMENT ADDRESS

June 24, 1945

By

STANLEY PARGELLIS
LIBRARIAN, THE NEWBERRY LIBRARY
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PRESIDENT PUSEY, MY FELLOW-ALUMNI — THE MEMBERS OF THE
CLASS OF 1945:

THE College which takes its leave of you today in this ancient moving and gracious ceremony — the last of its many humane acts for you — has let you grow for a few years in a liberal environment. Although it is a little ridiculous for me in my brief allotment of time to try to say any part of the things the faculty has been teaching you ever since you entered, I shall nevertheless talk about liberal education. I think there is little else worth talking about to men and women who have had your experience. Perhaps you do not know it, and perhaps I should not emphasize it, but you number among the select. Upon you, and upon a comparatively few others who graduate from liberal colleges, depends the survival of certain precious goods which men have learned through a long struggle.

In a college your president knows, the students used occasionally to play an old-fashioned version of "Information Please." "I'm thinking," one of them would say, "of someone beginning with A." "Is it a mathematician," the first on the left would ask, "who said that, given a fulcrum for his lever, he could move the world?" "No," the one who was "It" would reply, "it is not Archimedes." "Is it Hull House?" the next would ask. "No, not Jane Addams." "Is it a king who pulled a sword from a stone?" "No, not Arthur." A, and then B, and C and so on. You get the idea. I never was very good at the game. I would sit there, listen to the roll call, and like Tamino in Lowes Dickinson's version of *The Magic Flute*, see that procession of men and women, all of them different and most of them great, march past. I'd forget the game in musing upon the extraordinary diversity and richness of the human spirit which that procession proved. Nothing of which we have knowledge surpasses it. Potentially, the human spirit is unconfined, impenetrable, mysterious, with unexpected and unsounded depths, nearly as infinite in its possibilities as it is boundless in its achievements, bearing the spark and the image of the Divine, that which all institutions should serve, an end in itself and not a means.

If the things your liberal education has taught you are capable of summary, which I do not for a moment believe, they can all be contained in this composite picture of those men and women who conquered fear, built themselves avenues from earth to heaven, and found and left life rather richer than poorer. Liberal education stands committed to this faith in the human spirit, and you, liberally educated men and women, stand likewise committed to the preservation of a free

society which, as far as it can within the limitations of order and its own self-maintenance, encourages such diversity of experience that people may grow as they desire.

Many factors conspire today to shake our faith in the human spirit; not the least are those limitations of order and of self-maintenance in society with which young people are often impatient. I shall not talk about them — it might make you more impatient — but about a touchstone for keeping faith in the capacities of human beings. That touchstone is short and simple: Nothing which decreases your respect for the human spirit can be right.

It is not as easy as it sounds, that touchstone. Every day, from all sides, you are going to be meeting people and ideas that pleasantly, insidiously, authoritatively, playing upon some emotion or some logic within you, tend to tear down your respect for men and women.

Let me name a few of them. There are certain scientists who mess about with your insides, or your minds, or your behavior in groups, and come to the conclusion that they know everything which makes this creature man tick. I know a doctor, a specialist in the organs that lie about one's waist, who has made up his mind that every sick person who comes to him is bothered either about money or about sex. "Can't digest your food properly, eh? Well, tell me a few things about yourself. How's your family life?" He is not a bad doctor, but I don't believe I would trust him long with Wordsworth's divine discontent. A sociologist, more eminent now than when I knew him, once insisted to me that if I told him the kind of society I wanted, he would guarantee to produce it. He was sure he knew and could apply the rules of social behavior, and, like a housewife making a cake, could mix you up an angel food or a johnny cake on demand. I told him, merely to keep the conversation going, that I wanted a society which would produce, whether proportionately to the population or not, as much original thought and beauty as the Greek. You all know certain psychologists and psychiatrists who dissect the human personality as they might a frog, and label it bundles of complexes and frustrations and compensations. Each of them has his own idea of the perfectly normal being, and picks and twists and turns his bundles in hopes of producing him. Perhaps it is as well that such psychiatrists never got a chance at Lincoln, a poor introspective unfortunate with a latent inferiority complex, or lived a century and a half ago, when to be a little mad was the romantic fashion.

How should the liberally educated man regard these scientific prodigies who know all the answers? Why, obviously, he should listen to them, and when they unearth an informative fact which makes sense, use it to understand himself and others better. Any light we can get on ourselves is all to the good. These scientists are painfully amassing an organized body of information, at least as important perhaps as the information an artist must know, or a teacher, or a fisherman. They are valuable members of society, but only as long as they leave room for others who look at men with different and equally valid perspectives. Use them when they talk fact; beware of them when they say, "Here are the laws governing *all* human behavior," for then, by the premises of your education, they are wrong. They are lowering respect for the human spirit, unconfined in rules and laws.

More dangerous are those who act upon the conviction that men are cheap, cajoleable, manoeuvrable creatures who can be made to believe lies and like it. Hitler belonged to that crowd, clearly enough; much less clearly belong there also many, but not all, of modern advertisers. Advertising can corrupt both him who advertises and him who reads or listens to the radio, when it puts forth a half, or shall we say, a twentieth part of the truth as the whole. All of you have noticed the contrast between the tawdry human being as some advertisers who are winning the war see him, and the real human beings who are winning the war. That contrast worries the broadcasting companies, who twice recently, on days of national sorrow or rejoicing, drove the commercials from the air. Until advertisers become liberalized, beware of them. Acting upon a narrow, sordid and pitifully shallow concept of the human spirit, they betray it.

Also dangerous, and quite a different crowd, is that growing body of often otherwise intelligent people whose answer to the ills of the world is a heightening of their race prejudice. Looking for a scapegoat, they turn upon those whose color, heritage or faith differs from their own, and invent imaginary bogey-men to justify their vehemence. I doubt whether any of you can do much to halt the spread of this black cloud of prejudice that looms on our horizon and will damage us before it passes, but at least you can keep yourself, and perhaps some others, from adding to it.

I am well aware that in saying these things I trample upon a characteristic undergraduate belief — belief in one virtue only, that of tolerance. Maybe you differ from undergraduates of a few years back, who did deliberately exclude every virtue but that one. I remember a young

man so obsessed by the righteousness of his tag line, "If that's what he likes, it's OK by me," that he defended not merely departures from accepted patterns of decent behavior, like going to church without a shave or a collar, or telling low stories in mixed company, but selfishness, lynching, lying, murder, and the tactics of the late Hitler's elite guards. "It takes all sorts of people to make a world," he would say. That may sound like my procession of men and women, but it is not. There are some things not to be tolerated. Restrain your tolerance; be intolerant, bitterly and vehemently intolerant of anyone who decreases your respect for the human spirit. Liberalism and tolerance are far from being synonymous terms.

So much, then, for the negative sides of that suggested touchstone of mine, those ideas and people whom, in building your own life, you should rise above, master, use, and not be influenced by. You can add to the list; there are plenty of such ideas and people loose in the world. Now for a more positive application of the same basic principle.

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The liberal college believes in the amateur. In one of his books Maurice Baring describes an author who was condemning as amateurs all writers who wrote for the love of it and not for money. "But in that sense," remarked his friend, "God is an amateur." That is the meaning of the word, of course; an amateur acts for the love of it. I do not suggest that you should never do anything for money; this isn't that kind of a world. I do mean that the chief business of life is living. If every human being is as potentially many-sided as this extraordinary human personality seems to be, and if one attempts to cultivate all those sides, or even a few of them, the business is no inconsiderable one. No one can become a specialist in the art of living; it is a contradiction in terms.

You will find, I think, that keeping your amateur standing, by which I mean being more as a person than any particular thing you are doing at the moment, will not merely let you look back some time with satisfaction at your past, but will actually pay off. When you get home to your fathers and mothers, some of them will say, "What did you get out of college? What can you do?" Well, you can't do much, at the moment. You are going to have to learn to do something, run a family, become a nurse, go into business. And it will be hard to convince the old folks of the truth, that whatever you do learn to do you will do better because you are an amateur. Some of you girls, I hope, will become secretaries, who seem to me to run this country as much

as any single class of workers. The difference between the stenographer and the secretary is that one is a specialist, and that shorthand and type-writing are only two of the things the other knows. She knows all about her boss, all about all the things he is doing, a good deal about the people with whom he does business; she knows when to step in, and when to keep still; in time she comes to write most of his letters and all of his speeches, and so becomes indispensable. Don't glory in becoming a specialist; let whatever you specialize in be only one of the things you know. The English, by and large a liberally educated folk, are and always have been a nation of amateurs. The average well-educated Englishman can talk to you, in language which sometimes seems too deliberately simple, about a variety of subjects, in all of which he has a so-called specialist's knowledge. But he would never call himself a specialist; he remembers that the man is more than the specialty, that the moment he becomes and takes pride in being a specialist he ceases by so much to be a man.

When we pick a man for a big job, here as in England, we don't pick a specialist. There is no training-school for presidents, national, college, or corporation. We pick men whose horizons, we say, are broad, who can bring to any subject, however detailed, all kinds of knowledge and of understanding. No important job whatsoever but touches or should touch many fields; running a house and family is one of those jobs, and I don't believe a domestic science graduate who knows about calories and taking care of babies, and nothing else, can run a family successfully. You need to be an amateur to run a family well, as you need to be an amateur to run a state.

Don't let your specialism cramp your spirit. An old grad told me that he had remembered only one thing from his commencement address, and he had never ceased to be grateful for it: Get yourself a hobby. Well, that's another way of saying, Remain an amateur. The hobby is pure amateur; it keeps you from sinking deeper into the pit the specialists would dig for you.

I know it is a sort of heresy today to say that the amateur, in the sense I use the word, is more to be trusted than the professional specialist. Some people think a clinic the right approach to the world's ills, which are many and great. Get together all the specialists, they advise, let each of them submit his diagnosis and his proposals, evolve a masterplan and hold to it. The word "planning" has been taken over from one of those specialties, engineering. A bridge or a flood-control system cannot be built without planning, but a human society is not a bridge.

We are not dealing with measurable strains and stresses when we deal with men and women; we are dealing with the stuff of God, and no man, and no set of men can plan for a single individual, let alone a nation. It is blind and fatuous optimism, a defiance of history and of men, to think that if a group of specialists would only sit down and put their minds to a problem, it could be settled once and for all time. The amateur is no such day-dreamer. He knows that the magic formula, the masterplan which will air-condition human society and suspend it in rubber so that it will never shake or vibrate any more, does not exist, never has existed, never will exist. I say never; I should amend the word. It can exist, as we have seen in our own lifetime, under conditions which allow no freedom, under which your kind of education is blotted out. I don't want to be misunderstood. Planning of some sort is inevitable in the modern world; without planning we sink into chaos, with its help we may move into more ordered and more tranquil days. I don't mean that we should discard planning any more than we should discard specialists. I want only that you scrutinize all plans, including those you may make, with the eye of the amateur, that you follow them tenderly and not dogmatically, that you depart from them the moment the situation changes and they cease to fit, that any plan built upon the planner's preconceived theory of the nature of man you regard with extra suspicion, and that you not back any plan, however good it may sound, which involves unnecessary pushing about of human beings and depriving them of a free choice as citizens of a free society. Plan the environment, but let the people alone. Even tread gingerly in planning the environment. Perhaps the amateur has too many doubts about planning, but he has been often imposed upon. How, you ask, does the amateur solve a problem? He sits down, gets all the facts, summons all the specialists he can to get facts, sends them out for more facts, listens to their interpretations of the facts, looks at their plans, and then uses all his intelligence, all his understanding, all the wisdom he has about men and women to make the best settlement, in the light of everything he knows that he can. It won't be a perfect settlement; there is no such blessing in human affairs as a perfect settlement. But to the extent he has remembered the majesty and worth of the human spirit, it may last for a while.

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Now one final twist to my argument. In going over the list of prescribed subjects from which a speaker on this occasion can choose —

and believe me, they are all old and trite from over-use — I decided not to tell you, at length at any rate, that the world is tough. Who among us knows better than the young people how tough it is! It's tough partly because of the mistakes and ignorance of your elders, and partly because you happen to live in an era of immense and rapid change which has thus far had your elders stumped. When you get to be elders, you too will make mistakes, and your children will blame you. Even with the best will in the world, even from all available knowledge, you will still make mistakes. You won't be omniscient any more than my generation or the one before it. I hope that the mistakes of your generation will be only those of ignorance, that it will act without malice, will keep within the rule of law, and will be just—in other words, keep its respect for the spirit. Even in an orderly world — and the complete draft of the San Francisco conference in yesterday's papers really seems to represent a massive stone in the structure of international law which has been long a-building — the going will still be tough. A good friend of mine sometimes puts his faith in words like these: If you have stuck to your job — by which he means the amateur's job — you will get, by the time you are forty or fifty, about what you deserve. That is a mild version of the Bible text: Whatsoever a man soweth, that shall he also reap, which I have heard irreligious men call the greatest and truest verse in the Bible. In the long run, usually, a man gets what he aims for in this world; there is a kind of rough justice about it. If he aims for the wrong things, and works at it, he gets them, but will lose the right things. I have barely suggested this afternoon the content of the right things.

Now none of this is easy. You sold yourself when you entered a liberal college. You joined a minority. Of course you can relapse; lots of graduates do, and come to act in time as if they had never begun a liberal education. But if you don't want to relapse, want to continue that education, why then, let me assure you, it's a daily business. From now on you will have to set your own assignments, be your own markers. The government won't do it for you, nor anyone else. You may find it helps — and with this remark I am done — to say each morning some such words as Marcus Aurelius used to say: "I am arising to do the work of a man," a rational being, that is to say, a liberally educated being.