

## CONVOCATION ADDRESS

AUGUST 27, 1982

Professor Barney L. Jones

It is our great pleasure to welcome you, the class of 1986, and to thank you for your choice of Duke. While your education is not the sole purpose of the University, it is one of the principal reasons for our being. Without you and your commitment to learning, we would soon cease to exist.

For many of us, then, this is a day of days, perhaps the grandest day in the academic year. Why is this so? Because you are here at last and we are so very proud and glad that you have come. Your arrival makes this a University birthday. A new class is born, and this event alters our University family. To borrow a threadbare commercial slogan: We are new and improved. The Greek philosopher, Heraclitus, observed that you cannot step twice into the same river because other water is ever flowing down upon you. Since you are now come, the University is no longer the same. We are changed and renewed. And it is our earnest hope and expectation that we shall be a better and a more serviceable place because of you.

It is equally true that you will be changed -- probably are already changed by your Duke experience. The late Professor Walter Greene of our English Department was fond of telling his students, by way of hyperbole, that they could not pick up a stone and throw it across the road without shifting the balance of the universe. What he meant, obviously, is that whatever one experiences and learns, even in its smallest detail, shifts one's intellectual and moral center of gravity. The result: one is never again entirely the same. Hopefully, as a result of your Duke career, you will be a finer and more constructively useful person. There is then a fateful and formative covenant between us implicit in your choice of Duke and Duke's acceptance of you.

In the past several months you have been the recipients -- possibly the victims -- of Baccalaureate and Commencement addresses. It is obviously a matter of prudence and becoming modesty for the speaker on such occasions to acknowledge that his audience will not long remember who spoke or what was said. But, in point of fact, I have a vivid memory of the first days of my Duke career in September, 1938: who spoke and what was said at the first assembly. Alan K. Manchester made the address and spoke those memorable lines later erroneously attributed to me. "Look to the right of you. Look to the left of you. In four years, when your class graduates, one of you will not be present." (The attrition rate then being approximately one third). Those sobering and ominous words helped form within me a firm resolve to graduate with my class.

William Preston Few, the first President of Duke, was then in office, and was one of our earliest speakers. He had a well known idiosyncrasy of scratching his head while speaking. As I recall it, he was in the midst of a moral exhortation. "Men," he said, scratching his head, "if you lie down with dogs you are going to have fleas." I never knew whether he understood the roar of laughter that greeted his observation.

Shortly thereafter we heard from Malcom McDermot, Professor of Law at Duke. He read for us a passage from Genesis in the Bible concerning the Patriarch Abraham and his nephew, Lot. "Then Abraham said to Lot, 'Let there be no strife between you and me and between your herdsmen and my herdsmen: For we are kinsmen. Is not the whole land before you? Separate your self from me. If you take the left hand I will go to the right: or if you take the right hand, then I will go to the left.' And Lot lifted up his eyes and saw that the Jordan Valley was well watered everywhere like the garden of the Lord. So Lot chose for himself all of the Jordan Valley, and journeyed east: thus they separated from each other. Abraham dwelt in the land of Canaan, while Lot dwelt among the cities of the valley and pitched his tent toward Sodom. Now the men of Sodom were wicked, great sinners against the Lord."

Then, with great solemnity, Professor McDermot closed the book, leaned forward, and pointed a finger steadily at us. "Men" he said (there being no women at the time in Trinity College) "Men, Don't pitch your tent toward Sodom!" There was no mistaking his meaning.

As I look back upon it over the years, I can recall no feeling of being put off or offended by this obvious moralizing. It was evident from the start that the building of character was a prime objective of a Duke education. Clearly this was James B. Duke's intention when he composed guidelines for the operation of the University: "I request that this institution secure for its officers, trustees, and faculty [persons]...of...outstanding character...And that great care and discrimination be exercised in admitting as students only those whose previous record shows a character, determination and application evincing a wholesome and real ambition for life."

In the evolution of Duke, this commitment to the formation of character and zeal for corporate and personal honor must not flag. As never before, it needs to be established as the cornerstone of our on-going educational philosophy and operation.

Last spring, in an open letter to the Chronicle, President Sanford recalled remarks he made at commencement several years ago. He observed then that "Education at a major and significant university, no matter what heights of excellence are achieved, is incomplete if not braced by ethical and honorable behaviour. If there is not honor," he continued, "all the purposes of a liberal education are denied and abandoned."

At this juncture of our Duke history, there is no greater gift you women and men of the class of 86 can make than a sturdy commitment to the principle of honor in all aspects of your life here. Make no

mistake, this is a very practical, down-to-earth matter. Honor requires personal integrity not alone in academic honesty and truth speaking but in one's entire attitude and deportment: respect for the rights and property and feelings of others, responsible concern for the employees, the buildings and grounds, and the reputation of Duke, since this is now your home as it is ours. It assumes a personal behaviour that is above reproach. Thomas Jefferson put it crisply when he noted that no one can acquire honor by doing wrong. Your fate and the fate of Duke University are inextricably tied to our steadfast dedication to the timeless values of honor and moral character. What is left to us when these are lost?

We very much hope that Duke is really the place you want to be today, and that our acceptance of you was the fulfillment of your earnest desire. But given the quality of our pool of applicants, it is inevitable that some of you may have listed Duke as your second or even third choice of school and thus are a trifle let down about being here. And it is to be expected further that each one of you, however you may feel just now, will at some time in the future experience disappointment and frustration, and discover that Duke, as fine a place as it is, is not utopia. Probably the same must be said for any other college or university. But this is where you are now. However you may feel, and in whatever state of readiness you find yourself, the time has come now to set about your college career here. It is a wise student who has determined, whatever the circumstances, to make the most and best of his situation, to accept eagerly the challenges of the University, and to meet its difficulties with courage and cheerful determination.

Margaret Fuller, journalist, critic, social reformer, and editor of the transcendental journal, The Dial, once paid a visit to Thomas Carlyle and informed the notable English writer that she had decided to accept the universe. "Egads, woman," he replied, "you had better." In the future, without relinquishing your privilege of being a loving critic of Duke, do not waste time in fruitless lamentation over what lies beyond your capacity to remedy. Accept what cannot be changed and make the most of the precious moment at hand.

It has been my good fortune to share with many students a course in the Old Testament in which the book of Ecclesiastes is discovered to be a favorite. Its writer, a radical and unorthodox thinker, found that while all of life was vanity and a chasing after the wind, there was no point in crying over spilt milk. He would play the hand that was dealt him. Common sense dictated his advice: "Go to it then, eat your food and enjoy it, and drink your wine with a cheerful heart ... enjoy life with the woman you love all the days of your allotted span here under the sun ... whatever task lies to your hand, do it with all your might." While Ecclesiastes' outlook upon ultimate reality is certainly not my own, I find wisdom in his philosophy and on one occasion in particular did not scruple to use it in giving admonition to an eldest son, then about three years of age. We were at Virginia Beach on a blistering hot July day. The boy wanted an ice cream cone which I bought for him, and then he insisted on eating it at the waters' edge. My advice to enjoy the cone in the shade fell upon deaf ears. Under the scorching sun the ice cream melted in a stream down his arm. Only one thing flowed faster: his tears. My counsel to him came straight from Ecclesiastes: "Son, stop crying and start licking."

Much of the value of your Duke education depends upon your initiatives and your resourceful use of what the university has to offer. Freedom and responsibility of personal choice are hallmarks of the college experience. By themselves the minimum undergraduate requirements will not ensure that upon graduation you will be liberally educated, spiritually sensitive, morally sound, and physically fit. You must choose to be so. The bachelors degree does not guarantee that you will be possessed of a breadth of view and world perspective requisite for enlightened citizenship in the present age, nor will it signify necessarily that you are leaving Duke with a wholesome desire to be of the "Largest Permanent Service" to a troubled and threatened humanity. The achievement of these objectives is contingent upon your own determination and commitment.

What can be said with full confidence is that you are now surrounded on every side by all things requisite for a full and superior education. Since it is all within your reach, you have only to choose and to grasp: classroom, laboratory, library, art museum, theater, chapel, gymnasium, the gardens, the medical center, the phytotron. Water, water everywhere, but we do not make you drink. In the midst of an oasis of interesting, talented, fascinating people you may live as a hermit in a social desert withdrawn from a priceless source of learning, or you may gladly tread the forum and the busy market-place of knowledge and claim your rightful place in this community of scholars.

I have now waited to the end to draw my texts. They are two in number. The first is taken from a speech recalled from childhood, entitled "The Instrument and the Song," delivered by Rabbi Louis Mendosa of Norfolk, Virginia. Within it was a repetitive refrain: "The instrument is strung but the song that we have come to sing is left unsung." The instrument? All the knowledge, the resources, the personnel at our disposal to achieve an ideal social order, bright and beautiful, and blessed with peace and goodwill. But that goal as yet eludes our grasp. You are now beginning your college career and the educational instrument that is Duke is strung. We now await the song you have come to sing. The last text, similar to the first, comes from the New Testament, the Gospel of Luke. It is taken out of context to serve our present theme: "A man once gave a great banquet, and invited many. And at the time for the banquet he sent his servant to say to those who had been invited, Come; for all is now ready."

Once again let us thank you for coming to live and work among us. May God bless and prosper your way.

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