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Freshman Assembly Address, 1961

Rosemary Park

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President Park, Freshman Assembly, September 24, 1961

Address

I am very happy to add my welcome to Sandy's and express for the faculty and the staff of the College our very great pleasure that, in spite of all temptations to belong to other colleges, you decided to choose Connecticut College and make it your own. We think that you have made a wise choice, for many reasons. Some of these reasons are, of course, immediately apparent, like the beautiful sight of the campus, which you will grow to love as you know it through these years. Another reason might be the friendly atmosphere to which Sandy has already referred, and we hope that your welcome here will prove^{just}/to be ~~just~~ a sample of the good fellowship which is characteristic of the College. And we know, too, that as you begin to study here, you will have all the pleasures of real growth, the discovery of interest~~s~~ and capacities, possibly even a few blind spots, which you never suspected before; in short, you will learn to know more about yourself.

Now from some points of view, a college is a very strange place, strange because it brings together in one spot, in this instance in very beautiful surroundings, a group of young people of approximately the same age. You are separated from the political and economic problems of your time; you are removed from family pressures; you are even removed from the necessity to make provision for your daily needs for food or for shelter. And having isolated and protected you, we say to you, in effect, now grow up. Is this perhaps the wrong way--the wrong way to expect a person to grow up and become adult. Sometimes I think it is, especially when I have been on a tour of alumnae groups, for I hear

over and over again,"if only I had studied this, or learned that, in College, but I didn't know enough. If I could only go back, now that I am an adult, how much, how much it would all mean to me."

Well, even without that kind of testimony, perhaps it's illogical, illogical to expect a person to think, and to feel deeply, because that, I think, is a characteristic of a mature person, to expect such a person whose experience has been limited, who has seldom taken very much responsibility, who has not learned to know too much about the consequences of his or her action-- perhaps it's illogical to expect that such a person could become adult. It's easy, in other words, to agree that we do try to educate you at the wrong time, before you can understand and appreciate fully the adult materials which College spreads before you. Nevertheless, nevertheless it is strange that most civilizations do exactly this kind of thing, and they have been doing it right through history. The youth of the tribe are removed, and they learn the tribal customs in secret ceremonies, at a time when they can hardly comprehend why these ceremonies are any more than gestures, or why these rituals can become the cohesive force in a community without which there would be nothing but anarchy and isolation.

This persistent pattern of spreading before the young the most secret, the greatest thoughts and feelings of a civilization, before they can be fully grasped, this pattern, I think, would not continue if there were not something fundamentally sound in this strange and seemingly irrational arrangement. What justification is there for separating you off? I think we do it, and will probably

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continue to do it, because we want you to fully realize that you are becoming, that you are entering a new stage of life. Life, I think, is made up of stages, which merge one into the other, but the trick of it is to know when you have left one stage and are in another.

In the old days, before we had the automatic gear shift on our cars, you always knew when you went from one form or quality of motion into another; the shift required effort and judgment; but now only the most sensitive hand, or ear, can tell you when you have shifted your car from one gear to the other. Now life, I think, can be lived with either kind of gearshift. You can reach adult years with the attitudes of a child, and so you become boring and ridiculous, because you never realized the machine had shifted. Or, and I hope this is true of all of you, or you can live in full consciousness of childhood, of adolescence, of adulthood, maturity, and age. By removing you from the immediate pressures of life, we want to give you time to realize that you are now in a different stage, that you have shifted gears, that you have become an adult.

What, however,—what does it mean to become an adult? This we could talk a lot about, but I will hazard this definition: it means becoming responsible for your world, for the world of history, which you didn't make, and for the world of the future, which you will help to shape. This, I think, is the fate of human beings, that we stand between the past and the future. Now a college education offers you the tools with which to assume this kind of responsibility for your world. It offers

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you the possibility of learning the most essential aspects of this world as it now is. It's not just enough to have part of this world explained to you, as it might be if you stayed in your family circle, or if you continued in your home town, or among your young friends. There is too much to learn--there is too much to learn about this world for which you will soon be responsible to leave it to fortuitous contacts. The world is too complicated to depend upon unsystematic presentations. And so you need guidance. You need the help of people who have made it their business to understand, and to digest, some aspects of the multitude of facts and mysteries which make up the world as it now is. The faculty are anxious to give you the tools to come to grips ~~with this world~~ with this world of history. They will not, I think, be bothered much with trivialities; they will be concerned about general laws, about fundamental problems, about the most noble ^{expressions} ~~expressions~~ of human sentiment and aspiration, not those that are easiest to understand or most comforting. There is, after all, so short a time to make so much clear.

To grow up, then, as we hope you will here, you need, I think, to bring to this process of education two important qualities: The first is imagination, and the second is related to it--respect. Now I am not speaking here of such obvious qualities as industry and honesty. Those I think you have learned to know the merits of in your previous schooling. You know that you cannot progress, you cannot live up to the expectations of adulthood if you don't work; and neither can you have any regard for yourself, or enjoy the regard of others, if you cheat or lie.

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I don't care what you may have seen before, I don't care what you see in the world outside around you at the present time—a life that ~~relies~~ relies on lying and ~~chatting~~ cheating is rotten at the core, because it has not got the courage to face the world as it is. But this, I think, you know.

I am talking here of more subtle qualities. By imagination I mean the capacity to take seriously feelings and ideas you have never experienced yourself. I mean the ability to project yourself into the unknown, to refuse to be bound by one's own provinciality, by the limits of one's own physical existence. This quality of imagination is the most miraculous of all the human qualities. As you read those novels which we suggested to you, I wonder how your imagination worked. Did you say, "Well, this has nothing to do with me; these problems are none of my business." Or did you say to yourself, "Would I have said it so well; would I have had the courage to act; would I have believed as intensely as these men?"

With imagination, I think, you can realize the inestimable privilege of being inside another human being as he seeks for assurance and clarity in his life, as you will seek. Our friends in the military talk about a "dry run" and this is, I think, what imagination does for us. It gives us the possibility of living an experience we have not had, of setting up a hypothesis and then seriously drawing conclusions from it. There is no more precious, no more wonderful quality; it enables us to come to grips with the future in the present and to anticipate before we love and suffer.

And there is, then, a second quality which I hope you will bring to your education, and it is related to imagination: the quality of respect. I mean by that this: The best clue to the world of the future, which you will have to shape, the best clue to that world is the past.

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It is only a clue, nothing more. During the four years that you are studying here you will become acquainted with the inmost thoughts and feelings of men and women who have lived before you. You will see how they struggled for freedom. You will see how they sought justice, and how they tried to find meaning in the succession of their days, in the structures of their communities and their physical world. You, in this process of education, you are almost like gods with regard to these lives—you can trespass on them. You can trespass on them, and you know how it all came out. But the danger, the danger of such knowledge, is that you develop a kind of superiority, of superciliousness toward the past, which indeed no achievement of yours warrants. Only by virtue of time, not by virtue of your accomplishments, do you know more than these people about whom you study. And so I would urge you, remember this when you are about to finish off a man's life by saying, "Of course, he was just an old-line conservative," or "He was only a romantic poet", or "He was a second-rate composer." He may be, but he was always something more. To those who have lived before us, and to their works, we owe respect, whether we agree, or whether we understand, or not. And so I would say to you, take the material which College gives you to study—take that material seriously. It is the residue of much human life. By struggling with it—by struggling with it intensely, you will develop the imagination to form the future, and you will discover the standards to judge it by.

Now these are all serious thoughts. And why not? Because you are entering a new stage. And to really enjoy this new life, you must realize that you have shifted gears; the motion of your life will now have a different quality. Not only the motions, but the joys of this life are different from the pleasures of an adolescent, and the

horizons that are offered to you here are broader than even the most loving family could provide. So live this consciously. At times it may be serious, but I would remind you too, that only those who have their feet firmly planted on the ground can indulge in a truly hearty laugh. There will be so much pleasure, so much joy, so much to laugh about, and so many to laugh with, as your life becomes richer because it offers you responsibility. I return to this awesome word, but I assure you in the same breath that only the assumption of responsibility for yourself and for your world can give you the sense of freedom and of power which the true adult possesses. This is what we hope for you, this is what we hope you will learn with us, in the fellowship of all of us who have become today your ~~colleaguedanddd~~ colleagues and your College. Good luck.