

6-5-1966

48th Commencement Address

Kingman Brewster, Jr.
Yale University

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Recommended Citation

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The views expressed in this paper are solely those of the author.

Partial Text of Address by President Kingman Brewster, Jr., of Yale University,
at Commencement exercises of Connecticut College, New London, Conn., Sunday,
June 5, 1966.

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Now it would be easy to exploit my removal from my natural habitat to slander those students I know best. They are towering in their arrogance, overflowing with self pity, and above all see life as centered upon themselves. It is true, you know, yours does seem to me to be the most self analysing generation I have heard of. This may be the fundamental curse of existentialism. It is not the extension that is the trouble, it is the assumption that the great I AM is the be all and end all so that expression is all that matters.

But these are symptoms of two great changes--one internal, the other external. The internal is largely negative--the religious disinheritance. I speak of religion in both the literal and the figurative sense. The churchly gospel does not grip many of your future husbands even if their introspective ruminations are genuinely religious. But I would submit also that the gospel of wealth does not either--at least not with the unquestioned compulsion with which it gripped their fathers and grandfathers.

But this, in turn, is not just because of an inward looking skepticism. It is also a function of a wholly changed world, whose continuing change is unpredictable except in one aspect--its future will not return us to any past we have known.

We are entering a "post industrial" society--where the majority of the population will not be either proprietors or makers of things but will be managers and professional workers in a vast variety of service organizations. The private ones will be increasingly regulated. The public ones will be increasingly responsive to entrepreneurial initiative.

This society will not only be "post industrial" it will, I believe, give rise to a generation which is "post acquisitive." Now having invented my own jargon, it will take the rest of my remarks to explain it.

Remember I am talking to privileged girls about privileged men--not necessarily rich men, but men who are by definition privileged because they were admitted to Yale! Seriously, those who succeed in graduating from a college like Yale do not have to be motivated solely or primarily by the next meal ticket. This, I submit, is not because any ogre named Franklin D. Roosevelt was a traitor to his class or because a wild eyed intellectual named Maynard Keynes was trying to repeal human nature. It is, rather, because in this country there is today such an abundance of things and such a scarcity of skills that anyone talented enough to gain admission to a first rate college knows that if he puts his mind and muscle into it he is going to be able to earn a decent living at almost any useful calling he wants to pursue. So when I speak of the "post acquisitive" society, one of the things I mean is that for the privileged, purpose must be sought beyond and beneath the imperative of the "fair return."

So you see what you face. Bereft of both worldly and other-worldly salvation as their goal, your young men turn inward and the center of focus is themselves, whether the symptom is arrogance or self pity.

What an awful prospect.

But such is the nature of my position that I have boundless reservoirs of both wishful thinking and rationalization upon which to draw for sustenance. So I shall share them with you.

The doubt which has supplanted faith can, at its best, sharpen the view of the critic, toughen the mind of the skeptic, and liberate the heretic from dogma so that not only the true, but also the good and the beautiful have an excitement which only hard won discovery can reveal. There is always the risk of an arid nihilism, but the best of the lot are better for convictions and enthusiasms which have survived the test of doubt.

And even self doubt can, at its best, deepen the sense of fallibility which is the nucleus of humility. Tolerance, patience, and even justice may thrive only in those who know that they may be wrong. There is always the risk of getting into a state of absolute paralysis of decision which I would call "alternativism"--when you think everything is equal to its alternative. But the best of the self doubters will be wiser, more generous, more resilient because they are immune to the virus of insistent dogmatism.

So don't pine too hard and long for the man who is so sure that he knows what he wants that he doesn't stop to ask why. Doubt, too, is a privilege.

But patience without purpose is ultimately boredom.

Where is purpose if salvation is neither in faith nor in worldly success. You want your man to be successful. What does that mean if there is no aspiration?

My rose colored glasses detect some clues to an aspiration which is no less moral simply because it is often wholly secular.

Maybe aspiration is detected by signs of admiration, even more certainly by evidence of envy.

I think I see envy and admiration for the artist, the thinker of a new thought, the maker of a new thing, the organizer of new ways of putting people to work together. Maybe the calculated slovenliness of those beyond the fringe of decency indicates not so much rejection as a desperate effort to emulate the appearance of creativity.

The cultivation of the off beat is perhaps at least an accolade of admiration and envy to those who do have something genuinely new and untried to offer in art or thought or action.

And there is, too, a new cult of spokesmanship. Protest leadership dramatically, but also the desire to be heard concerning the things which affect you raises the visibility of the spokesman, the manifesto writer, the negotiator; also of the organizer of assembly, the purveyor of petition.

So how do you tell the difference between the real and the sham? Between the poseur who carefully cultivates his beard and his hairdo and the artist who is so involved in his vision that he is genuinely unmindful of appearances; between the intellectual huckster whose aim to shock attempts to parade as originality; between the exhibitionist and the highly motivated organizer of the voices of true grievance?

What is the common factor of admiration for and excited satisfaction with the real thing, whose contrast makes the sham so repulsive?

I submit that it is the motivation which is moral. What sanctifies the attempt and glorifies the result is a purpose to enlarge the capacity and opportunity of others. This is what the true artist does when he tries to add a new perspective to what the eye has ever seen before or what the ear has ever heard before. This is what the scientist does when he, by concept or experiment, broadens the non-contradictory explanation of man and the cosmos. This is what the administrator or organizer or spokesman does when he attempts to so order the work and energy of others that they accomplish more than they ever would have without him.

By this standard I can see ambition made moral and success recapturing its worthiness.

In the eyes of most of the young men of privilege of this generation the measure of the goodness of society is not going to turn on whether its means of material production are publicly or privately owned. Nor do I think that the greatness of a society in their eyes is going to be measured by its ability to lift everyone's standard of necessity to the level of luxury.

I think, rather, that it is going to turn on whether the society does or does not allocate its rewards in terms of who does most to enlarge the capacities and opportunities of their fellow men, and its penalties in terms of who restricts them.

I happen to think that a private enterprise economy and a federated republican form of government does better by this standard than any other form of society yet organized by man. But that is not the point. The point is that "divine right of business" and "founding fatherhood" are not adequate substitutes for asking and answering the question: does the person, the institution, the policy operate to restrict or to enlarge the capacities and opportunities of all men? Failure of business to make its case for a free market in these terms instead of in terms of productivity alone; failure of politicians to make their case in these terms instead of in terms of power alone--these, rather than hostility of business or disregard of official authority explain the skepticism of the snidely "cool" generation.

I am not suggesting that the generation of young men who will be your partners in the American inheritance are a band of prigs who will look upon their fellows with that glance of the friar who was walking down the cloister with his brother in the New Yorker cartoon and turned to him and said "but I am holier than thou."

I am saying that especially those who seem most bewildered by their disinheritance from both the worldly and other-worldly gospel of their fathers can be counted on to keep fair and accurate score by the standard of who does and who does not contribute to the capacity and opportunity of others.

That is, they can be counted on if, without nagging, you will hold them accountable to this standard yourselves.