

Spring 1932

14th Commencement Address

Florence E. Allen

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Judge Allen's Commencement Address

(reproduced from memory three weeks later)

Fashions change but essential moral truths do not change.

If one of the founders of our country, for instance, George Washington, or John Adams or Abigail Adams (for the women were just as important then as ever) were to appear on Fifth Avenue today, he might at first have some difficulty in even so simple a thing as crossing the street; he might not wait for the signal, he might try to walk on the red light; he would certainly be immensely astonished at the vehicles, but he would find no changes or improvements made on his ideas of honesty, justice, rightness; in short, his moral principles would be perfectly good today.

The underlying distinction of the United States Constitution, when this nation was founded, was that it turned away from the ancient idea of gov't and established an entirely new conception of the state. This new conception was that the state has a moral responsibility, that officials hold their offices in trust for the people, that governmental power is to be limited by ethical considerations. Not might, but right was the aim. A worthy aim then and a worthy aim now, for these essential bases are the things time with all its changes cannot change.

Young people need to be reminded of this fact because our outer life, our standards of living, means of transportation, etc., change so rapidly and completely that the superficial observer may naturally fall into the error of believing that the entire basis of life changes too. No other country ever has seen such thorough changes effected with such frequency as has our own. For instance when a child of 14 I rode with my father on the first interurban trolley-car making its first trip in a certain county of northern Ohio. I remember very well the excitement of that time. Within a very few years the entire state was a net-work of trolley lines, operating regularly, bringing the country districts into close connection with the cities, representing an immense capital and as it seemed, the height of efficiency in inter-urban

This was the state of affairs twenty-five years ago. But in that same county now you would look in vain for a trolley. The rolling stock has been scrapped, the tracks torn out, and everywhere is substituted travelling by motor. Such a transformation, in such a brief time, involving so great a loss and expense, is inconceivable in any country but our own.

But let us not be deceived, the basic rules of right living and right government are not changed. The qualities we need now in men and women are those possessed and prized by our grandfathers and grandmothers. You young woman may ask, before the colleges were open to her, before she possessed a vote, what chance did a woman have to display strength of character, to be a leader, to show her mettle, and to help her country? Let me answer by an illustration. a true story. Less than a hundred and fifty(?) years ago, a young woman in New York State was left by the death of her husband to provide for three children alone. Ohio was just then being opened up and the new country seemed to offer her the best opportunity. She invested the scanty property left by her husband in a wagon and a yoke of oxen, and started out to drive to Ohio. The way was long, the roads were next to impassable, and all conditions unbelievably hard. ~~Soon~~ But she kept on and soon the inevitable happened-- the oxen died. She was forced to abandon the wagon, and decided to continue the journey to Ohio on foot. Of the three children, one was a sturdy boy pretty well able to take care of himself. The next was a sickly girl of about eight, and the third was little more than a baby. She started out again carrying the baby with the other two walking, and again the inevitable happened. One day the sickly child fell down in the road and could walk no further. There they were-- far from a settlement and in an Indian country. What did this woman do? She laid the baby down by the side of the road, picked up the little girl, walked on a few rods. Then putting down the little girl she went back for the baby. And so going on and going back, going on and going back, she brought her family to Ohio. Courage and persistence, honesty and trust in God, these things she taught by precept and example to her descendants.

In many ways life seemed a more serious matter to earlier generations than it seems to young people of the present day, who have formed the habit

of driving about in high-powered motor cars, going to parties to which they have not been invited and not going where they have been invited, constantly familiar with violations of the prohibition law and reading in the papers of gangsters and kidnapers. Yet the present generation too is eager to be heroic, to serve the country's need. How can we best do it? they ask. Let them remember the old virtues, let them recall the conception of the state as possessed of a moral responsibility. Each citizen is a part of the state and on him and on her rests that responsibility. Is it not an indication of our deviation from this conception that today we fail to hold our public officials up to the same standard which we demand in private life; that we condone acts of government which we would not tolerate when done by individuals?

In other words, in practice we not only have not completely established justice through government but many of us have ceased even to maintain that aim for government. Great groups of Americans no longer look upon the establishment of justice as the main function of the state and this means that the great enterprise which is our noblest heritage has not captured our minds and hearts; that we do not understand and feel its significance enough to carry it forward to completion.

No code of laws is perfect and no one would claim perfection for the Constitution. The constitution in its attempt to guide and limit the action of government according to moral considerations was the greatest step which has ever been taken in the direction of establishing justice through national organization. Once the mind of the American people adopts as its political faith the constitutional principle that political action should be controlled and directed to the public good, we shall be in a position to invent effective machinery so that the greatest human powers shall not be exercised without consideration for justice, reasonableness and morality.

We need above all things a new definition of political power. We need new political prophets, who will teach us the faith of democracy; who will show us the meaning of constitutionalism; who will unite politics with morality and will define the true idea of liberty.

(quote poem)