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45th Commencement Address

Stewart Lee Udall

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Thank you very much Dr. Shain. I might say as an outdoorsman, and I hope some of you will join me in the thought, I was pleased when your President informed me that he thought maybe next year they'd try having the Commencement out-of-doors. I'm sure we're all going to concur with that before the morning's over. It is a real privilege and a pleasure to me to get acquainted with another of our fine colleges and to participate in these exercises today.

I heard an interesting story, the type of story that goes around in Washington. I think, I suspect, this was a satire on the Department of Defense because, you know, there are various categories of information, secret, top-secret, and then occasionally they will rush in with something which has Eyes Only on it, and I was told the other day that a minister now classifies his papers and addresses, and some are sacred and some are top-sacred. And I have chosen my own top-sacred subject which is expressed in the one word, Conservation. That is my text today, but after I put the text together coming down here, I got bold and decided with some trepidation that I would also try to say a few things about the place and role of women in the modern world, and I am going to make a few comments, as I say, with trepidation.

I gather from all that I read that one might say that there are two schools of thought about the role of women in modern society, one that holds that women should be right there along side men as movers and shapers in the world, and I happen to think that some of you here today, will perhaps be movers and shapers, that there is a place for you, those who want to do that. One of the things that gives me great hope and inspiration with regard to the conservation of our environment in this country, which I'm going to discuss, is the fact that a wispy little woman by the name of Rachel Carson has caused the nation to stop and think about what we are doing with our environment.

There are others, of course, the other school of thought who holds, and I am undertaking to say today that they are both right, that women in our society have a special opportunity and can make a special contribution to our life and to our society. And I should like to think that many of the things that I will call today the quality things of life, that the women in particular are the keepers of our sense of quality, and in another way the keepers of the creative spirit of our society, of what D. H. Lawrence once called "the delicate magic of life." This is a complex and confusing world today, and it is getting more complex and will get more confusing. It seems to me, also, that women in our society can be, and this is and should be a special role of theirs, a force for what I would choose to call simplicity. And if Bill Meredith will allow me I'd like to paraphrase a phrase of Robert Frost and say that I think more than anything else I can think of now, that there is a need of being versed in simple things.

Within the last seven months three great people in the world have died. I happen to know - to have the great fortune to have known - two of them fairly well - Eleanor Roosevelt, Robert Frost, and Pope John, only last week. Although they have many differences about them, they played very different roles in life, I would suggest to you that there was one thing that they shared in common, and this was perhaps the most precious gift of all that they had, and that was simplicity. Because each of them, if you will examine their lives, had a way, although they dealt with big ideas and with big affairs, of making complex things simple, of getting right to the heart of the matter and of seeing in small things universal truths. And therefore, I should like to suggest that it should be the task of all of us and particularly the women in a society such as ours to be the keepers of simplicity.

Henry Thoreau, a man from your neck of the woods up here, who died a hundred years ago, used to have a one word slogan that he tossed out from time to time, and it was sort of his creed and motto, "Simplify, simplify." And it seems to me in a world where quality is so often overwhelmed by the mass, where quantity sometimes seems to mean everything and where we seem to be in such a mad rush to get places and to do things and to build things oftentimes without thinking of how we do those things, that we need more than anything else in life, simplicity. And of course, the most creative work of all, that special work of education, of inspiring young children, is also the great task of the women in our society. And you graduates today face a question, as all of us do when we reach that point in our lives when we leave the halls of learning, what are we going to do, what shall we do with our knowledge, how do we put it to use? And of course, it seems to me that perhaps the best opportunity, or that the biggest challenge, rather, really lies ahead.

We had a visitor in Washington this week, Dr. Radhakrishnan, the President of India, a great scholar who somehow in that country got into a high political position. He has written many great things, and one of the things that he wrote I wanted to quote, because I thought it particularly appropriate when I read it earlier this week to a Commencement Exercise.

"Knowledge is not something to be packed away into some corner of our brain, but what enters into our being, colors our emotions, haunts our souls, and is as close to us as life itself, is the overmastering power which through the intellect molds the whole personality, trains the emotion, and disciplines the will."

And I am sure that you will find that the real test lies ahead in how you apply that knowledge and in how your learning continues.

And I would have only one further suggestion, the suggestion that wherever we go or wherever we walk in life, that we always leave room for the poetic side. I think this is one of the important things. Because poetry has life in it, and I told Bill Meredith this morning that I was going to illustrate that point by reading a little four line poem, called Bravado. You know who wrote it.

"Have I not walked without an upward look of caution
Under stars that very well might not have missed me
When they shot and fell.
It was a risk I had to take, and took."

But my broader subject that I have chosen today is an old and honorable one as I have indicated, is the subject of the conservation of our land and our resources, and of the relationship between this conservation and the conservation of man himself. Because we are finding, it seems to me, that what was once a simple subject, the subject of conservation, also like everything else, becoming increasingly complex. And the conservation of our land and resources has an intimate relationship to the conservation of man himself and to the quality of his life.

Dr. Albert Schweitzer, another great man still with us, who has this quality of simplicity, has a phrase by which he is known, "reverence for life." It seems to me, embodied in that concept is also what I would call reverence for the land. And I suspect that some of the reverence for the land that we once had in this country, we have lost, and we have lost it in part because we have lost touch with the land and with some of the important things about it. The American people have always had ambivalent feelings toward their land and their environment. We have on the one hand wanted to conquer nature, conquer a great virgin continent, and we did, But are we still trying to subjugate it today or are we part of it?

Never before has man been so at odds with his environment as we are today in America. This is an age of the scientific revolution, and most of what we see about us now is man-managed or man-built or man-directed, and the dilemma we face is how shall we use our land and its resources. And because so much of what is happening inside and outside of America is drowned out by the clamor of this fast moving world, this crisis of conservation is what I call a Quiet Crisis, but is one that will have, I suspect, an increasing impact on all of our lives, unless we confront it and what it holds. The elements of the Quiet Crisis of conservation today are poor urban planning, polluted air and water, the misuse of poisonous pesticides, disappearing open space, overcrowded parks and vanishing shore lines, the exploitation of the few remaining areas of our country's wilderness and wild areas, the threatened extinction of some species of wildlife, and dwindling opportunities for contacts with a life-promoting environment. Each element of itself represents, at this stage, no more than an inconvenience, a discomfort, a frustration. In fact in the past we have talked about these outdoor things, these things that concern the land as amenities, but it seems to many of us now that these amenities are becoming necessities.

The history of every civilization from the Byzantine Empire to the British is in large part the chronical of man's emotional and physical relationship to his land and through his land, to himself and his fellow citizens, and so it was and is with our own country. We found a virgin continent of awesome proportions with magnificent landscapes and seemingly inexhaustible natural resources. A good many of the finest qualities which make up our national character, it seems to me, came from testing ourselves against this rugged and demanding continent. But there has been since the time of Theodore

Roosevelt in this century, an evolution in the conservation movement, and if the forester and the reclamation engineer depicted the conservation effort at the turn of the century, and the TVA planner and the CCC tree planter typified the New Deal, the swift ascendancy of technology has made the scientists and their rockets and reactors the compelling symbol of the 60's. There is, of course, in this new hope, and there are new problems too. Because with the proper use of science we can even create, almost literally create, new resources, but unless we use the new powers we have wisely, we can also destroy much that has been priceless as part of our heritage.

For the first time in history a note of optimism pervades the reports of our resource experts. Conservation, we are told, is now largely a problem of efficient management, and most scarcities will be the result of poor planning or inadequate research. Aided by the men of science, in some resource sectors, we reversed our course, and we now produce more, waste less, and have found the foresight to make the needs of tomorrow an integral part of our computations. The result is that we will no longer be able to explain away our shortcomings by pleading ignorance or incapacity. We have the insight and the power to conserve, and the existence of areas of Quiet Crisis today indicts us, separately and collectively, for failure.

The level of military preparedness required by the cold war has necessarily made our total technological performance lopsided, and this is part of the problem. We are conquering outer space and neglecting the earth that is our home. An accelerated emphasis upon technology has widened the gulf between science and humanism and resulted in overemphasis on material accomplishments and the neglect of what one might call the science of human ecology. While we have solved problems in some resource areas, we have

created a crisis in others. We mastered the art of atomic fission two decades ago, and continuing revolution and research will enable us to desalt the seas, turn shale rocks into oil, breed energy from stones, but we may yet make a shambles of our common environment unless we act in time to save it.

The irony of our situation is that the Quiet Crisis in conservation of the 60's results, in part, from our very success as a nation. As science opens up new avenues of abundance and production, it also opens opportunities for exploitation, and the classic pattern of the past repeats itself. The modern land raiders, like their predecessors of the last century, insist always that the present is paramount and assert their freedom to misuse the land and to destroy common resources that all must share. And it is these common resources, the air, the water, that are now threatened most. The sad fact is that the Myth of Superabundance that misled the 19th century has been supplanted, in the 20th, by what might be called the Myth of Scientific Supremacy. We easily tolerate imbalance of land use and shrug off new forms of erosion, erosion of the common environment, the "let-science-fix-it-tomorrow" attitude. This is a rationalization, and I would suggest that it is as potentially destructive as the "rain-follows-the-plow" slogan that lured men out on the Great Plains, the men who made the Dust Bowl.

We can, if enough men and women really care, shape what Thomas Jefferson called the face and character of America by proper planning and proper action. The projects that will shape the world of tomorrow, the freeways, the urban renewal projects, the airports, the industrial parks, the new subdivisions need not be ugly or inhuman if enough people are ready to fight for harmony, and order, and beauty, are ready to demand creative planning by creative people.

The man-made part of our world can be a triumph of taste and artistry if, as Walter Gropius said recently, we "can find the right balance and coordination between the artist, the scientist and the businessman." Science has given us the orchestral instruments we need to play a heroic symphony. We can waste this gift on discordant solos, or if we are wise enough to let sensitive designers and the artistically gifted wield the baton, we can do a noble and enriching work in the recreation of the man-created part of our environment.

Each generation has its own rendezvous with the land. For despite our fee titles and claims of ownership, we are all brief tenants here. By choice or by default we will carve out a land legacy for our heirs. We can make mistakes that will cancel out our gains, or we can wisely create a world in which physical affluence and affluence of the spirit go hand in hand. Each of you must play a part, some at the center, some at the fringe in forging the decisions which will decide the future of our land, the face and character of America.

The individual is a "maximum leader" in our society, individuals such as those graduating here today. And the quiet men and women have an equal place in the sun with the public men under our system. Those of you who by instinct choose to play the quiet part have your philosopher in William James who wrote once:

"I am done with great things and big things, great institutions and big successes, and I am for those tiny, invisible, molecular, moral forces that work from individual to individual, creeping through the crannies of the world like so many soft rootlets, or like the capillary oozing of water, yet which, if you give them time, will rend the hardest monuments of men's pride."

And I should like to close my remarks today with something that I have written in an attempt to write down what I have called Notes on a Land Ethic for Tomorrow. Because it seems to me what we do with our land, what kind of country that we create, your generation and mine working together will depend in the main by the approach that we have to our land by our attitudes, by whether we can recreate a reverence for land and a reverence for life. Because the conservation concept as updated to today is ultimately something of the mind -- a search for balance and order, a never ending quest for a new sense of values, a striving for a land conscience that has meaning for the future. Our stewardship has faltered because we are less land conscious, and we are still misled by the seeming overabundance of some resources. The Pastoral American of a century ago (who was insensitive to some values), has been replaced by the Asphalt American of the 1960's (who is equally insensitive to others.) Our estrangement from our environment -- from our own "natural habitat"-- reflects our growing dependence on machines and our increasingly mechanized response to the world around us. If the slow swing of the seasons has lost its magic for some, and others have lost the path to the wellsprings of self-renewal, our personal stability is thereby undermined, and the durability of our society is weakened.

Men need in these times respect for the inner rhythm of life, need to march with a stride that conforms to the cadences of the earth itself. Modern life is confused by the growing imbalance between the works of man and the works of nature. Yesterday a neighbor was some one next door; today technology has obliterated old boundaries and our lives overlap and impinge in myriad ways on those of thousands of other men who will always remain strangers. An aircraft overhead, or an act of air or water pollution miles away, can

despoil or demean an environment that thousands must share. If we were to formulate a public conscience appropriate to our times, we might begin by redefining the term neighbor and by framing new concepts of neighborliness. One of the paradoxes of American life is that while the economic standard of living has reached new heights of affluence and our Gross National Product has become the envy of all, our environmental standard of living has visible worsened. We are better housed, better nourished, and better entertained, but mounting evidence indicates that we are not better prepared to inherit the earth or better equipped to carry on the pursuit of human happiness.

In Thoreau's time we were a land-conscious, outdoor people, the American face was weatherbeaten, and the skills we set store by were muscular skills, and we had daily contacts with the land itself. Now marvelous machines give us new comforts and an easy life, but we have acquired the weaknesses of an indoor nation and the short comings of a sedentary society. The land ethic for tomorrow should be as direct and simple as Thoreau's "Walden" and as comprehensive as the gentle science of ecology. It must seek always to appreciate the kinship of nature and have respect for the live-and-help-live logic of the great chain of life. If in our haste the economics of ecology-- and the legitimate demands of the future-- are ignored by our economists and our budget makers, the result will be an ugly America in which expedience ignores aesthetics, and decisions on "development" and "progress" (those words are in quotes), are made without regard for new ideas of neighborliness or the new essentials of a suitable land ethic.

If Henry David Thoreau were alive today, I think we can safely guess that he would scoff at the notion the Gross National Product should be the ultimate index to our advance, or that automobile sales or consumer consumption figures

are relevant to what he called "the narrow problems of living." He would surely assert that the remaining clean landscapes are as important as freeways, would scorn every planless conquest of the countryside, and would remind his countrymen that a glimpse of a grouse can be more inspiring than color television, or an encounter with a woodchuck more conducive to well-being than the most costly comforts. To those who complain of the complexity of modern life he might hark back to what he called once, "the higher Indian wisdom", and say, "if you want order and inner peace find it in solitude not speed-- and if you would find yourself, look to the land of which you are a part."

Our contract with nature is a bilateral one. Nature will produce cleanliness and freshness and order only if we are willing to keep our part of the bargain and perform those innumerable acts of stewardship that help to make America a more green and pleasant and productive land. We will also accord new importance to what we have mistakenly called the intangible things and recognize that some of the amenities are now necessities, and the intangibles are now for perceptive people, as tangible and vital as human assets. There is hope that many will aid the life process of self-renewal and be the true "planters" of progress, others can at least emulate the late Robert Frost, who in old age once told a friend that he no longer had time to plant trees or shrubs or grass, but followed the conservation philosophy he described as "Let grow."

The saving spirit of our time-- the best way to conserve man himself-- a common sense philosophy of let live and let grow, that respects the inner laws of life is surely one of the necessities of our time, but the signature that each generation affixes on the land, that your generation will also affix

will largely be determined by the land conscience and land ethic which we evolve. We need a conservation concept that will give full sway to the finest and highest human impulses, will make visible our love for the land and declare our respect for the rights of the unborn.

Thank you very much.