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President Shain's 47th Commencement Address

Charles E. Shain

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CHARGE TO SENIORS *from Pres. Shain*

This is one of those pleasant and important moments in your life and the life of this College in which one would like to ask time to stand still. You, the largest class in the College history, are graduating today under the eyes of your families, the College Faculty and Trustees, and also under an aspect of eternity. One would like to take advantage of the ideality of the moment, as a philosopher would put it, and say certain important things.

I would like first to make this brief statement on the education of modern women - you. Women's after college lives today are now assumed to involve almost inevitably a combination of home-making and salary earning. Such a life might be described as a life unfavorable to mental concentration. If this is true, then what an intelligent modern woman does not need is an education on finishing school principles, at Readers Digest level. Rather, it would seem that just to survive she needs especially the power to direct an effort of concentrated thought on a subject that is not immediately entertaining. I am going to suggest now that your faculty, who sits next to you today, has had this in mind for you all along. The fact that they had, and the fact that this matter was perhaps not always clear between you was nicely illustrated recently by a statement from a Connecticut College graduate of the early 50's who has just published a successful novel. "I loved Connecticut," she writes, "for many reasons, but I must give it credit specifically for what has turned out to be most important in my own work: an acceptance of discipline. Oddly enough, this turns out to be the by-product of what I liked least at school: long term papers on "narrow" subjects, with the certainty of severe heartless criticism at the end! Such endless effort! Such grudging praise! All very useful."

(I understand that the English Department intends to have these words carved in oak and hung over the entrance to Thames Hall.)

The second comment that I would like to make is this. Your college generation has been enormously talked about and written about. You seem to have earned this public importance by virtue of some peculiarity of your collective personality. As a generation, not as individuals, you have expressed in many ways an admirable obligation toward improving the moral level of our American society. At the same time you have become famous for urging the claims of your private worlds against the advice - even the curiosity - of parents and college deans.

You are hung up, as you would say, on a paradox, new to you personally, perhaps, but not to the human race. Your college education may lead you to look for a way out in this direction. The moral history of man which you read at Connecticut College seems to me to say quite clearly that we must not set up an ideal spiritual condition for ourselves and then try to imagine, or even to create, a society to express this unique condition. Ideals grow out of the act of living and the logic of life. Then, as our ideals grow, they modify the way we live. Loyalty to a private world, considered somehow to be purer than our everyday world, often contributes to a defective sense of reality.

You Seniors have just passed through a state of dialectic - as you philosophy majors would say - a process of logical argument, between you and Connecticut College. Your diplomas in your laps, prove that in one sense you have won. I hope that in another sense the game has ended in a draw, that we will always be in touch with you, and that the noble argument - your continuing education - will always pull your minds and your hearts back to this campus.