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President Shain's 55th Commencement Address

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Charge to Seniors

This will be brief. We have had a long ceremony.

To the Class of '73

You are especially the class that felt the campus political tumult of the '60's and you now have suddenly declined, according to some commentators, into a premature, bland middle age. The campus radicalism that many of us shared with you during your Freshman and Sophomore years turned out to be a temporary American phenomenon. You were here during a rare moment in American campus history. Today, if you are tempted to look back with condescension on your activist youth, I hope it will not be in the spirit of William Buckley, who as I remember, said at that time that he would rather place our country in the hands of the first 100 names in the Boston telephone directory than in the hands of the Harvard faculty. I recommend a gentler piece of condescension, now over 100 years old: Oxford, some early Victorian said, that home of lost causes.

That puts the melancholy accent where it should be. A college must be a home of causes, lost, erratic or just premature. A few weeks ago the national convention of the American Association of University Professors in St. Louis went even further. They took notice that all persons in high office allegedly involved in the Watergate affair were college graduates and in a resolution they said they "grieved" along with all professors across the land "that we failed in not keeping them to overcome their character defects and asocial and larcenous propensities while they were in our tutelage."

If Huck Finn had floated past St. Louis at that moment and heard that statement, I think he would have called it a bit of a "stretcher."

The moral responsibility of any college; the moral influence of this college on you, is a question I invite you to ponder as you leave. I hope we could agree that there have been centers of moral authority here. Moral questions were certainly asked in our classrooms, if not, perhaps, answered to your satisfaction. Sizeable temptations for personal corruption - bless those St. Louis professors - were probably not present here. I once made up a college moral dialogue for my own amusement. The end of it went this way, "Father, what is an academic question?" "My child, in America an academic question is a question with no money behind it."

I suppose a college teaches morality most effectively as most families do, by setting a tone, by helping the growth of your moral imagination by providing models and illustrations. I hope you found here morally sensitive men and women, both among the best of your contemporaries and among your seniors and that these people stirred your own powers of imitation and moral achievement. I hope as you leave today some of these people, some part of this college's moral history, will have your respect and remembrance. I believe sources of moral perception and direction will be here when you return and when later students of this college sit where you are sitting now.

Congratulations to all of you . . . Goodbye and Good luck.

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