

"OUR WIDENING LIFE"

Address

by

HONORABLE HOMER CUMMINGS

C. C.

Attorney General of the United States

Delivered at

OGLETHORPE UNIVERSITY

Georgia.

May 27, 1934.

PRESIDENT JACOBS, MEMBERS AND FRIENDS OF OGLETHORPE UNIVERSITY:

I am profoundly grateful for the distinguished honor which has been conferred upon me. The occasion stirs mingled feelings of happiness and, may I say, humility. It is, of course, deeply pleasing to receive such generous recognition, but, at the same time, I am made humble by the realization of my limited claim to join that gallant company, which includes two great Presidents of the United States, Woodrow Wilson and Franklin D. Roosevelt, who have received honorary degrees from Oglethorpe University since her rebirth eighteen years ago.

I extend to you, my fellow members of the class of 1934, my sincere congratulations upon the successful culmination of your undergraduate labors. It is a high privilege to become a member of the alumni of this fine university, and I know that you cherish for your Alma Mater a deep and abiding affection. In your heart of hearts, when you think of her honorable history, her period of unhappy adversity, her restoration to a vital and useful life, surely you instinctively feel that; "By the Hand of God She Has Risen From the Dead".

As you leave the classroom and stand upon the threshold of adult responsibility, I am confident that the questions which are uppermost in your minds have to do with the opportunities for self-expression and worthwhile living that await you in the world of practical affairs.

There may be those among you who are inclined to view with some degree of apprehension the necessity of leaving the fruitful college years and of becoming involved in the sharp encounters of modern business or

professional life. It is difficult, perhaps, to avoid a certain vague and disquieting fear that the complexities and limitations of present-day civilization have lessened the opportunities for individual achievement which, in earlier years, seems so readily available to the college graduate. I can well understand that feeling as I compare the conditions of today with those that existed, let us say, in 1890.

At that time, life in the United States was expressed in relatively simple terms. In many parts of the country pioneer conditions still prevailed. The famous massacre of General Custer and his men by the Sioux Indians on the Little Big Horn had occurred only fourteen years before; and the celebrated and much feared Geronimo, under whose leadership the Apaches ravaged large sections in the Southwest, was a public menace for a decade longer.

The great western railroads, the Northern Pacific, the Southern Pacific and the Santa Fe, which opened up to civilization tremendous areas in the West, had been in operation but a few years; and the Great Northern had not yet been completed. A vast territory, recently the habitat of the Indian and the buffalo, where land could be acquired from the Government without cost or purchased at an insignificant price, was thus made available to those who felt the need of wider horizons. Boom towns, which were soon to become cities, dotted the map of the West, where the young lawyer or doctor could, by himself, begin his professional life and grow up with the country.

In the East, the era of industrialization and mass production was just commencing. New frontiers in business were being explored and

constantly widening fields of activity were being developed. The attitude of the Government toward business and industry was that of laissez faire. In fact, except for the governmental regulation of railroads, which was in its early stages, the entire business field was practically free of interference from the Federal and State Governments.

An idea of the comparative simplicity in which life went on can be obtained if you reflect that the first automobile had not yet put in its appearance; the first aeroplane flight had not been made; motion pictures were unknown; wireless telegraphy had not been invented; the radio was but a dream; the erection of a nine-story building in an American city exerted a powerful influence upon architectural trends; the population of the United States was only 63,000,000 people, of which number 65 per cent. lived in the rural districts; only eleven cities in the United States had as many as 250,000 inhabitants; there was only 1 telephone for every 278 persons in the country; and the electric utility industry had been begun only eight years before, when Edison established the first central electric station in the world in New York City, with a few score customers in an area of twelve city blocks.

The college graduate of today emerges into a far different world. The pioneer West, with its vast expanse of uninhabited territory, is a thing of the past. Concrete highways, filled with traffic, wind their way across what was, in 1890, open country. The roaring boom towns are now thriving cities, with the business and social conservatism that is a product of urban maturity. The population of the country has doubled since the 1890 census. The number of our cities with a population in excess of

250,000 has increased from 11 to 37; and the percentage of our people who live in urban centers has increased from 35 per cent. to 56 per cent. Nine-story buildings are found in almost every small town, and our tallest structure at the present time soars to a height of 1248 feet. In our large cities the apartment house has, to a large extent, taken the place of the friendly house and lot. Twenty million telephones keep us in touch with each other at all hours of the day and night. Swift passenger planes wing their way across the continent on definite schedules, making it possible to travel from the Atlantic to the Pacific in less than a day. The radio takes into millions of homes the news of current events almost simultaneously with their happening, and when the President of the United States speaks, the whole country listens.

The simple industrial units - the individual enterprise and the partnership - which were characteristic of our business life a generation ago have been largely displaced by corporations, wherein hundreds or even many thousands, of owners pool their resources to carry on undertakings of common advantage. Today the Federal, State and local Governments, through the enactment of voluminous legislation and the establishment of countless administrative agencies, regulate almost every phase of human activity.

Manifestly, the young person of today does not enjoy the opportunities that were formerly available to strike out for himself in the world of practical affairs. The average young man or woman who now enters the business field must secure a position with some well established concern. The professional man or woman, at the outset of a career, seeks a connection with a firm which has already built up its reputation and acquired a

clientele. Even the young man who chooses agriculture as his life work must begin on the farm of another, since the free land of an earlier day has disappeared.

The increasing complexities of our civilization compel us to live a social existence, and, if we are to have peace and harmony, the unregulated independence of the individual must, to a certain extent, be curtailed in order that the welfare of the group may be preserved. A simple illustration will suffice. The man who drove his horse and buggy down Peachtree Street fifty years ago could drive in almost any manner that suited his fancy. The person who today drives his automobile along Peachtree Street, through Five Points, must be constantly on the alert in order that his activities shall not be a menace to the safety of himself or to others. Furthermore, the manner in which he proceeds must conform strictly to traffic regulations which control every stage of his progress. Similar illustrations, dealing with matters affecting health, taxation, occupational requirements and, indeed, almost every phase of life where public interests are involved, could be multiplied indefinitely.

Why is it that in our civilization today the individual is so much more the subject of regulation and supervision than in the past? Is it because of a shift in our fundamental political philosophy? I hardly think so. We believe in the essential freedom for the individual as firmly as ever. At the same time, it is obvious to us that we cannot live a group life without order. Implicit in the fact of an increase in the complexity of our civilization is a corresponding increase in the extent to which the individual is regulated for the general good.

Nevertheless, I am convinced that the opportunities for self-expression, and for worthwhile living, are more abundant than ever before.

Fundamentally, the same traits of character and personality that commanded material rewards a half century ago are essential to success in the commercial and professional affairs of today. In our abstract thinking we are apt to regard corporate enterprises as mechanical organizations wherein the individual must submerge his personality and subordinate himself to a machine. This conception is largely erroneous. A corporation is but an aggregation of individuals who have united for the purpose of carrying on a common enterprise. The young man or woman who enters one of these organizations as an employee or associate must, in his or her contacts with the organization itself and with the public, deal with people, just as the young person who embarked upon an individual enterprise fifty years ago had to deal with people.

This is equally true of professional life. The large law office is but a community of individuals, whose professional dealings are with individuals, be they clients, judges or juries.

We still live in a world of men and women. Probity of character and vigor of personality, now and always, are of prime importance.

The present era, though complex and one of group living, does not demand of the individual that he submerge his personality or surrender his identity. It requires, however, that he, in a spirit of cooperation, curb those personal desires and tendencies which violate the rights and privileges of the social order of which he is a part. In the chorus of modern life the individual may sing as lustily as ever, but he is expected to avoid discordant notes and to contribute his part to the harmony of the whole choir. Moreover, an intelligent conformity to regulations designed to further the interests of the whole body of our society presupposes a

self motivated individuality. The most valuable member of the football eleven is not the eccentric player who runs amuck, no matter how brilliant the performance may be, but the one who by training, intelligence and co-operative effort most effectually promotes the common purpose.

Some philosopher, though perhaps not an entirely sound one, has said that the expression of personality consists of the exercise of the will in order to accomplish a visualized purpose. True, life is complex and certain limitations of individual conduct are inevitable, but, after all, cooperation has created a larger liberty; and fresh opportunities for self-expression and worthy ambition have been amazingly multiplied. The history of mankind has been marked by a continual adaptation of the individual to changing environment. The intelligent person of today adapts himself willingly and consciously to the conditions of modern life with their insistent demands for a more cooperative social order. In this fashion the common way of living is being constantly enriched and enlarged. Imprisoned values have been released to bless mankind, and life itself has become more abundant. If you will but consider civilization in realistic terms, you will easily see that the man of today can use his will just as effectively as ever and, at the same time, can employ his powers in the infinitely wider fields which social development and civic advance have created.

I firmly believe that the days to come will be greater and far better than we have ever known. This is not the mere casual expression of an amiable optimism; it is a settled and abiding conviction. Its corollary is, that the individual, now as always the unit of society, will have opportunities for a more complete existence, a deeper satisfaction in living, a wider field for self-expression, and a closer approach to the essential beauties of life, than were dreamed of even faintly in the days gone by.