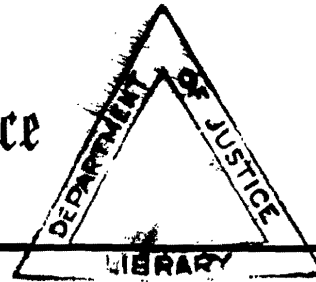




Department of Justice

REFERENCE



ADDRESS

BY

HONORABLE ROBERT F. KENNEDY
ATTORNEY GENERAL OF THE UNITED STATES

at the
COMMENCEMENT EXERCISES
TRINITY COLLEGE

WASHINGTON, D. C.

June 2, 1963

Your Excellency Archbishop O'Boyle, Sister Margaret, Reverend Clergy, distinguished guests, and members of the graduating class:

I consider it a great honor to take part in this ceremony -- to be associated however briefly, with one of the finest liberal arts colleges in America -- and I must add too that I find it a great pleasure.

The last three formal speeches I've made were to a group of industrialists, a chamber of commerce, and a gathering of labor officials, in that order.

Those three audiences had little in common except for the one homely fact that they were all male -- and I can't begin to tell you what a refreshing change it is for me to stand here today.

Remembering my own graduation from college (which, people keep reminding me, wasn't really so very long ago), I think I can imagine something of what you feel this afternoon.

For most of you, I would guess that the main significance of this day is that it marks an ending -- the culmination of four unique and memorable years -- and that like most endings it is touched with sadness.

But our ceremony, after all, is called commencement. And what commences today, for each of you, is membership in the most vital segment of this country's population -- that scant nine percent of American adults who have received and mastered a higher education.

I suspect there may always be arguments about what constitutes a higher education, but wise men through the ages have at least been able to agree on its purpose.

Its purpose is not only to discipline and instruct, but above all to free the mind -- to free it from the darkness, the narrowness, the groundless fears and self-defeating passions of ignorance.

And so perhaps it's not too much to say that what we are celebrating here today is the liberation, the setting free of your minds.

From now on you have earned the right to do your own learning, to develop your own insights and draw your own conclusions, to conduct your own explorations in the life you find around you. Your minds have been freed.

You may sometimes regret it, for a free mind insists on seeking out reality, and reality is often a far more painful matter than the soft and comfortable illusions of the intellectually poor;

But your regret will be nothing compared with your advantage -- the measureless advantage you will always have over the vast majority of human beings on this earth.

In the light of a truly freed mind no prejudice can disguise itself as zeal, no bullying can masquerade as leadership, no pettiness can pose as importance.

The freed mind will never confuse a sentimentality with a true emotion, an act of violence with an act of heroism, a slogan with a cause.

Men and women with freed minds may often be mistaken, but they are seldom fooled. They may be influenced, but they can't be intimidated. They may be perplexed, but they will never be lost.

Granting that you have won this freedom of mind, and that you have the courage to accept it, there follows next an almost automatic question.

How are you going to use it? What are you -- and I mean each of you, as individuals -- what are you going to do with this hard-earned and priceless power?

It seems to me that three choices lie before you.

You can simply keep it, savor it, and never use it in any but an occasional negative or critical way -- and this can only be considered a terrible waste.

Second, you can use only that small portion of it that may serve to advance your own status in the economic and social scales -- but to do this would clearly betray your failure to grasp the distinction between education and training.

Your third choice is to use your mind to the full, for the benefit of others as well as yourself -- to take an active, creative part in the community, the nation and the world you live in.

And that, it seems to me, is not merely the best of the three alternatives but the only one worth considering.

This nation today needs all the freed minds it can muster, in order to meet the challenge posed by the infinite complexity of problems both at home and abroad, to pit our intellectual strength against the insidious menace of an enemy that goes by many names:

Discrimination; hunger; disease; ignorance; economic oppression, and political tyranny.

The current crisis in civil rights for example, is not something that can be solved by Governmental edict. It is an intensely human problem, and its ultimate solution will rest in the ability of men and women everywhere to recognize and follow their own best instincts.

They will need guidance in this quest for right as opposed to wrong -- for vision as opposed to blindness, for reason as opposed to hysteria. Our answer to the extremists must be to move quickly in establishing those reforms which all of us know in our hearts, should have been made long ago.

And you, enlightened by your religious and liberal education, will be among those expected to provide the necessary leadership.

The Negro's struggle for equality, for all its urgency, is by no means the only pressing social problem within our shores. We think of ourselves as a rich country, yet the spectre of poverty hangs over many hundreds of thousands of Americans.

I wonder how many of you are aware of this fact: nearly twenty-one percent of American families -- not individuals, but whole families -- are living on total annual income of less than the amount of a single year's tuition and board at this college.

Conditions among the American Indians, seldom publicized, are so poor that I could devote the rest of my talk to them alone, but I'll settle for two statistics.

The infant mortality rate among Indians is nearly twice that of any other racial group in the country; and their overall life expectancy is twenty years less.

And here is another alarming truth about the United States today: one out of every eight Americans is either mentally ill or mentally retarded, and present facilities for their treatment and care are sadly inadequate.

None of these problems is the business of government alone, or of any specialized organization. They are your business, all of them; and by you I mean every one of you, personally -- especially you whose minds have been freed.

I would remind you of your own Sister Margaret's words, in that inspiring talk she gave last month, when she called on all of us to "show in our deeds what we say in our words," and when she pointed out that "a deep and genuine concern for our fellow men is not proven by the regular contribution of tax-deductible sums to our favorite charities."

The challenge is there to be met; the only remaining question is that of how you, as individuals, will be able to meet it -- and this of course depends to a great extent on what your immediate plans are after leaving college.

A recent survey shows that some sixty-two percent of women college seniors in this country plan to take up some serious profession or employment before marriage, while the remaining thirty-eight percent look forward to early marriage as a career in itself. These figures may not apply to this graduating class, but, in any case, I would like to address my next few remarks to each group starting with those of you -- the majority, I assume -- who now plan active working lives.

Of all the occupations you may follow perhaps you can best meet the challenge in the field of education. Present estimates show that within the next ten years we will need no less than thirty percent more teachers than we are presently producing, if our educational system is to survive.

Perhaps you can best serve by taking an active part in your government, or in its agencies -- the enormously productive Peace Corps, for example, or the hopefully soon-to-be-established Domestic Service Corps Organization.

Perhaps you will find your place in medicine. Over the next decade, the physical and mental health of our nation will demand as many as half a million more doctors and nurses than we now have.

Your range of service might lie in the ever expanding physical sciences, or in the social sciences, or in economics, or in the law, or in the arts. The choice is yours, to be made according to your own skills and inclinations.

But any responsible use of your freed mind will demand that the choice be made -- and that it be made for reasons greater than mere convenience or personal gain.

And now I would like to talk to that other, presumably smaller group of you -- those who will be going straight from college into married life.

You have, of course, my blessing. But I'm afraid I must add that you also have my concern. The classic role of wife and mother as just a wife and mother is something that belongs, I believe, to simpler times than ours -- and to simpler minds than yours.

The bland gospel of "togetherness," so sweetly and solemnly spread by merchants over the mass media of this country, can no longer be dismissed as a minor irritant in our popular culture.

It has come to reflect a real and present danger: a growing concept of ideal family life as containment within an air-tight capsule of coziness and consumership, a bright plastic bastion from which all the range and clamor of the world is shut out -- from which reality itself is forever held at bay.

Don't -- as those other frightening advertisements used to say -- don't let this happen to you.

Consider it imperative, for your own and your husband's and above all your children's sake, as well as the sake of your countrymen, that you continue to make full and generous use of the mind your education has set free.

If only with part of your time and only in the region of your own community, you may find yourself able to work effectively against the forces of darkness around you.

Your opportunities are unlimited, for volunteer works are urgently needed for a multitude of programs in depressed areas all over the nation.

Right here in Washington, for instance -- and mind you, this is only one of hundreds of cities -- there are many humane projects whose need for volunteer help is enormous.

To cite only several examples:

Washington Action For Youth, an organization established with funds from the President's Committee on Juvenile Delinquency, is now engaged in a broad program to help overcome the years of neglect that have allowed our capital to reach a crisis point in family deprivation and adolescent unrest.

But hundreds of volunteer workers will soon be needed if the efforts of this group are to succeed.

The Urban League has launched an educational drive that calls for an unlimited number of volunteers to teach at school remedial centers, helping children who are falling behind in their work.

The Urban Service Corps, both in its own remedial teaching project and in its widening horizons program this summer, will also need substantial volunteer help.

So will the area "P" crash program of the Junior Chamber of Commerce, in its counselling work with potential high school drop-outs; and every settlement house in the city urgently requires volunteers to work directly with underprivileged children.

These are only a few of the agencies dealing with problems in Washington alone.

The same story can be told of conditions in almost every other city in America -- wherever you live, you must face the fact that your home will be surrounded by a crying need for help -- your help -- in as many ways as there are kinds of oppression and poverty and pain.

If family circumstances do prevent you from taking an active part in the human struggle beyond your doorstep, in your town, your country and the world, then at the very least you can -- and seems to me that you must -- take an active interest.

This college, and this nation, have every right to expect that much of you. And you, with your freed mind, have no excuse but to expect that much of yourself.

I am sure that all of you, liberally educated as you are, need not be told that we live in a perilous, exciting, potentially disastrous and yet also potentially the best of times.

And I need scarcely remind you that your generation will have plenty to worry about -- more, perhaps, than any other in history. My message here is simply that there can be no allowance for your complacency in the days and years ahead, and there will be every reason and every need for your intense, personal involvement.

As people with free minds in a free society, we have literally everything to live for.

And, as we use our faculties to the maximum, as we apply ourselves fully to do God's work we have nothing to be afraid of.

Good Luck! And may God be with you all.

Thank you.