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"THE WISDOM OF THE YOUNG"

Commencement Day Address

by

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Much of life is thought of in terms of special days; our own birthdays, for example, celebrated in childhood with laughter, in youth with pride, in middle life with mild misgivings, and in later maturity, if we have ripened well, with understanding and satisfaction, tinged with the sadness of the swift passing of this miraculous experience called life. There are days commemorative of events, or of ideas or principles, and of the men who have given them expression: Columbus Day, dedicated to the discovery of a continent and the courage of the voyager; Independence Day, in honor of the birth of a great nation, and of the ideals of its Government; the birthdays of Washington and Lincoln, in memory of their enobling lives and their imperishable services to mankind; Labor Day, dedicated to the simple dignity of toil; and Decoration Day, consecrated to the heroic dead.

To this list of anniversaries of capital importance in the life of the nation might well be added another day, Commencement Day, dedicated to an event of signal importance, the going forth into active affairs of young men and women, emboldened and sustained by the qualities of youth, who, shortly, will be bearing the burdens of family, business, professional and public life. If there were not this day and these renewing qualities of youth, the nation could not survive.

And how essential are the attributes of youth: health, strength, energy, activity, confidence, ambition, adaptability, capacity for growth, hope, aspiration; and a certain divine recklessness in preferring to trust insurgent life and its shifting requirements rather than the teachings of experience. Education, in part at least, is aimed at giving to the oncoming

generation the benefit of accumulated experience - a sort of condensed, pre-digested wisdom - but youth is inclined to resist it, or, at least, to question it. It may be something of a paradox to suggest that the teachings of previous generations should be honored in both the breach and the observance, if the world is to be well-ordered without becoming static. Such admonitions, of course, must be honored in the observance if we are to preserve the good, but they must also be honored in the breach if we are to discern and discard the evil.

I suspect, however, that this present generation of graduates is a little less reckless, a little more wise, than is usual. Wisdom is supposed to be the attribute of age, but it is not so in any arbitrary sense, but only because age presupposes time, and time experience, and experience, in turn, wisdom. But not all learn from experience, however old; and some who are young learn quickly. Relatively speaking our President is a young man, and, also, a very wise man. You, my friends of the graduating class, are young, and yet I am inclined to believe that you are wise beyond your years. Far more than any recent generation of college graduates, you are experienced, as citizens and as individuals, in privations and in the follies of recklessness.

You live in, and you are citizens of, a country that, like you, is young - young in years compared with the nations of the Old World, and young in qualities. In its vast extent, in its variety and wealth of natural resources, in its facilities for converting and distributing these resources to human account, it has the strength of youth. In the activity, self-

confidence, ambition, adaptability, capacity for growth, hope and aspiration of its people it has the revivifying qualities and boundless energy of youth; but it has, too, the recklessness of inexperience, as we have learned to our cost in the years since the World War. Careless of moral values and business prudence, it flung itself into an orgy of ill-ordered production, and unwise spending, of sheer business libertinism and almost universal gambling. And it paid the price. Its youthful zest departed, its glowing qualities were tarnished; and the creeping paralysis of stagnation threatened to make an old nation of one of the youngest. The turning of its resources to human account largely ceased; millions were in idleness, and in the hearts of the people there was dark despair. Although, my friends, you did not create this condition, nevertheless you endured it. You experienced it not only as the pathologist observes the phenomena of sickness and thus learns the law of their happening, but, also, as the patient himself. For not only in this past four years have you observed our economic stagnation and the want and idleness of our people, but you have shared in the unhappy consequences. I venture to say that each of you has suffered personally in some way. If you have been receiving the aid of your parents in your schooling, that aid has been materially lessened. If you have supported yourselves, you have found it more difficult to accomplish than it was for the college generations preceding 1929. Very likely, as students, you have suffered, also, because of diminished educational facilities, affecting the laboratory, the library, the general equipment and, perhaps, even the size of the faculty.

In thus observing and experiencing the vicissitudes of the past few

years, it is inevitable that you should have gained wisdom beyond your time. Although you are young, yet you will have become old. As the spirit of youth is timeless so that many in mid-life may be young if they but remain hospitable to the new, so may you in your Commencement be wise with the wisdom of years if you are hospitable to the teachings of experience. You will have learned the painful lesson that our country cannot, with safety, disregard the fundamentals of historic teaching and avoid disaster; and you will have applied these observations to your personal lives, social, economic and moral, with a consequent accumulation of wisdom for your own and your country's use.

Happily the nation is recovering. By the voice of a great leader the people were aroused from their inaction and dark despair. The vitalizing blood of credit once more runs in the veins of our banking system and is energizing the nation. Factory wheels are beginning to turn and our railroads, once more, distribute our resources to human account. The checked forces of national existence are being released and their energies directed hopefully and intelligently toward "a more abundant life for all".

Your emergence into the social, economic and political world of today is an entry charged with unwonted responsibility. Thus far you have suffered without fault and therefore, without accountability. Henceforth, if you invite the consequences of your country's folly, you will be held liable. For in the energy and adaptability of your youth, and in the wisdom of your early experience, you possess a power that charges you with a duty which, intelligently and steadfastly performed, will forefend for your country another such debacle as it has been passing through. I speak earnestly and

literally in charging each of you, whatever your walk of life is to be, with the power, and hence with the duty, to save your country.

We are too prone to think of the nation legalistically, or as an abstraction. We think of the flag at the masthead and forget that it is a human hand that pulls it up - or down. The nation is but a group of individuals. True, they often think and act in concert, and possess group characteristics; but such thinking and acting and characteristics are factored by the thoughts, the acts, the characteristics of 125 million individual men and women. It was not a mere abstraction that, in the years after the World War, became careless of moral values, and business prudence, or that flung itself into unwise production, reckless spending, and unmoral devices to avoid work and win unearned profits. Certainly it was not an abstraction that paid the price. It was men and women who paid the price. The summation of their folly and of their suffering was the summation of the nation's folly and of the nation's suffering. This is not to say that all were at fault, or that all those at fault were equally so. This is not to say that the results were not in part affected by environment, or by the course of other nations and their peoples. But we can shelter ourselves little in that thought for we cannot deny that within this country there are natural and human resources sufficient, if need be, for a wholesome life lived wholly through, and wholly unto, ourselves. This is not the ideal I would inculcate, but it illustrates the power we have to exercise mastery over our own fate.

As we live individually so will our country live these years to come. The morality and prudence of individual, family, business and professional life will be the morality and prudence of our national life; and the indi-

vidual morality and prudence of the public officer will be the individual morality and prudence of his public acts. You will have discerned in your studies these last few years that in all great art, great music, great literature, great character, there are, among other attributes, two which are outstanding, sincerity and simplicity. They are as observable in the greatness of the past as in greatness of today. There can be no fashion in fundamentals. The tragic folly of the post-War years was folly of thought. Bad thinking inevitably causes bad action. Good thinking will cause good action. St. Paul knew this nineteen centuries ago when he said, "Finally, brethren, whatsoever things are true, whatsoever things are honest, whatsoever things are just, whatsoever things are pure, whatsoever things are lovely, whatsoever things are of good report; if there be any virtue and if there be any praise, think on these things."