

June 6, 1936

President's Remarks

We are met again at the place where five years ago Bennington College first dug into the soil of Vermont. Today we are assembled to carry through in public the official acts leading to the award of the degree of bachelor of arts to our first group of graduates.

It is a necessary function of colleges to certify, for advanced institutions and for people generally, the abilities and achievements of its students. Our bachelor's degree is such a certificate. It comes at the end of a long period of general education followed by special training. Specifically it means that each one receiving it is the survivor of a process of selection, that each has received instruction and engaged in activities which make her a useful worker in one of the areas of important human achievement. To the communities to which these graduates go, we commend them. Their presence will give a modest increment of youthful purpose, energy and skill in fields where these qualities are needed for the improvement of our culture.

It would be disloyal to our primary educational beliefs, however, to assume undue significance for this certificate as an end or aim of college education. The qualities and accomplishments of the class presenting itself here are in no sense encompassed by the requirements set up for the degree. This college--any college worthy of the name--provides instruction for its students; it also offers, at least for a time, a way of life. It suggests new habits, new attitudes, new values. It is primarily a place of growth. Under its influence young people develop at different rates and in different ways; they begin and end at widely different points.

Should we attempt to equate our students in terms of this broader learning we would be condemned to artificiality or confusion. No stated number of years nor any measuring stick yet devised, could assess that development.

Further, if we should attempt to evaluate the institution's part in the maturing process to which we have been witness, it would be equally difficult. Back of the college experience lie longer years of schooling, the fundamental, persistent influences of home and families, the impress of the general, contemporary environment. Within the four-year span just ending other agencies, other institutions than those at work on this hilltop, have contributed in important ways to the education of those we call our students. As the first entering group they have themselves in a unique and important sense helped to make the institution and the influences under which they have lived. Our pride in their maturity we share with many others.

It is natural to dramatize this hour as marking a stage in the life-long enterprise of learning. But it is false to think of it as culmination or reward. Life in college is living, not pre-existence. It is characterized by experiences artificially contrived so as to be vitalizing and enriching--experiences such that day by day a residue is accumulated which we recognize as growth. The end of labor is marked by result rather than stored-up preparation; yet this kind of learning, because it is learning how to learn, seems the soundest preparation for the days to come. For the students about to leave us the scene of activity will change. But living and learning will continue. It has been our fundamental objective so to arrange the work here that purpose, interest, and acquired skill, will naturally result in its continuance even though the environment inevitably be more resistant.



We shall follow these first graduates with interest and affection. We shall be proud of their future accomplishment. We shall be disappointed at their failures--especially their real failures. For those accidents of fortune which masquerade as failure we shall continue to have, I hope, both understanding and patience. Our expectation is in terms of values we have in our life together agreed upon as enduring. We would not spurn, but we would not build our hopes, nor theirs, upon the accident of falling under the restless, capricious glare of the spotlight called popular success. Rather we shall watch and weigh future achievement in terms of honest--often unobtrusive--work, adaptability, the facing of realities with humor and sense, the acceptance of responsibility, above all,--the maintenance of integrity. These are the continuing bonds between us.

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