

Bennington College
Commencement 1946

There are formally assembled here in regular session the Board of Trustees and the President and faculty of Bennington College for the purpose of making the last official decisions leading to the award of the Bachelor of Arts degree to the members of the eleventh graduating class. We are gathered here as teachers, parents, fellow students, townsmen and friends to honor and to share a common pride in the achievements of the young women who have presented themselves for the award of the degree.

The Bachelor of Arts degree from Bennington College certifies that those to whom it is awarded have successfully completed an extended period of study and instruction. The purposes to which their work here has been devoted are those of the great tradition of liberal education. They have sought an understanding of the cultural heritage as a whole. And they have undergone intensive training in one of the important fields of human achievement. We certify them to be useful workers in one of these major fields.

More important than general knowledge or special competence, however, are those immeasurable qualities of imagination, courage, sympathy and human understanding which characterize the civilized person. These qualities cannot be directly taught, nor formally certified by the award of the degree. Yet it is the peculiar function of a liberal college to try to develop them in all its methods of instruction and in the quality of its community life.

The term "liberal" implies freedom. Freedom is possessed only by those who have learned to discipline their own minds and emotions. It is this difficult art of self-discipline which has been our main objective at Bennington College: the discipline of the mind and hand through the patient mastery of skills: the discipline of impulse through an active understanding of the moral basis of human society. In their work in the classroom, laboratory and studio, these students have set themselves no limited objectives, extraneous and irrelevant to the work itself. The passing of examinations has not been the goal. Instead, they have worked directly at the task in hand, accepting its logic and discipline. They have taken their places, with serious purpose, in the continuing fellowship of intellectual workers, artists and craftsmen who have built up our civilization and who will carry it forward into the future. Here they have lived as responsible members of a democratic community. They have learned to relate themselves, through study and through practical work away from the College, with the wider community into which they now go.

For them, therefore, graduation is not a sharp break, where education ends and life begins. The years at Bennington have been fully lived, and their influence will form a strand in the continuing pattern of life. The standards we have agreed upon as of enduring value in our life together here will continue to be valid. The difficult times we live in will call on all our resources of personal courage and wisdom, and moral conviction. Indeed, the tasks of reconstruction which face this generation may appear so staggering as to

dward all feeling of individual responsibility. But true responsibility is always a modest and manageable thing: to do well the task in hand and to contribute whatever sanity, perspective, and good will one can to the conduct of the personal and public relations in which one is directly engaged. The values of a liberal education are not remote and academic; they are practical guides to action for members of a free society.

This ceremony of Commencement fittingly marks the termination of our close association with these students, and our peculiar responsibility towards them. We shall continue to follow them with interest and affection. Those of us who have taught and worked with the members of this graduating class express our confidence in them. It is the measure of our confidence in the future. To the communities to which they go, we recommend them.

Lewis Webster Jones

President, Bennington College