

The Degree-Confering Ceremony - June 10, 1939

Opening Remarks of the President

There are ~~here assembled~~ in regular, joint session the College board of trustees and faculty, for the purpose of carrying through in public the last official decisions leading to the award of the bachelor of arts degree to the ~~fourth~~ ^{first} graduating class. The members of the class have presented themselves for the purpose. Less formally, we have come together as a community in the company of parents ~~graduate~~ and friends to share ^{our} common pride in ~~the accomplishments of~~ this graduating group.

Bennington College accepts as one of its functions certifying the abilities of its students for graduate and professional instruction, and for other purposes. The bachelor's degree is such a certificate. Those awarded it are the survivors of a process of ~~rigid~~ selection. They have combined a long period of general education with more concentrated training in one of the important areas of human achievement. They are qualified as useful workers in ~~the fields of their major work.~~ ^{one of their major}

It would be a mistake to attach undue significance to this certificate as the principal aim of our labors together. This college—any residential college—provides not only instruction; it also offers its students, for a time at least, a way of living. It alters habits, attitudes ^{and} values. The growth and abilities of the class here present are in no adequate sense defined or measured by the requirements set up for the degree.

Under the institution's influence young women develop in different ways and at different rates. They begin and end at widely different points. Should we attempt to equate them in terms of their general growth we would condemn ourselves to artificiality or confusion. No stated number of years nor any measuring stick yet devised can assess the development that takes place.

Equally difficult is the attempt to determine the College's part in the maturing process of which we have been witness. Back of the experience here lie longer years of schooling, the fundamental influences of home and family, the subtle, powerful impress of the general environment. Within the four-year span just ending other agencies and institutions than those at work on this hilltop have contributed in important ways to the education of these, whom we think of as peculiarly our students. We are only one of many factors in the process of their education.

It is natural to dramatize this occasion as marking a definite stage in the lifelong process of learning. But it is a somewhat false emphasis. Inexact and inadequate as graduation or measurement, it certainly is not commencement.

In college, students are already living and living in the great world; education is not pre-existence. Nor is this hour in any real sense culmination. For the four years the work, so far as our ingenuity allows, has been contrived so as to be enriching and vitalizing. For the most part it is day-to-day activity leaving a gradual residue we later recognize as growth. For the students about to leave us the scene will change. But learning of some sort will continue. If there has been anything stored up for the future it is not primarily the precarious capital of remembered facts, but, more fundamentally, skill in learning and doing and a continuing desire to learn.

To the communities to which these graduates go we recommend them. Their presence will yield a modest increase of youthful energy, purpose and competence in fields where many skilled hands, trained minds and stout hearts are needed for the maintenance and improvement of our common culture.

We shall follow them with interest and affection. We shall be proud of their accomplishment. We shall be disappointed at their real failures. For the accidents of fortune which masquerade as failure we shall continue to have, I hope, understanding, sympathy and most of all patience. We do not build our hopes or ^{our} judgments upon the accident of their falling under the restless glare of the spotlight called popular success or public achievement.

Our expectations rather are in terms of values we have in our life together agreed upon as enduring. ~~We shall weigh achievement in these terms:~~ ^{they are} honest, useful--more often than not unobtrusive--work, adaptability, facing of changing realities with humor and sense, the acceptance of responsibility, above all--the maintenance of integrity. These as well as the natural sentiments of association and friendship, are the continuing and sustaining bonds between us.