

McMURRIN

## LIBERAL EDUCATION AND AUTHENTIC INDIVIDUALISM

Sterling M. McMurrin

President Petersen, Mrs. Bradshaw, Governor Matheson, Dr. Kuusisto, the Trustees and the faculty of Westminster, friends and patrons of the College, and especially the candidates for degrees:

It is a great honor for me to be with you on this occasion and to have this opportunity to express appreciation to Westminster College and extend to you, its graduates, my sincere congratulations. You are to be congratulated for your successful pursuit of a liberal education at this College that is so unique in this vast western region. And I must congratulate you on being at Westminster during the administration of President James Petersen, a most uncommon man whose remarkable abilities for leadership and endearing personality have brought the College successfully through its most difficult time and established it on firm foundations with a new vitality and a new and greater vision.

Now what can be said for the education with which Westminster is launching you? What is the meaning and value of the degrees you are to receive? Westminster is fundamentally a liberal arts college, and we must presume that through it in various ways and degrees you have been initiated in the elements of a liberal education. I say simply initiated, given a

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beginning, because education is a lifetime, living process. And a liberal education, which requires a great deal of living and studying and thinking, can be achieved outside a college, or any other school, but there is something to be said for seeking it in the precincts of a liberal arts college in association with teachers and scholars of high competence and commitment.

Both the meaning and worth of liberal education are often confused and misunderstood. In the early tradition a liberal education was conceived as the education appropriate for a free person. It was education for an elite as opposed to the servile classes. Here was the traditional classical curriculum, rich in value, but today it would be limited in practical worth for the generality of students. Now we have a quite different conception of liberal education, for we have no servile class. Today's liberal education is not education for free persons. Rather it is the education that frees a person--that liberates him and liberates her. It cultivates the qualities of mind and spirit essential to genuine freedom--freedom from ignorance and superstition, from bigotry and fear; freedom from the strictures of habit or from outworn traditions of the past.

In our society today a liberal education is important for everyone, but not everyone has access to the advantages of an institution that provides opportunity for cultivating the arts and sciences.

You who are today receiving degrees from Westminster College might well examine yourselves to assess its impact on you, to judge the degree to which it has contributed to your knowledge

and intellectual strength, your moral and aesthetic sensitivities, your moral courage, and the spiritual quality of your life. Of course, your personality and character are not simply the product of your college. Your childhood, your family, your church, and the multiple institutions and forces of your society have all conspired to shape your knowledge, your attitudes, your thought and commitment. But the college has been a major force in bringing you to where you are.

And what about the usefulness of a liberal education? We hear much about the importance of education for careers, and there are some who disparage the practical worth of the liberal curriculum for life in modern industrial society. All education is education for careers, and the curriculum of such a college as Westminster is geared to life in our kind of society. When you ask yourself whether your years at Westminster have had genuine practical worth, consider the meaning of a genuine liberal education:

An educated person is at home with ideas. He is as comfortable with concepts as he is with objects. He readily infers the general from the particular, for his capacities for rational abstraction equal his powers of concrete perception.

An educated person is one whose reason disciplines his attitudes and actions, but in whom the emotions are alive and sensitive and in whom there is genuine moral awareness, artistic perceptiveness, and spiritual commitment.

An educated person has some understanding of himself. He is aware of his own prejudices, is critical of his own assumptions, and knows his own limitations.

An educated person is aware of the events that have brought the world to where he finds it. He knows the wellsprings of his own society and culture and understands the essential unity of past, present, and future.

An educated person has a fine sense of the relation of the ideal to the real, of the possible to the actual. He is not satisfied with the world as it is, but he knows that it will never be what he would like it to be. He has hope for the future, but refuses to deny the tragedies of the past and present.

An educated person has a cultivated curiosity that leads beyond the bounds of his own place and circumstance. Provincialism and parochialism have no place in his world, for they stifle thought and inhibit creativity.

Finally, an educated person is one who loves knowledge and has a passion for truth and will accept no substitutes, whose life is made meaningful through the never-ending process of the cultivation of his total intellectual resources.

Of course it is not simply the quality of life of the individual that is at stake in the matter of education. As individuals we are integral to the society and culture which have given us birth, which nourish us, and which are our responsibility.

We live in a difficult world, and our future is precarious. At the very moment in our history when our society and its institutions desperately need an infusion of moral and spiritual strength, and when those nations which oppose many of the crucial freedoms of the individual draw strength from their conviction of historic destiny, we, who once believed that history was ours, have awakened to the realization that there are no guarantees on our future and that we could fail where failure would be total disaster. But fear of the future paralyzes the will and destroys the capacity for decision and action. Our only course is to sharpen our perception of our own problems, meet them head-on, and by the grace of our wisdom, energy, and strategy convert the prospect of defeat into a promise of victory.

Beyond the usual problems of social relations and social organization are the disastrous dislocations in our economy which arise from vast investments in military production and activity, the difficult social and moral issues generated by the growth of our great centers of population, our patterns of urbanization and suburbanization which so commonly produce civic decay, our severe racial conflicts with their devastating effect upon civic morality, social distortions attending the rapid expansion of industry, the increase in the mechanization, automation, and cybernation of production, chronic unemployment and poverty, growing environmental pollution and deterioration, and the nation's assumption of an overwhelming responsibility in international affairs. And always we have with us the problem

of government, whether local or national--the question of its regulative and constructive functions, the proper employment of its powers, and the setting of limits upon them. In the midst of these difficult social facts, and many more, and in a world in which the pace of social change is accelerating at an inordinate rate, education must pursue its arduous task as the primary agent upon which depend the creation and protection of a society of free men.

We have suffered a profound disenchantment with our world. But we now see more clearly the evils that men do both individually and collectively; we recognize the moral failures of our own society, as indeed of all societies; and we are more conscious of the almost demonic social forces that shape our world, that they commonly frustrate our best efforts and distort even our most defensible ideals. But though we are disillusioned of our optimism on human history, we are now more perceptive and more sophisticated. Hopefully, we are better prepared to come to grips with the mean facts of an imperfect world and to face more effectively the grim realities of the human predicament.

Our future is a world of permanent danger in which whatever is most precious to us faces the possibility of catastrophic destruction and is at all times threatened by those events both large and small which in various and insidious ways can erode our freedoms and otherwise ravage the quality of our lives. We can no longer rest comfortably in the faith that we are on the side of right and that therefore our nation and our culture must

inevitably prevail, that whatever setbacks and failures we may suffer, the future of our society is guaranteed. The traditionally chaste distinctions of right and wrong are vanishing amidst the complications of a more honest and more sophisticated moral judgment, and it is becoming obvious that there are no guarantees on our future, no guarantees that we will not fail whether in the right or in the wrong.

It is against this portentous background of continuing social, political, and cultural crisis, in which we are threatened internally by irrationalism, cynicism, bigotry, complacency, and despair, and externally by the prospect of an apocalyptic destruction, and where the decision will be determined by the balance of human commitment and disciplined and creative intelligence, and possibly by a turn of good or bad fortune, that we must define the meaning of education for our society.

It is central to the faith of the American people that the good of the individual person is coincident with the good of society and the good of the culture, and that therefore the pursuit of ends which are defined by the well-being of the individual not only serves his interests but as well builds into the social order whatever virtues of cohesion, integrity, and rectitude are required for its health and security. It also brings to the culture those qualities of excellence which should adorn the life of a free people, and brings to it the strength and spirit and purpose without which no civilization can look confidently to the future.

The great task of American education for the future is to move us toward the fulfillment of the democratic ideal, to justify the faith that a society of strength and culture of high achievement and lasting power can be built on a foundation of authentic individualism. The task of education is to lead us into that individualism, where the intrinsic worth of the person is the ground of value, where the integrity of the individual person is not dissipated in the totality of society, and where freedom is not defined in terms of totalitarian purpose and collectivist action. This task steadily becomes more difficult and in the future it may confront insurmountable obstacles, for our world daily becomes more complex and more confusing and the relation of the individual to the total society and to the state becomes more difficult to define and negotiate.

Even in our society, the individual is now seriously threatened. He is threatened by countless forces which impair his cultivation of a genuine and full personality: the increasing automation and cybernation of society that can regiment his life to the last detail and thereby destroy his freedom in his own decisions and his sense of meaningful involvement with his community; the growing complexities of social arrangements which destroy the privacy and solitude which are essential to his dignity; the bigness and impersonality of both public and private corporate organization that commonly treats him now as a number and not a name, a statistic and not a person; the ugliness and poverty of our great cities in which he can be lost and his spirit destroyed; the overwhelming presence

and power of government. And added to all of this is the anguish and despair of annihilation that is now a pervasive property of our social consciousness as we face the possibility of total extinction. All of these factors conspire to regiment and constrain the individual, to subvert his freedoms and depersonalize his life.

We must face the task of saving the individual, not simply as an individual, but as a person. This task will not be accomplished easily--and it may not be accomplished at all. We will not succeed if under the stress of urgent circumstances that threaten the basic institutions of our society and at times augur domestic failure and total war, we sacrifice reason to passion, knowledge to extremism, freedom to regimentation, and the person to administration and efficiency. We are confronted by the danger of an inhuman technocratic order, the danger that we will stake our fortunes too much on machinery and assembly lines, on pointer readings and computerized operations, the danger that we will ignore the simple truth that for the long future our strength for survival and for the fulfillment of our aspirations lies in the personal quality and character of our people. It is the threat of the dictatorship of technology, where machines rather than humane considerations would determine our purposes.

The task we face is the preservation and cultivation of authentic freedom--the freedom of the individual person in a free society. The freedoms which we now enjoy have been won by centuries of struggle in the world arena of force, power,

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oppression, hope, and aspiration. They are freedoms that have been won or partially won, and can be violated and lost-- freedoms which are properties of the individual because they have been written into the law of his society, or into its habits and customs, or in countless ways incorporated into its institutional life. They are the freedom to vote and the freedom to come and go, freedom to speak, and freedom to read and write, freedom of petition and assembly, freedom of dissent and protest, freedom of privacy and immunity from government harassment and espionage, freedom from police repression, freedom to worship or not worship, and the freedom to receive judgment after due process by one's peers.

There are other freedoms which are not guaranteed by law or even nourished by custom and whose survival therefore is precarious. But they are not for this reason less worthy of achievement or less precious to those who have them or are deprived of them. They are such freedoms as the freedom to work and freedom from want, pain, and fear; freedom from ignorance, custom, conformity, superstition, triviality and boredom; freedom from oppression by both minorities and majorities; freedom from the mean discriminations that in countless ways violate the sanctity and dignity of the person; freedom to think unfettered by subtle patronage and uncoerced by vicious instruments of propaganda; freedom from the tyranny of the past and from every form of tyranny that can oppress the mind, depress the will, and destroy aspiration. To be free is to be genuinely and authentically an individual in whom uniqueness is respected and encouraged and autonomy and independence are real.

The freedom we value is not the freedom of impulsive action and arbitrary decision, the freedom of unbridled emotion and willfulness, of anarchy and social irresponsibility. It is a freedom that is found in internal moral discipline, in the rational control of the will and the passions that comes from inquiry, reflective thought, knowledge, and understanding. It is expressed in the creation of a moral social order where justice and equality prevail.

Those of you who will receive your degrees here today may judge whether your years at Westminster College have brought you closer to an authentic personal freedom. Your College has been committed to the dual task of the dissemination of knowledge and the cultivation of reason. Knowledge and reason, with compassion and good will, are the only sure guarantees on our future.