

Commencement Oration  
delivered at the Commencement  
University of Minn. - 1922

Please return  
to my sister  
515 So. Victoria  
Cleveland  
Minn

## INTELLECTUAL INTEGRITY AND COLLEGE EDUCATION

In the almost sylvan quiet of this campus, within the walls of this historic room in which many generations of commencement orators have spoken, it is difficult to speak of the disagreeable things of life. It would be pleasanter for us all, perhaps, if I should repeat a few saccharine platitudes and take my seat. But America, and Mississippi especially, have had enough of that. Our English friends come and make graceful speeches to us, chautauqua lecturers discuss gravely and ponderously superficial problems of the day, and we go to hear them, go gladly, and come away with a feeling of smug satisfaction, nodding and saying, 'that's true'. But if ever anyone undertakes to destroy any of the illusions of our 100% Americanism, we brand him as a 'foreigner' or a 'danyankee' and retreat behind our stolid sophistries. We have built out of slogans and meaningless phrases an armor that renders us as impervious to criticism as ever Achilles was to Trojan arrows.

We have been told in throbbing, sobbing tones, that the need of America is for men, we were told, not so long ago, that greater production of economic goods would cure the festering sores of our social structure; now we are told that over-production is one of the causes of those sores. Such foolish twaddle will be served to us until the real need of America is met, that need is

for intellectual integrity, an honesty of soul which will face the world as it is, frankly and unafraid, and which will not lie to itself.

The colleges and universities, one would think, might supply that need. They taught war aims cheerfully during the war, and now in the same cheerful, unreasoning fashion, they teach peace aims; anything, in fact, that anyone asks for is willingly added to the curriculum. Why not teach the students to think? That, strange to say, is treated as a shocking, disturbing proposal.

In the troublous time of the middle ages, the first universities and colleges were founded by men like Abelard, and Thomas Aquinas, and Edmund Rich. Men "who had dedicated themselves to the pursuit of wisdom and understanding." They were "seekers in the realm of the spirit," they had the passion to seek and to impart. These first colleges were poor and small, but those who attended them were lovers of books and meditation, and curious inquiry. In time came endowments and buildings and organization and power, and a lessening of initiative and imagination, the college and university was then a place of fixed curriculum where the students followed a required course in Latin, Greek, moral philosophy, mathematics. It was definite, it was thorough. We need not dwell on this middle phase, for it like the first, belongs to the past; but one feature needs to be remembered: the teacher was master of his subject, and no committee either of bankers or of bricklayers told him how it should be taught.

In the last half-century the college of 'liberal arts' has disappeared, in its place we have the modern university. Whether they have three hundred or thirty thousand students, these universities are alike. They offer a pot-pourri of subjects from accounting to archaeology, they have the professional and vocational schools. They are big, there is a stir and bustle about them like that of a department store. The student learns when he first arrives that he must have a required number of units in a certain number of groups to get a degree, and the most he gets out of any course, if his conversation is any criterion, is two or three points, and at the end, a degree which entitles him to a certificate to teach. All idea of culture, all efforts at real training of the intellect are taboo, and the only justification for a course is that it will help a student to earn his living. Imagination and initiative, which in the beginning lit the cloistered halls of the colleges are gone; in their place are politics and success. It is forgotten that the student must live, as well as earn his daily bread.

"It is now assumed", to quote one writer, "that the glory of a college finds expression in more buildings, more books, more laboratories and more students. To question this holy truth is heresy and treason." But some there are who would question it, some who doubt that the greatness of an educational institution lies only in size, some few who believe that the object of education is "to discipline the mind and to give to students a knowledge

of their own souls." But they are only a still small voice in the midst of the rosters for the big university.

A little more than three hundred years ago, in 1600, Bruno was burned at the stake because he dared to say that the sun and not the earth was the center of the universe. And it is less than three hundred years since Galileo with the picture of the tortured Bruno before his eyes, knelt in the cathedral and recanted. Intellectual liberty, such as we have, has been dearly bought. The blood and tears of thousands of sensitive souls have watered the tree of liberty, and those who sit in its shade today seem unaware that the same forces of bigotry and intolerance that took joy and delight in the iniquities of the inquisition are poisoning its roots again.

When the head of an institution of learning requests the students on going home to apologize and explain because an instructor in one of the sciences teaches that science according to the best of his knowledge, I, for one, respectfully refuse to thus betray the ideal of education. Are students to be fed bits of information as a baby is given its milk? Are they never to learn to discriminate the true from the false? Are they to get no sense of value? Will they always be taught that life and its problems are absolute and not relative? That is the way students are treated at present, and then some wonder that college graduates in a community fall for the first smooth talking demagogue that appears. Why not? They have never had a choice between ideas in their lives.

We Americans are becoming the most bigoted and intolerant people on the globe. That is bad, but what makes it worse is that we stand in the market place and pray the Pharisee's prayer, "Lord we thank Thee that we are not as other Nations are."

The "Merchant of Venice" was stricken from the curriculum of certain New Jersey schools because it offended the Jews. The Scotch, not to be outdone in patriotic fervor, then tried to have "Macbeth" taken out because it reflected on a noble Scotchman. The legislature of Kentucky very nearly adopted a bill prohibiting the teaching of evolution in the state schools. The general assembly of the Southern Baptist Church recently adopted a resolution calling for the rewriting of biology texts according to their own peculiar notions. The sum total of human knowledge has never been increased by papal encyclicals and it will ~~never~~ <sup>not</sup> be by protestant resolutions. There is no choice in my mind between an index expurgatorius of the Roman Catholic Church and an index expurgatorius of the Southern Baptist Church. Soon it will be suggested that a committee be appointed in every county to decide what shall be taught by the professors in their respective departments and membership on this committee will be limited to those who have not gone beyond the sixth grade. Shall the English department stop insisting upon good English because ~~perchance~~ a majority of the people speak bad English? Shall German be taken out because perchance, it was not spoken on the tower of Babel and Sanskrit be taken up instead? We call our-

selves a free people, we stand and sing to the land of the free and the home of the brave, yet the restraint put upon the faculties of our institutions may be compared to that which was the rule in Russia when the Czar was at the zenith of his power. This insistence upon strict conformity to the status quo is making mental cowards of us all.

In 1914 a professor of political science, in explaining the first ten amendments to the Constitution, known as the 'Bill of Rights', stated to the class that though probably necessary in 1793, they were superfluous now, as such matters as freedom of speech, right of assembly and petition were taken for granted. In 1922, a congressional committee reporting on the activities of the Department of Justice is forced to condemn as "examples of inexcusably illegal violence" the raid and wholesale arrests of the Department in 1919 and 1920 and to characterize them as "the lawless acts of a mob," and in plain violation of the fourth amendment to the Constitution. And so we have cause to be grateful for that strange fear psychosis of our ancestors which led them to write into the Constitution these guarantees of our fundamental rights. But it does little good if the government can disregard them and if the only remedy of the injured is a congressional investigation two years after the wrong. There is a bill of rights in the Mississippi Constitution, it contains twenty-seven sections; is it to be merely a list of noble words, and array of fine phrases as meaningless as a copy of Milton in the hands of a savage South Sea Islander? "Eternal vigilance is the price of liberty", said one of the 'founding fathers', as Mr. Hard-

ing delights to call them. While we bask in the sunlight of material well-being, the freedom to think is stolen from us. Name a subject, be it history, economics, science, politics, even literature, in which any deviation from the beaten path is not met with cries of 'socialism', 'bolshivism', 'radicalism', and on the other extreme of 'reactionary'. As has been said, we have a word 'socialism' and it makes us angry at others and satisfied with ourselves. We do not think. We hurl epithets; and this is the tragedy, the dishonesty; we call it thinking.

We call ourselves a democratic, law-abiding people. How many have analyzed that concept 'democracy' and how many try to square that concept with our labor policy, if such it may be called, with the subsidized police of West Virginia, with our mobs, our lynchings, the Ku Klux Klan? This nation, which was one of the first to adopt the revolutionary republican government, now says to Russia, "we will have nothing to do with you until you establish a form of government that pleases us." If the Czar of Russia had said that in 1815 and again in 1860, we might not have been a nation today. What right have we to assume a self-righteous air and dictate to other nations what they shall and shall not do with their own. America with its enormous wealth, its vast resources, its unlimited possibilities, its bouyant hopefulness, could be the spiritual leader of the world; instead, it is stifling any breath of intellectual life within itself and the colleges and universities actively assist in the smothering of such faint breaths as stir within their walls. "Somehow we do not have an interest in ideas as ideas nor in science and art for what

and elevating they may do in liberating/the human spirit. Science and art as far as they refine and polish life, afford 'culture', mark stations on an upward social road, and have direct, useful social applications; but as emancipations, as radical guides to life, they have no interest for our people or for our educators."

No one suggests that the university has to do with "the kingdom of the spirit, that beautiful realm which we have beheld from afar, and which those who seek after wisdom and understanding fain would enter and possess for themselves forever." And with relating that kingdom with the realities of life. Such an idea is an empty dream in the closed, stuffy, false atmosphere of a modern university. Any student who harbors such an idea is dubbed 'queer' and shunned by his fellows, and any professor who would teach such ideas is censured and sees his chair slipping from under him. You may say this is an exaggeration, that there is a shred of creative intelligence left in some of the institutions for the higher learning in America. Be honest for a few moments, think over your own experience, you may have studied under a master of syntax, but did you meet a master of life? There are a few notable exceptions, we would honor them. But read again the "Education of Henry Adams," Professor Veblen's "The Higher learning in America," the recently published autobiography of Ludwig Lewisohn, "Upstream", and some of the many articles on the subject of university education in current magazines, from the foolish series by Calvin Coolidge to others more intelligent.

Some there are among us who hold that a benevolent auto-  
cracy is the best form of government, some who would distribute the



vote according to the amount of property a citizen owns, one vote for every ten thousand dollars probably, as if governments were instituted to accumulate gold. These persons are honest. Then there are those who would establish a dictatorship of the proletariat, and they too, are honest. But the great mass of our people do lip service to democracy and permit acts of autocracy to be done without ever a word of protest; they claim to be law-abiding and then break every law that it does not suit their convenience to observe. The mental dishonesty of this kind of thing is the most corrupting influence in our life. Slogans ~~instead~~ substituted for ideas have brought us to this pass. Students are not taught to evaluate, they are taught to condemn or to approve, never to understand. We worship in doggerel verse set to jazz, we sing illiterate, vulgar songs, listen to this one, it is typical:

"No use of talkin', No use of talkin'  
 You'll start in dog walkin',  
 No matter where, there's jazz copation,  
 Blues modulation,  
 Just like a Haitian,  
 You'll rip and tear."

After singing songs like that our people cry 'dago', 'wop' at the Italian hod carrier in the street who sings the airs from "Rigoletto." We want to 'Americanize' him. To what? To singing the 'Royal Garded Blues' instead of 'La donna e mobile'? The mere word 'Americanize' is not sufficient to dispose of that problem.

A word cannot supply for all time the place of ideas. As expressed by Bertrand Russell, "So long as self-righteousness and an antiquated morality of disapproval govern the American outlook, self deception will be easy and tyranny inevitable." That is the state in which we now are. That is the road upon which we are moving.

There are nearly four hundred thousand students in American colleges and Universities. In them should be the nation's hope. They are, on the whole, earnest and well behaved, good to look upon and pleasant to associate with. But they are sent to college, or they send themselves with the fixed determination to acquire there information which will better enable them to earn their living, to sharpen the tools with which they must carve a livelihood from a cold and hostile environment. This materialistic concept of education has stilled any faint stirrings in the minds of the students, and the windows of the soul are never opened for the wind to come into and blow them into life. Instead those windows are sealed with words without meaning, 'conventionalized gestures of the mind.' If an idea can be called 'democratic' or 'undemocratic', no one ever inquires further into its nature or import. Success is substituted for thought.

A citizen's first duty, to paraphrase Mark Twain, is not to his country, is not to his party, but to his honor, to the honor of his mind. The realm of ideas, the potential knowledge of mankind is a vast uncharted sea, and those who would like Columbus set sail, perhaps to discover another new world, should find in the

universities a freedom to seek, a wider knowledge, a passionate love for the truth, and encouragement and assistance in making ready for the voyage. To adapt Aristotle, the origin of the university is that it enables us to live, its justification, that it enables us to live well. Truth, beauty, liberty, these are words full of grace. We have played with them too long, the time has come to treat them with reverence. And may it someday be possible for every student in America to sing, and to mean with all the intensity that his soul possesses:

"Pilgrims on the starry road,  
March we up to the abode  
Of those spirits, pure and high,  
Who for truth, have dared to die."

Lucy R. Somerville,  
University of Mississippi,  
May 29, 1922.

The foregoing 11 pages are the full text of the speech given by Lucy R. Somerville, a candidate for the LL.B degree, at Commencement, 1922.