

V. Commencement Address
for
the Cornell College Class of 1989

by Stephen W. Lacey

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I have talked with a good twenty or thirty of you during the past several weeks, and I know that this is a problematic day for all of you, a day filled with ambivalence—and I sensed this very strongly during Jill’s slide show at Senior brunch last Thursday, as the mood changed from an initial exuberance to a final quiet retrospective. Feelings of exhilaration and opportunity are natural complements of such massive closure as this day represents. And they are accompanied, just as naturally, by a sense of nostalgia for this place and its people, and perhaps also by regret, regret for things left undone, or for the ‘good-byes’ that will inevitably stretch into years of separation.

For today we strip away what is familiar and start out for what Bob Dana has called “the difficult world,” a world as yet unknown and problematic. Anthropologists would call yours a *liminal* situation. The word comes from the Latin *limen*, and it means threshold: to stand betwixt and between the known and the unknown, between structure and void. Perhaps in our modern world such a moment of transition becomes merely disconcerting, at the most temporarily disruptive. But in other, more ritually organized, cultures, such transitions become opportunities for immense creative renewal and re-engagement, because they involve the whole psyche as it encounters a blurring of distinctions between the conscious and unconscious states, between light and dark, life and death, male and female. This is why such moments have traditionally been hedged in and marked off by ritual observance and containment.

So we have two related but distinct issues here: the ambivalent nature of the day itself—with its backward and forward looking aspects—and what that might imply about our lives more generally, and the dual nature of the ritual ceremony, that suggests an ambiguity about what we have tried to do here—and what we might unintentionally have achieved.

Of course vestiges of ritual can yet be seen in our own ceremony. You wear special clothes. Soon, as your names are called, you will make a ritual passage over the stage to receive your diplomas. And this, on a public level, will celebrate your uniqueness. We will have asserted, in a sense, your right to your heritage; confirmed your progress toward stated goals, and praised your achievement of them; we will have recognized you as individuals, and acknowledged the honors you have earned for yourselves and have brought to us as an institution. This is as it should be.

Yet all central symbols of ritual passage have a dual function: they assert one thing publicly and loudly, but whisper its opposite to the attentive, private, ear. As I look at you from this vantage point, I hardly see any individuals at all, because the caps and gowns you wear have the effect of reducing you to a collective uniformity, one without any *individual* distinctness. Indeed, the deadening *sameness* of academic gowns and hats, the central symbol of your ritual passage, speaks to the underside of today’s ceremony, and reveals unspoken assumptions about its conservative, integrative, nature.

Some of you may recall how fond I am of shocking freshmen by arguing that college is a kind of an institutionalized old peoples’ home—for the young. It represents

one of many forms—the military, the jail, menial jobs that exhaust the critical powers as they enervate the spirit and body—that society has of thwarting, or at least controlling, your emotional energies and instinctual impulses. These are your eros and aggression in their revolutionary aspects, what Freud claims to be an individual's only defenses against the repressive demands of one's culture. Indeed, Freud goes further to argue that civilization is built on the sublimation, even renunciation, of aggressive individualism. Those impulses that might, in less structured ways, go toward violence, social revolution, creativity, or erotic exhilaration, are here domesticated and tamed. A one-sided critic might go so far as to say that we reduce them, and in the process, your freedom, to a mind-numbing, collective, uniformity.

Certainly it has often been claimed that higher education has taken over for the modern world the role the Mediaeval Catholic Church had for its society: we baptize you in your culture, confirm you in its values and institutions—make you marriageable, hireable, and socially acceptable. In a word, we make you *harmless*.

And you—or your parents—have spent a small fortune for this. You have even worked hard to achieve it. Before you all rise up in outrage to protest that this view is too bleak, let me remind you that the world, whatever public value it claims to place on the unique or the heroic, would really prefer that you *be* as uniform as you *look* right now. Much in your life will want to rob you of your freedom and individuality. In a terrible way, the world tends to encourage silence and complacency: monetary reward, promotion, or status elevation, is rarely the result of moral outrage, or the genuine, or the unique. (Although given the recent example of Oliver North, of the heroic gone wrong, it is gratifying to know that dishonesty, duplicity, and chicanery are not always rewarded, either!) And life itself frequently—normally—crushes what we would do or be by the experience it hands us. We become chained by responsibilities, fettered by economic, social, and family obligations. These can chip away, bit by bit, at one's sense of self and one's commitment to the assertion of that self. Too many of our lives, or too much time *in* our lives, is spent grubbing after petty rewards, or treading water between disillusion, boredom, and hope. And to all of this, Freud's answer of "love and work" to the question of *how* one lives seems woefully inadequate: even depressing.

So your graduation ceremony contains, hidden in its ritual symbols, a potential trap for you reflective of life, a trap we clearly wish you to avoid. And, in a more general sense, the dual nature of the day itself, with its nostalgia, relief, and anticipation, hints at a different kind of psychological danger—and as an opportunity. "What is a man," asks Hamlet,

If his chief good and market of his time
Be but to sleep and feed? a beast, no more:
Sure he that made us with such large discourse,
Looking before and after, gave us not
That capability and god-like reason
To fust in us, unused ...

I don't believe that Shakespeare ever came any closer than this to considering, in a brief compass, the defining attributes of the human. Our uniqueness lies in our discourse, our logic as embodied in language, and in the freedom that discourse gives us

to look “before and after,” to reason from past experience about present situation, to use our past imaginatively to anticipate or direct our future. Yet what, for Shakespeare, makes us most freely human, becomes, in Freud, potential traps particularly limiting to human growth. Freud called these traps “fixation” and “projection.” Fixation is the privatized ritual imprisonment in a remembered past that still operates as an individual’s present reality: “The past is the present, isn’t it? It’s the future too. We all try to lie out of that one but life won’t let us,” says Mary Tyrone in O’Neill’s *Long Day’s Journey into Night*. Here we feel the helplessness of a person for whom the weight of the past has become an excuse for the failure of the present. This is fixation in Freud’s sense. We could call it the pathological equivalent of the nostalgia you feel today. Projection is the opposite of this. Technically it is a defense mechanism in which we live always in terms of our expectations, not in terms of our experience. That is, we live in terms of a projected future, idling away our lives in fantasy and dream: “Hope springs eternal to the human breast/Man never is, but always to be blest” claims Alexander Pope. For Freud, both these pathological states inhibit what is for him, as for Shakespeare, a compelling necessity: wrestling a meaning from life in the full exercise of our moral and intellectual freedom.

Nor is this an easy task. How does one wrest, or win, a structure for being and knowing from the disparate nature of human experience? For surely *meaning* doesn’t inhere, *a priori*, as a thing, in experience; it must be found. I suppose there are moments in some lives where a total clarification of values and self suddenly occur—moments that James Joyce would call “epiphanies.” I’m thinking here of the liberation through gender that accompanies the discovery of oppression—and the achievement of a new voice—in feminism, or of the public assertion of self that being “born again” in Christ means for the committed Christian what “coming out of the closet” means for a gay person. Although in the eyes of the world these seem utterly distinct experiences in value and in form, from a psychological perspective they are absolutely equivalent, indeed, identical. Yet these moments when “the past seems prologue,” when everything in one’s life seems merely preparation to the discovery of a suddenly integrated, almost transcendent self, are not frequent moments, nor are they available to most of us. Nor, I would argue, do they necessarily purdure as adequate self definitions.

Most of us fight the battle for personal integrity and meaning from day to day, and without such obvious victories. Marcel Proust speaks directly to this continuing struggle in the second volume of his *Remembrance of Things Past*. The young Marcel, the novel’s protagonist, has made a hero out of the painter Elstir—who is a fictionalized amalgam of the real impressionists Monet, Turner, and Vuillard. Marcel has virtually worshipped Elstir; he has made him his mentor and his model. Then one day Marcel discovers something unpleasant about Elstir’s past, and the artist can see disappointment written large across Marcel’s face. He makes the following extended comment, a comment wonderfully well worth sharing. “There is no man,”—and I want to add here, woman, but the example is masculine in the text—“There is no man, however wise, who has not at some period of his youth said things, or lived a life, the memory of which is so unpleasant to him that he would gladly expunge it. And yet he ought not entirely to regret it, because he cannot be certain that he has indeed become a wise man—so far as it is possible for any of us to be wise— unless he has passed through all the fatuous or unwholesome incarnations by which that ultimate stage must be preceded. We do not

receive wisdom, we must discover it for ourselves, after a journey through the wilderness which no one can make for us, which no one can spare us, for our wisdom is the point of view from which we come at last to regard the world. The lives that you admire, the attitudes that seem noble to you ... represent a struggle and a victory. I can see that the picture of what we were at an earlier stage may not be recognizable and cannot, certainly, be pleasing to contemplate in later life. But we must not repudiate it, for it is a proof that we have really lived, that it is in accordance with the laws of life and of the mind that we have, from the common elements of life ... *extracted* something that transcends them.”

For Proust, meaning is not “found.” It must be *extracted*—and from our mistakes and failures, from the risks we take to assert the self as well as from our temporary victories.

As a faculty we have tried to introduce you to the best that has been thought and uttered. We have tried to give you the tools to make this extraction, this struggle toward definition, possible. But in our hearts we know that neither the reading of great books, powerful as they are, nor the rest of your education, can in itself *prepare* you for the world. We do not send you out of here with answers to the questions life will throw at you. You do not even emerge with fully defined values, because what you have come to believe has not yet been fully tested by experience. Nor will you be able to protect your education—that is, place it in one small area of your lives, compartmentalized from, say, the business of making a living. The structures of society and its economy necessarily *invade* the privacy of the self and help to shape and remake it. We have tried to fashion one kind of positiveness, inwardness, sensitivity. You go into a world that will fashion another, more public, self, and conflict is inevitable.

Yet we have given you the wide background and exposure only a liberal arts education can provide. In doing so, what we have tried to establish, for the best of you, is a set of *preconditions* for a certain kind of conflict—without which one is not fully human. Today’s rite of passage celebrates your freedom to discover certain things about yourself and about your world, and urges on you the moral imperative to act upon those discoveries. But all we can do is to provide you with the tools. The desire to use them must come from yourselves.

Well. I think I have said what I have to say this afternoon. Except to add that, if this is an ambivalent day for you, it is so for us on the faculty also. For, in celebrating your commencement—your “stepping forth,” we must face up to our own obsolescence. Most of you have long since ceased to be our students, at least in the sense you were when you were freshmen. You are our friends, and saying good-bye to friends is always hard. It is also necessary. Today we joy with you and for you. And we wish you well. Good-bye from us. And good luck. Or, as one of your number, Dave Tyroler, might say: “yo. dudes. later.” Thank you.

Stephen W. Lacey
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