Atkins, Gaius Glenn

Convocation address, June, 1933
I count it a very great honor to be asked thus to share the
graduation exercises of the Class of 1933 on the forty-fifth anniversary of
the Class of 1888, though there is, I suppose, a delusion in which time, that
master magician delights, in the whole affair. For we for a season forget
the years and match your youth with ours while you, more clear-eyed, see us
for what we are and wonder likely whether there is any bridge at all between
you and us. I have no test to see us as we seem to you save to imagine how
we in 1888 would have contemplated such members of the Class of 1843— if
there had been a Class of 1843—who, having escaped 'the dark backward and
abyss of time', had brought their senile and sobering presences to our bright
scenes. We should, I think, have looked upon them as academic curiosities
or visitants from another world, and even had they made some show of health
and force we should have considered it only the autumnal coloring of leaves
soon to fall.

But there is a bridge between us for all that—the bridge of
recollection. You have already begun to build it for yourselves. When,
presently this day you have so long looked forward to dies and the twilight
falls, you will see as you cross the campus and amidst the shadows the first
faint outlines of your own bridges of recollection, most curious bridges
which advance their spans through time and carry their one-way traffic always in the contrary direction. and something began the issue of which we could not

Of our own Commencement forty-five years ago I remember we held it above the spring, then unadorned and responsible, it was said, amongst other

It is only a bridge like that, a bridge of mightily remembering things, for the University having been located where it is. It was a wise and lovely thing to build a University around a spring. I do not remember who gave the address or in the least what he said, which encourages me to believe that you will not long remember what I am saying either—which will save us all from taking ourselves too seriously. I do remember, so tricky a jade is memory, that the wind blew the sheets of the address all abroad which leads me to conclude that it was not as weighty as it sounded.

I remember also that Seibert—yes, Professor Seibert—after a stately bow to the universe at large, delivered as representative of the Class a most admirable oration on Thomas Carlyle, which likely, more than more momentous things, measures the gap between you and us. For I suppose that nowhere today would any class orator either orate or take Thomas Carlyle for a theme. We were amongst the last of the academic generations nourished on the great traditions of Victorian literature and liberalism and we have lived to see the house-furnishings and head-furnishings of our masters held in small repute or else held up to scorn. I remember, too, the high, white clouds,
light to make it both proud and tender and the sense of something ended which
could never be recaptured and something begun the issue of which we could not
foresee.

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It is only by a bridge like that, a bridge of mistily remembering
what we were then like inside, that I can reach a little what you are probably
like inside now. And I suspect there is not as much difference as we from our
opposite end of the bridge would like to believe. You are capped and gowned
as we never were; there seems to be about an acre of you and we were a handful;
what I say is amplified—which makes it no wiser. We were arts and science and
only the catalogue and President Rightmire know what you are, and I doubt if
the President really knows. Your world is far more complex than ours though I
suspect even that, as the London Morning Post said the other day, not to the
actual complexity of life but due to the distressing habit man has evolved of
worrying himself to death and using his brains to conceive a superabundance of
problems and perplexities that have no reality outside the brains which conceive
them. After all "life proceeds"—I am still quoting that eminent Tory authority—
"very much as it has always done and on the whole is not nearly so complex as
the theorists would have us believe."

You may take that at your discretion. I do not mean to be led into
the discussion of the comparative complexities of the world forty-five years
ago and now having other detours in mind. I do think more threads cross and
tangle now at any given spot but those threads which have to do with our own
lives, yarn for our own particular looms, to be woven into some kind of a right
pattern, are much the same for you as they were for us. I protest, then, that
you in 1933 and we in 1688 are much the same except that you, I honestly believe,
are wiser in your fashion now than we were then. We of more than middle age are
in no positions to pass upon you those judgments of contemporaneous youth which
are current. We have mostly wasted your inheritances and furnished you the
edged tools to play with. Besides you would be surprised at what we used to
get away with.

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The main difference between us then is that we have gone further in
our education than you and have, after our own various fashions, done or left
undone the larger part of what we set out to do with the strange handicaps of
not knowing any more than you what and where and how it was to be. For we of
those vanished years would at least agree in one testimony: that by no tour de
force of the imagination could we have forseen the course of our lives, the
roads we were to travel or--some of us--the death we were to die. What, then,
with the dear bought advantage of retrospective wisdom in this curious adventure
we call life could we have asked of the education our Alma Mater gave us then
and the years have given us since in order that we might bear ourselves
adequately, happily, usefully, even nobly and finish when finishing time comes,
like Cyrano of the long nose with our plumes untarnished since what we would
now ask for ourselves I would ask for you.

First of all I think that our education should have helped us and your education have helped you to find amongst all the selves we might be our best and proper selves. For we are creatures of manifold inheritance, haunted by old and pestering ghosts of our unbelievably long biological ascent, by the ghosts of primitive human nature, and ghosts of family heredity. Fear ghosts and passion ghosts and ghosts of old belief and social compulsion and unless we can at least distinguish between our solid, daylight selves and our disturbing retinue of ghosts, we shall be living haunted lives and fighting shadows.

Education does help us to find and evoke not only our solid, daylight selves, but also to find amongst the competition of possible selves and powers in undeveloped personality the self which is likely to be most useful, most intuitive and most persistent.

You are very likely now in essence and promise what you always will be. The contours of your personalities and the ways in which your powers will function are essentially determined. You have found yourselves, not completely of course. You will be doing that all your lives and will likely never get over being surprised at what you discover, but you have found enough of yourselves to go on with. Your teachers have helped you, you have tried your selves against your comrades and with them. You have found this fragment of yourselves in the laboratory and that in the library.
You have found yourselves in an insight of Plato or a dead poet's singing line, in some gleam of immemorial wisdom, in the philosopher's speculation, the engineer's discipline, the economist's conclusion, the Mathematician's demonstration. Here a little, there a little—the self that can think and do and foresee and stand and withstand and understand—a tempered tool, an elected and selected personality and the master of your ghosts.

But most of all you have found yourselves, I suspect, in formative years rich in a wealth which only a college campus can yield—in the recitative of the chimes, in the stadium here as the autumn day darkened and victory wavered between white lines trampled into the earth, in the sacramental singing of 'Carmen Ohio', in winter mornings whose fugitive snows were still white, in April twilights when the trees were misty green and mornings when youth and a day are enough, in friendship and shared confidences and unshared dreams and the transforming comradeship of all which lifts our humanity above its dust.

Your education has served you well if it has helped you find your true and daylight selves.

Education in the second place should make us intelligent citizens of the world of facts and ideas. We live actually in a world and signs and symbols. Also education must teach us what we do not know, save us from pride and conceit, furnish us an always growing hunger to know more and tell us where to go to find out. We should ask of education then the blessed yellow primrose or even Primula Vulgaris. It blooms out of earth and sky and
ohemic action and one is never quite wise even about a primrose till it becomes a golden window through which to see and understand a little those processes of life which some in their more inspired moments have believed to be the garmenture of God.

One should not hear too unwittingly the names of the great artists and musicians and still less the names of the makers of history. We need a certain at-homeness in literature and a working key-knowledge to the general conclusions of science. We as certainly need a speaking with the ruling ideas of philosophy and economics and, I venture to believe, even religion. These and the like are the necessary furnishing of an intelligent life; without them we grope blindly and read with gaps in our mental responses and think steriley and talk only of little un consequenceal things, are lonely in the comradeship of the wise and very lonely with only ourselves.

I do not say that a whole brainful of facts, catalogued, pigeon-holed and cross indexed make an educated person. One trouble with traditional education is that it has been too informative and not sufficiently formative. Nor can we know everything. But education must make us enough at home in the world to know its main roads, read its sign posts, understand and translate its signs and symbols. Also education must teach us what we do not know, save us from pride and conceit, furnish us an always gnawing hunger to know more and tell us where to go to find out. We should ask of education then the blessed
gift of at-homeness in the outposts of the stars, the book at our elbows, the
primrose by the river's brim, the ways of our common humanity—and the ways of
our minds and souls.

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Education should in addition give us minds and faculties disciplined
and resourceful enough to deal with an always living and always changing present.
This, if I could say it clearly, I would wish you most to remember. Life,
society, the human enterprise are strongly patterned. We ignore to our cost
the massive experiences of the past. They are codified in laws, they are awe-
some in moral decalogues, they live in science and the arts, they are recited
in creeds, they are built into states and systems, churches and creeds. Human
history has been a long and terribly costly process of trial and error and
enough has come out of it—to save us if we are teachable at all—from too many
errors of our own. There are laws enough we can not break—we only break our
heads against them and one service of education should be to save us from such
useful every point to dictate politicians and preachers and measurement
broken heads.

There is a place for an Amen kind of education, a reverent and
sincere acceptance, I mean, of all the funded wisdom time has brought us, a
happy bowing of the head and heart to those authorities which, being in the
nature of things, are as unescapable as they are savingly kind. Margaret
Fuller, they once told Carlyle, had said that she accepted the universe. "Gad",
was Carlyle's comment, "Gad, she'd better accept it." There are a good many
things, and they are likely to be the true and enduring things, which we would
better accept with a glad Amen. Education has served a high purpose when it
has taught us when and where to say Amen.

There is equally a place in education for the searching question-mark. Education has of late taken that line strongly. We are taught to take but
nothing on authority, question every conclusion, scrutinize every creed and greet
the unseen not with a cheer but with an interrogation point. Such attitudes do
keep roads open. They have hitherto been the secret and will continue to be
the secret of all advance in knowledge. Amen closes the road, interrogation
keeps it open. We should ask of education to make us wise, constant, courageous,
questioners, writing across our banners this old and shining assurance: "Ye
shall know the truth and the truth shall make you free." There is even some­
thing to be said for 'Oh yeah' education, the temper which meets the banal,
the stereotyped and the dogmatically stupid with a happy scorn. 'Oh yeah' is
a most useful spear point to deflate politicians and preachers and commencement
speakers when they begin to say air-stuffed things pompously. Keep it in your
armory, but use it sparingly. It may pierce the hand that uses it, and the
true and right will always turn its edge.

But the great service of education ought to be to make us neither
these faculty men, telling the dead past to go bury its dead, will begin to
card indices of information nor Amen-folk, nor unanswered question marks, nor
occupants of the seats of the scornful. It ought to make us the adequate and
resourceful masters of living situations, whether in our own lonely lives or in society. Precedent and pattern are our servants not our masters. We are not here to continue the out-moded but to carry the present enterprises of life to victorious issues. A surgeon may have all the learning of the schools but when the patient is on the operating table, it is not the learning of the schools but his own resource, intelligence and power to meet the unexpected which carries him through. Our world today is sick through its persistent inability to meet its changing situations with free and creative resource. It needs surgeons who will not operate with one eye on the textbook and the other on the patient.

The economist quotes old maxims, diplomats quote old formulae, lawyers old precedents, politicians old platforms, the patriot old slogans and the theologian old creeds and the financial expert old market quotations. A plague on all their houses. We have sense enough to do better if we will use the sense we have. Everything within and without us is more plastic than we dream.

Education should give us men and women wise and strong enough to meet the fact with the truth and situations with vital resolutions. There is no answer today to our challenging problems save the intelligence, courage, dominant motives and free creative wits of the folk who are alive today, possess these faculties and, telling the dead past to go bury its dead, will begin to use them. We cannot secure disarmament in forty-eight epochal hours. If Geneva
would stop thinking in terms of blood stained pride, precedent and fallacy and think in terms of the interests and values of humanity. We can make our economics serve human need and our social machinery serve social well-being and our international machinery serve the ends of peace and order if only we can get enough disciplined, intelligent and uninhibited folk enough who will bring their free intelligence to bear on evilly or stupidly patterned situations, not as their subjects but as their masters. *That is what education*

Here is your chance and your challenge. Do not conform to old fears and factions or allow yourselves to be caught and stifled in ways of doing things and thinking things upon which the God of things as they are has passed a judgment before which they are falling in upon themselves. Your technical schools have taught you engineers to meet a situation when it arises out of your own trained and resourceful minds and left you free to do it—old way or new way but make it work. Society is in a desperate estate today for want of folk who will bring that same spirit to its economic, social, political, industrial issues. That is what your education is for.

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That and one final thing: to make us all rich in that wealth of the inner life which is the true wealth. No wise man will quarrel with education as an economic asset and still less with technical and professional education. We are likely in the future to need more and not less of that. Whether the truly significant ends of education can be or have been secured by the development
of technical education with the excessive specialization which has been the out-
standing feature of American education for the last long generation, I do not
know. Many disturbing aspects indicate that at least they have not. But
education is not in the final weighing of it to be tested by negotiable values.

It is meant to make us rich in appreciations and understandings, able if need
be to live simply and still to live nobly, finding our satisfactions in the
beauty of the world and art, lovers of dawns and sunsets and the pageantry of
the seasons, making kingdoms of our own minds.

There are other harvests to be reaped from Ohio fields than wheat
and corn, other satisfactions than place and power. There is an accessible and
generous comradeship of the wise and the good of all time amongst whom you are
now to be admitted. They will advise you in your perplexities, they ask only
to be invited to share your loneliness, they will furnish a plain room with a
company kings can not command. No life need to be poorly lived if you will
exercise the rights and privileges of the degrees to which you are so soon to
be admitted.

There are, says L. P. Jacks, two civilizations: the civilization
of power and the civilization of culture. Civilizations of power have hereto-
fore been greedy and wasteful. They have soaked the dust with blood and sac-
rificed their youth to their pride. They have begun by impoverishing their
neighbors and ended by ruining themselves. What they have gained has always
been at others cruel loss, nor have they ever held it long.

The civilization of culture know no race nor frontiers. Its wealth

is common-wealth and it can not enrich itself without enriching others. It

enables all its citizens and its gates are always open to whoever will keep its

laws and seek its ends. It has touched cities with glory, spread a garmenture

of beauty across the fields it tills, made little states great and outlasted

time. You are now—citizens of that civilization. Exalt and

maintain it, for if we can not secure it and displace with it the self-devouring

stupidities of our competitive civilizations of power—I see dark shadows down

the vistas of the years. An education like that is a priceless possession. The

gleam of it shines beyond the confines of time and sense. The roads it opens

lead beyond the horizons of time into the Unseen and Enduring and the children

of its light need fear no dark.

Last Christmas a dear friend in England sent me a little calendar

with a poem-prayer upon it. I have said enough that would be wise and is not.

I would end with Angus Watson’s prayer for if it be answered for you or you can

answer it for yourselves, you will be educated men and women.

"Give me a good digestion Lord,
And also something to digest.
Give me a healthy body, Lord,
With sense to keep it at its best,
Give me a healthy mind, Good Lord,
To keep the pure and good in sight,
Which, seeing sin, is not appalled,
But finds a way to set it right.
Give me a mind that is not bored,
That does not whimper, whine or sigh.
Don’t let me worry overmuch
About the fussy thing called "I"."
Give me a sense of humour, Lord,
Give me the grace to see a joke;
To get some happiness in life,
And pass it on to other folk."

The June shadows have lengthened, your Commencement Day is almost over. It remains only for your Alma Mater to give you your diplomas and dismiss you. She will, I think, give you more than parchment signed and sealed. She can, not unworthily, use the words which Virgil used when, having brought Dante by steep ascents and through many perils to the top of the Mount of Proving and about to give him over to other guides, he bade him farewell:

"With wit and skill I've brought thee to this gate;
Thy pleasure be thy guide henceforth, and now
Free art thou of the steep ways, free of the strait,
Await no more a word or sign from me;
Free, sane and upright, now thy will has grown,
And not to follow it were sin in thee;
Wherefore I set on the mitre and crown—"

is far as your University can crown and mitre you, she is now about to do—

having brought you to this gate—may it open for you upon noble and always ascending roads.

We from our various stations on the road, salute you, fellow pilgrims up the hills of time.