

Bevis, Howard Landis

Convocation Address

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DR. HOWARD L. BEVIS

Commencement - June 1940

Not being in the ministerial line of succession of college presidents, I have ventured with hesitation to take a text for my brief remarks. But, having ventured so far, I am impelled to take some liberties with the texts and, moreover, to take two texts instead of one. Finally, I have ventured to turn both texts upside down. The texts are: "Works without faith are dead" and "While there's hope there is life".

In the year 1910 I graduated, as I thought, for the last time. I had graduated from grade school, high school, university and law school. I had four sheepskins, one of which said that I was an A.B., one an LL. B., a third that I was entitled to be a lawyer, and a fourth that I was a Notary Public. I had accumulated a little store of book learning and a much smaller store of knowledge of the world, but with what knowledge I had I faced the world with confidence. Why indeed should I not have had confidence? This world was a square and solid place. It had well defined paths. I had been taught those paths. I knew the landmarks and the way to get there. Geography was a fixed and definite subject, the world had all been discovered, boundary lines had been drawn and, except perhaps for small and inconsequential changes which might occur, things were likely to remain as they were.

In the realm of government we thought we had the answer, democracy was the answer and if, perchance, a few countries had not accepted it, time would take care of that and things would fall into their proper places. In the realm of economics we had the answer. Private enterprise and free competition were the straight

highways to prosperity and those highways were marked by the common law, a triumph of human wisdom. For those who followed these paths success was assured. Hard work, integrity (reasonable integrity) alone were necessary.

All of this had the sanction of religion. This was indeed the way and paths were straight.

The year 1910 was thus a year of certainty. Now in the year 1940 when you are graduating, with perhaps fewer sheepskins, but more knowledge of the world, I venture to ask you: "Have you a confidence to match my confidence of thirty years ago?"

Geography has now become a jigsaw puzzle with pieces missing. Cartographers have even ceased to make maps until the world shall settle down. Government is no longer the assured abiding place of democracy. Democracy itself is pressed for its life at this very hour. In the realm of economics the theory of private enterprise is being crowded ever more closely by collectivism and in the realm of law the center of gravity has shifted until this is no longer so much a government of laws as a government of men.

Do you know the way to success? Somehow it seems to me that knowledge for all its growth and complexity is failing us. We have lost our way.

We of my generation with supreme confidence based our lives on knowledge. The processes of education would spread knowledge through the nation. Science would press back the frontiers of ignorance and yield us new wisdom and new powers; knowledge was the password to a better life; it would establish democracy and, if there were any remaining ills it would cure them. It would provide us with ever-mounting standards of living.

Firm in our belief, vast sums were appropriated for education and an army of trained people served its mighty cause. In its lower reaches and to a large extent in the higher ones as well it has been made free to all. Science has become the Aladdin's lamp which has dispelled the mysteries of nature and provided myriads of things undreamed of in 1910.

Yet the year 1940 is, I fear, for many of us a year of doubt, of uncertainty. Many of us have become individually helpless, some of us hopeless, and this uncertainty is reflecting itself in our thinking and in our daily lives. In the realm of business, to be on your own seems no longer a goal worth striving for. Even in the professions, the last stronghold of individualism, to hang out your own shingle no longer seems to be thought a possibility. The goal is now a payroll with reliance upon the company, or upon the government, or upon some extraneous force which will take care of us rather than upon our own initiative. We have succumbed to statistics. We accept the domination of the law of averages. A cult of senility has sprung up whose members believe that America is old, that there is no chance for the young to rise, no use wasting the days of their youth in work. We are unwilling to plan, to risk and to endure because, forsooth, we cannot see the end of the way.

All this, it seems to me, presents a challenge to college people which they dare not ignore. Are we as college people satisfied to find an undistinguished niche in some collectivist regime, to accept without a struggle a standard of living assigned to us as a group; to forego the adventure of business on our own?

To which you answer: "No, we are not satisfied, but how shall we know the way?" Knowledge alone does not show the way. Knowledge alone cannot give the answer. We are told that our years of growth are over, that the frontier is past, that competition is becoming keener, that regimentation is upon us and taxes take our profits. All these arguments I know and I could produce counter arguments which I believe would be as plausible; but I am persuaded that the question is not to be settled by argument and that the answer does not lie in knowledge.

The answer, in my thinking, lies in faith. Knowledge is a tool, an indispensable tool, but alone in our hands, it is inert and dead. Infused with faith, knowledge becomes irresistible, but without faith it is only potential power.

In my mind, our greatest need as college people is a new baptism of faith, a desire toward which we strive when we cannot see the way, a will to struggle through the night although we cannot see the dawn. "Faith is the substance of things hoped for, the evidence of things not seen."

No one, I dare say, has ever achieved greatness through knowledge alone, not Moses, nor Copernicus, nor Columbus, nor Edison, nor Hitler. Whatever we think of Hitler, unless we can match his faith, we may well look with apprehension to the future of our democracies. It is faith which unlooses our latent powers, sparks our knowledge and makes it irresistible.

Faith and faith alone will keep us alert, in continuous preparation for the opportunities to come. When Abraham Lincoln said: "I will study and prepare myself and some day my chance will come", he could not see the day, but the day did come and the measure of his great ability was his capacity for continued growth, growth

motivated by faith. Through such stimulation of our individual efforts we may find the opportunities which today we cannot see. That "tide in the affairs of men which taken at its flood leads on to fortune" had often been referred to as a tide which comes but once. Natural history tells us that tides come every day, but they come at a different hour every day and faith can make us ready to take advantage of them when they do come.

Opportunities rise all about us. Faith will help us to uncover them, to exploit them, and to seize them as they come within our reach. The only time we really grow to greatness is when we undertake tasks that are too big for us. If with faith we attempt things that are bigger than ourselves, somehow we find the strength to improve opportunities which without faith would pass forever beyond us.

As faith is the key word for the individual, so faith is the key word for the Commonwealth. Without it we shall not have the leadership to perpetuate our civilization for the future. College people must be relied upon increasingly to provide that leadership and with faith I am sure they can do it. Our society can succeed only if it has within it individuals who are capable of success and that capability depends upon their faith.

You ask me, "Faith in what?" And I say to you, faith in yourselves, faith in individual effort, faith in America, in free thought, in free speech, in free enterprise, faith in Providence which will not let humanity degenerate into a pack, faith in God, that God who said to the Prophet Ezekiel centuries ago: "Son of man, stand upon thy feet and I will speak unto thee."