

Commencement Address

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at

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Mine was the curious experience that having grown up wholly as a child of Manhattan I came of age knowing nothing of the fabled institutions of learning in the East, whilst feeling deeply involved in the life of two great middle western universities, Notre Dame and Ohio State.

It has been my fortune to have been awarded honorary degrees by both these institutions. And it has further been my fate to have done so in circumstances curiously reminiscent of that first, and to the young man, mythic encounter. One hesitates on the edge of the word, but something such as destiny seems at work.

For I have also, on each occasion, been required to speak for my honors, and there was no avoiding what was on my mind.

Football.

The ultimate ritual combat of American youth. Even to those who could only hear about it. I spoke to the point at Notre Dame:

One recalls...growing up in New York City in the poverty-ridden 1930's, and yet possessing in that Notre Dame football team a symbol of tribal might and valor that can stir the blood atingle to this day. O, the golden Saturday afternoons when, in the name of every Irish kid caught in the social wreckage of the Eastern slums, thunder

indeed shook down from the skies, and those mighty Polish tackles swamped the Navy...!

I was drawn to Ohio State by political not tribal conflict, but with attendant passions that linger still. In my first year of high school, in 1940, The Male Animal by James Thurber and Elliot Nugent opened on Broadway not blocks from where I actually lived. But for years thereafter a part of my imagination lived a few blocks from here, in Professor Tommy Turner's living room.

The living room of a pleasant, inexpensive little house. There is no distinction of architectural design, but someone with natural good taste has managed to make it look attractive and liveable on a very modest budget. \$2,500 a year, as one learns later on. (But enough for a maid, in those days!) To this setting that weekend of the Big Game came a cast of characters who surely will always live in Academe -- where, I would remind you, spirits can be long-lived indeed. The Enduring Professor Turner, intent on staying out of trouble but equally determined to read a letter of Bartolomeo Vanzetti to his class on English composition by non-professional writers. The Eternal Trustee Edward K. Keller who is damned if "anything Red -- or even Pink" would be taught at Ohio State, and doubly umbraged at the prospect that The Professor was "putting Lincoln and General Sherman in a class with Vanzetti!! "Americanism," says Big Ed, "is what we want taught here."

When the Long-Suffering Dean complains of 42 years

of being "kicked around in this institution by one Edward K. Keller after another..." the Eternal Trustee proclaims "There is only one Edward K. Keller!" and in truth, in our memories, Big Ed looms so large there really isn't room for another.

And then there is Michael Barnes the Ageless Editor of the Student Literary Magazine. And, oh, yes, the mighty Polish tackles Stanenkiwicz and Wierasocka who in the end and in the company of athlete and aesthete alike, sign the "red petition" vindicating The Professor and vanquishing "The Trustee.

But, of course, the desire among trustees that universities should teach a simple, wholesome brand of truth has never vanished. Most resist it -- there was, you will recall, only one Edward K. Keller. But some succumb. The desire to impose one's views on others is a natural one, and it would seem a university trusteeship is what theologians call a natural situation of sin. Sometimes what is demanded is a conformity of the right. Sometimes of the left. But always at bottom there is a fear of ideas.

"No sir," as Big Ed said, "...You put ideas of any kind into young people's heads, and the first thing you know, they start believing them."

It is ideas -- new ideas -- that such trustees will always fear and always seek to repress.

Equally, it is ideas which a true community of learning -- Ohio State then and Ohio State now -- will never fail to defend. I know, because I went to Ohio State 36 years

ago, went to the Big Game, read the Literary Magazine, signed the "red petition." I am just a little late in getting my degree. But that may be just as well, for the time may have come once more to speak to the issue of academic freedom, and to an especial peril which I do not believe is sufficiently perceived.

This peril may be succinctly stated. It is the peril that in nominal defense of academic freedom, the academic community will find itself participating in character assassination.

The process, incomparably more deadly than anything Big Ed could ever have conceived, is just as devastatingly simple.

An attack is made upon the views which a scholar is alleged to hold. But in fact he does not hold those views. To the contrary, his views have been wholly distorted, utterly misrepresented.

There is an outcry against these views. Boldly, however, the Dean of the Faculty or whomsoever stands forth to proclaim academic freedom. The freedom, that is, for scholars to propound whatever views they have come to.

The scholar protests that those are not his views. His defenders respond: Never fear, we will defend to the death the scholar's right to hold them.

The scholar protests...But the protests grow feebler. Acquire a self indulgent quality. Others begin to lose patience. Has not intellectual freedom been reaffirmed? What more does the wretch desire?

This is a formula for the success of the authoritarian mind. Dissent is not so much suppressed as it is discredited. In the 1950's we gave the name McCarthyism to a not dissimilar phenomenon when it appeared in the political world. But the present practice has crept into the life of our universities with but little notice and almost no resistance. We have domesticated McCarthyism -- but succumbed to it. A McCarthyism mostly of the left.

Observe the phenomenon here at Ohio State. A trustee is troubled by my ideas. I am charged with subversion. But I do not hold the ideas of which I am accused!

The storms of the 1960's have passed, and in the main we seem to have weathered them well enough. But I wonder. Should we not ask whether in the course of that protracted travail we got accustomed to a kind of complicity in the assaults of intolerance on the necessarily experimental and unavoidably disturbing life of the mind. We surely now can see that this assault comes from all points in the political spectrum. The Male Animal depicted the enemies of freedom as propertied men. Almost four decades of the 20th Century later, we know the matter to be more complex. We learn anew the tentativeness of all knowledge, the uncertainties of even the most fighting faiths. (Four decades later, for example, the agony of Sacco and Vanzetti is said by some to be a far more complicated matter than it would have seemed to a New York theatre audience of 1940.) All we know for sure is that freedom is the safest way of life there is -- and yet is always in danger.

Big Ed to the contrary, there is something bigger than the new Stadium. And I for one -- and I am sure I am not the only one -- would like to thank the student editors of The Lantern for attesting to this where I am concerned. I am proud to be your classmate, those of you graduating this year. If you ever get to thinking of me in the manner of Phillip Roth's alumni, let me sign the yearbook with the words of the earlier Elliot Nugent play about life at Ohio State, written with his father in 1925. The Poor Nut was the title, and the hero was one of those sorts who prefers to study his beloved algae rather than achieving glories on the athletic field. But he is induced to join in, wins the big race, and with it a Wisconsin co-ed, who, as the Nugents write, "knows Freud well, if not intimately." Physical glory of every description seems assured him, but in the end he turns it down.

"You are all trying to make me amount to something," he tells his teammates and coaches, "like you do -- well, I can't -- I'm inferior -- and doggone it, I'm gonna be inferior. I'm going to be a professor, whether it's immoral or not."