

(Address given by the Reverend Theodore M. Hesburgh, C.S.C., President, University of Notre Dame, at Commencement Exercises, University of Rhode Island, Kingston, Rhode Island, Monday, June 13, 1960)

### THE VALUE OF LIFE

One of the most popular endeavors today is the quest for goals, personal, national, international, and, even to some extent, interplanetary. As indoor sports go, this is a difficult one. In an affluent society, advertising tries to simplify, or should I say, vulgarize the quest for personal goals. The political parties are in the usual frenzied quadrennial quest for national goals: to be all things to all men, at least to those of voting age. The current most pressing international goal seems to be survival in its most elemental sense. This gives urgency to the astronautical quest to get off the earth while it is still here and unradioactive.

For all of you who graduate today, some of this goal searching may seem a little unreal. Getting yourself phased into this cosmic picture may seem unnecessary, or at least unprofitable with so many more immediate concerns facing you. Allow me to nudge you into this broader framework with a reasonably serious thought.

Did you ever stop to think that a hundred years ago you were nothing, if not a thought in the infinite mind of God of someone who could be and would

be some day. A hundred years hence you will, I believe, still be someone, somewhere, although for all that, only a statistic or a memory here on earth. Between these two focal points you live, well or badly. You affect the world and some few or many of the people in it, well or badly. You spend your days, these future days left to you, doing significant or trivial things. And when it is all summed up, one might say, as on television, this is your life.

All of life is a kind of looking ahead, <sup>in youth</sup> almost always to greener pastures, more exciting days, the fulfillment of dreams, security, and I suppose the satisfaction of having lived well. A larger part of our lifelong hope assumes that all of this will come true, if not inevitably, at least in due time. All of you who graduate today have earned your share of hopes. I can say in all sincerity that I hope your best hopes come true in the days ahead. But I must say something else: that nothing really worthwhile in life comes true automatically, and very little of real value comes true by chance. All of our lives are just about what we, with the grace of God, make them, and what we make of our lives reflects the goals or the values that we cherish and seek and establish throughout our days.

The important consideration at this juncture of your lives is, I believe, to have some conscious goals that will govern your days ahead. That they be conscious goals is the least that might be asked of your education. Woodrow

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Wilson once wrote that "the educated man is to be discovered by his point of view, by the temper of his mind, by his attitude towards life and his fair way of thinking. He can see; he can discriminate; he can combine ideas and see where they lead; he has insight and comprehension. His mind is a practiced instrument of appreciation. He has the knowledge of the world which no one can have who knows only his own world or only his own task." (Woodrow Wilson on Education, Harper and Brothers, 1958)

What is the alternative to this picture of a conscious, intelligent, discriminating view of your life with all its opportunities, challenges, and possibilities? The alternative is an uneducated, unconscious, passive point of view that is at the mercy of every wind of passing fancy - the ship without a rudder, the unquestioning, uncommitted person who drifts through life.

In other days, this latter attitude might have survived more easily in a world less full of tensions, less competitive, more stable and less changing. But today we face a situation that demands education and the fruits of the educated point of view, not just to get along, but to survive. In easier days, you could be born a peasant, live a peasant life, and die a peasant death. We have the picture of the Incas who were born in an unchanging stratified society on the high plains of the Andes. Or of the Africans who for centuries were born, lived

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and died within the radius of a few miles of jungle. We even have <sup>had</sup> periods of slower social change within the history of our own Western culture: A Renaissance that took a few centuries, an Industrial Revolution that took a few more. But now within a lifetime there can be witnessed the coming of electricity, automobiles, airplanes, telephones, radio, television, electronics, atomic power, fusion and fission, jets and rockets, satellites and deep space probes. There can also be witnessed a world whose outermost parts now are only split seconds apart by modern communicative devices, and yet a world where millions of people refuse to communicate with each other, and even threaten daily to destroy each other. And <sup>we</sup> you live in a world of great inequity which will give rise to even greater tensions. Ten per cent of the world's population living on the North American continent have 75% of the world's income. And if you want to change the figures around, 75% of the world's population receives no more than 10% of the world's income. Many of these people work longer and harder than we do. The twenty largest underdeveloped countries produce over half of the free world's industrial raw materials; but they themselves consume less than 5% of what they produce. Do not think of this as mere money or wealth, but of the things that wealth makes possible: food, clothing, shelter, medicine, education - or in a broader context, the reasonable material situation in which basic human dignity can be a reality and not a tragic fiction

or an unfulfilled dream. Recall that half of the world's population goes to bed hungry every night; that half of the world's children never see milk or medicine, that half of the people on the South American continent have never slept in a bed.

This then is the world that the educated person, the person with comprehension and insight must face: a world of explosive technological change, a world of gross, even inhuman inequity and rising tensions, a world, that to compound the complications, has had more net increase of population in the last fifty years than there were people existing on earth in the Eighteenth Century, a world that has used more natural resources in the past thirty years than in the whole history of the world before that.

Do you wonder then that I say to you that the least one might expect of your years of education is that you face the remaining years of your life in such a world with conscious goals that will give a dimension of significance, meaning and depth to your life. When I say goals, you might substitute other equally valid words: ideals, convictions, or values. I care not what words you choose, but I am sincerely concerned that you consciously and conscientiously subscribe to some deep-set and intelligent convictions regarding the direction of your life in the years to come.

While it may sound selfish at first glance, I think you might begin by asking yourself what you want out of life. At least this defines a goal. There

are no dearth of goals presented to you today. Most of the visible goals, however, are hardly worth more than a passing glance, if what Woodrow Wilson wrote of the educated man has any validity in your life. Take a quick look at the goals that emanate from Madison Avenue - they are pleasant to the touch, the taste, the eye - but by any ultimate standard they lack substance. You would not be alone in our country if you made them your total life goal: the ranch house, the sleek sports car, the Ivy look, the sophisticated vacation spots - in a word, the easy, comfortable life of security. Other nations have gone this way before us, and in Arnold Toynbee's sense, gone is the word. They exist no longer.

Am I saying here that there is something wrong in comfort, pleasure, sense satisfaction, material security, ease? No, nothing wrong per se, by themselves, as the philosophers say, but something terribly wrong if this Madison Avenue picture of life becomes your total goal in the days ahead. If you think that these things **alone** can satisfy you and totally motivate your days tomorrow, then you cannot truly discriminate, you do not really see where this motivation is leading you, your knowledge of life and of the human situation today is naive, and your insight is tantamount to blindness. Let me add something else which is not really original: You can, in fact, choose material goals as the end-all of life, and you can achieve them in small or large measure, but you will not be

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really happy, for man does not, indeed cannot, live by bread alone. We can ignore the spiritual dimension of our lives, but we ignore this at our own risk, and at the price of bartering the best for that which may be good, but infinitely less important and even less satisfying in the total picture of a human life.

At this point, I may most aptly refer you to the enigmatic and paradoxical words of Christ, our Lord: "A man must lose his life to gain it," or again, "It is better to give than to receive." May I suggest that the spiritual goals of life fall within these categories: they involve giving rather than receiving, they seem often to mean losing one's life, whereas in fact they fill a man with happiness and satisfaction beyond the capacity of any food or drink or material pleasure. Do you think that Albert Schweitzer is unhappy at Lambarene, in French Equatorial Africa, because he might have been a professor at a great German university? Do you think that Dr. Thomas Dooley is unhappy caring for the abandoned sick in Laos because he might have had a lucrative practice on Park Avenue? Do you think that your professors are unhappy here at the University because they might be making more money in industry? No, these people, and all people who have dedicated themselves to a higher cause have in a true sense

gained their lives by losing them, have found more joy in giving than in receiving, have lifted themselves to the height of that to which they have devoted themselves.

All of you cannot give in equal measure, but wherever you go, whatever you do, there are unchanging facts of human nature that will inevitably bear upon the meaning, significance, and importance of your lives in the days that lie ahead. To repeat what Woodrow Wilson said of the educated man: "He can see, he can discriminate, he can combine ideas and see where they lead; he has insight and comprehension."

Here then is your basic problem: the world is changing rapidly and will change even more explosively within your lifetime. The tensions will heighten throughout the world and, especially, in our country, endowed as it is with the mantle of world leadership at this time. What insight and comprehension will your life reflect - what impact will it have - what goals will consciously give your life meaning and direction in the days to come?

I need not say that my vote is for giving, for dedication, for ideals, values, and goals that transcend the quest for your own exclusive comfort, pleasure and personal security. What are some of the values and ideals that the present

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condition of man, the state of the world, and the whole historical moment seem to demand of educated people?

I would first commend to you the values that characterize the academic community in which you have been living: the high and continuing quest for truth, on every level, by every legitimate means. Commitment to this value has given us our universities, indeed our whole educational system. Here is the basic value of the scholars who have enlightened the minds of men and led them in the paths of wisdom. Here is the continual struggle of truth against error, the war against the blind forces of ignorance, prejudice, passion. No one of us is fully educated until we die. Only by lifelong commitment to truth, as we can daily learn truth, embrace it, and love it, do we rise above the vast army of those who feel instead of think, the great mass of those who accept all of their opinions and ideas, tailor-made from the columnists, commentators, and even from the funny-papers and cartoonists, unthinkingly, uncritically and blindly. Lifelong commitment to the pursuit of truth - who can hope to live a reasonable life in any measure without this value of the mind and of things intellectual as the very base of living.

Then there is the love of beauty in all its truest forms: commitment to this value has given us all the artists who have brightened our days with

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music, our dwellings with sculptury and painting, who have illumined our human situation with poetry, drama, and literature. The world is full of man-made ugliness and only a sense of discrimination can recognize the multiform beauty, God-made and man-made, that like sunlight brings bright flowers to blossom in the swamps and deserts of this world. The truest instinct of this value is to shun habitually that which cheapens human life, human love, and the rich tapestry of a world that mirrors God's perfection.

Then there are the great moral values that badly need commitment today: the passion for justice, for example, that engenders respect for law and order, basic human rights, all of the blessings of civilization that are made possible by intelligent freedom under the law, by personal integrity of life. Utter commitment to this value has given us our great lawyers, jurists, legislators - those who have given our world a dimension of order and rule that reflects the eternal law of God by way of natural law, divine and human ordinance. There are many today who want rights exclusively for themselves, but only obligations and in-human servitude for others. There are those who want to be a law to themselves, in whose lives justice to others and respect for basic human rights are nothing but a mockery or a special prerogative of those who happen to have been born with a white skin. Passion for justice will or will not be a value in your life. If

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it is, it will ennoble you and others, if it is not, injustice will degrade others and you, too.

I cannot refrain at this point from emphasizing that you graduates of the University of Rhode Island have a special contribution to make - because of the founder of this State and the tradition he first instilled here. Roger Williams was not popular in New England. He was in fact expelled from the center of it. Because of him and what he made of this little Commonwealth, his place of exile, this State was for more than two hundred years called Rogues Island and the State of Confusion. But America owes much to him and to your State, much that it could well ponder and practice today in our most serious present domestic crisis of civil rights.

Listen to what a great scholar has said of Roger Williams:

He was "certainly the most generous, most open-minded, most lovable of the Puritan emigrants - the truest Christian among many who sincerely desired to be Christian. He believed in men and in their native justice, and he spent his life freely in the cause of humanity. Neither race nor creed sundered him from his fellows; the Indian was his brother equally with the Englishman. He was a Leveler because he was convinced that society with its caste institutions dealt

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unjustly with the common man; he was a democrat because he believed that the end and object of the political state was the common well being; he was an iconoclast because he was convinced that the time had come when a new social order must be erected on the decay of the old." (V. L. Parrington, Main Currents of American Thought, Vol. I, pp. 74-75)

We are still fighting that battle, and none of you can disengage yourselves from taking a stand on this national blight that makes one tenth of the American people second class citizens, without truly equal opportunity in voting, education, housing, employment, or even in the administration of justice. We have had enough of compromise, of gentlemen's agreements, <sup>of</sup> restrictive covenants, of the myth of white superiority, of white citizen's councils. Roger Williams said: "I have not hid within my breast my soul's belief." In a world whose uncommitted peoples, one-third of all humanity, are almost entirely colored, let us who believe in freedom and justice for all not hide that belief within our breasts or deny it by our practices here at home. The cost of following Roger Williams' lead today is not exile, just courage. The whole world looks anxiously to America and expects a passion for justice that will make the promise of our Constitution and Bill of Rights come true for all, here and elsewhere. This

much we can say: without a burning commitment to justice on the part of every American, in every section of America and in every walk of life, the American Dream will not come true tomorrow or any day thereafter.

I have thus far spoken of some personal values that should characterize the life of the educated person: the quest for truth, the love of beauty, the passion for justice. We might now pass from these values that give deeper meaning to your personal life to other social values that somehow enhance the quality and style of our life as a nation, while also giving your own life a richer dimension of significance.

Something that is of dire need in the world today is a capacity for dedication, sacrifice, and hard work geared to excellence of performance. These values are in direct opposition to the current spirit of our age that panders to security, ease, and mediocrity. Try to think for a moment of any single advance that was made in our history by indolence, by the safe rather than the adventurous way, by the shoddy, undemanding performance. Whatever you do in the days to come, you may be sure of this one basic fact of life: your life will be as significant as those things to which you dedicate your days. To high dedication one must also join high performance worthy of this dedication. Without high dedication and

excellent performance in every age, there would have been no great religious or educational leaders, no outstanding scholars, artists, statesmen, scientists, doctors, lawyers, businessmen or engineers, no, not even any good husbands or wives, fathers or mothers. There is no substitute for dedication, sacrifice, and excellence of performance. There is no easy way to achieve that which is worthwhile and first-rate.

You will note that all of these values or goals that I have been commending to you are of a spiritual order: the undying quest for truth, the appreciation of beauty, the passion for justice, the capacity for dedication, sacrifice, and a personal commitment to that which is excellent. Consequently, I would at long last commend to you a final value: respect for that which is spiritual, that which transcends the body, its pleasures and its comforts. It is in the spiritual order of our mind and will that we are made in the ~~image~~ and likeness of God, and it is in respecting and using these higher qualities to their utmost that we best serve God, and man too.

In respecting God and the order which He has made, we are truest to ourselves and to our common mankind. I might add that in commitment to these spiritual values we are most likely to fill our days tomorrow with the kind of

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activity that makes for true human happiness, satisfaction, and significance, both in time and in eternity.

When one lists the monumental challenges that face us today - personally, nationally, and internationally - it may seem unrealistic, purely academic, or unduly idealistic to speak, as I have, of spiritual values and ideals. But, may I ask you, if you will glance backward on the thrilling history of our country what stands out in greater relief than the faith of Washington on his knees in the snow at Valley Forge, the hope of Jefferson in hammering out the great ideals of liberty and justice in the ringing sentences of our Declaration of Independence, the love of all mankind that kindled the heart of Lincoln in making his Emancipation Proclamation. Strip our past history of its heroic human values and its noble ideals and you have nothing of the greatness that we have inherited today.

The fundamental challenge to America and to each of you who graduate today is to advance this American Dream - by intelligence and wisdom, by integrity and courage, by faith and works - and to enable this dream to become more true in our day, for the millions of people here and abroad for whom America is the great white hope for an end to injustice, ignorance, hunger, disease, and the multiform kinds of more subtle human indignity that reduce man to a beast and this world to a monstrous zoo.

This hope in America will be an empty illusion if young educated Americans of our day lose their taste for adventure, dedication, hard work, excellence, and the will to stand above the fat, unthinking amorphous crowd. If passion attracts you more than compassion, security more than sacrifice, convenience more than consecration - then the tensions will continue to rise, inequities will multiply, the ruthless will enlarge their rule, and all unconscious and uncaring, we will witness the demise of mankind's hopes and humanity's honor - which are also our own. With half a world hungry for bread, we will rant against spending two billion dollars of our precious money <sup>for</sup> ~~on~~ foreign non-military aid while we continue to spend six billion annually on tobacco, nine billion on alcohol, and twenty billion on gambling.

At long last one must ask: what are you going to do about it? Even global problems must ultimately find solutions in the intelligent decisions and the moral convictions of individuals. If only you decide that you are going to think about these great burning issues of our times - and not leave their solutions entirely out of your dreams for the future - that is a beginning. If justice somehow plucks at your heart the next time you have the opportunity to help or hurt a Negro - even in the secret of your thoughts and judgments -



America will be that much richer. If you are determined to achieve excellence in whatever you do, despite the hard work and sacrifices it will demand; if you steel yourself to be honest despite all the cheap examples of cheating all around you; if you can find within you some good aspirations that transcend your own personal pleasure and indulgence, some call to dedication, some faint glimmer of heroism, something that will stretch your mind, and heart, and soul, in a word, that will enlarge your humanity, then thank God and give it a chance to grow and pray God that you are equal to the call and worthy of our great heritage.

I sincerely believe that there are <sup>still</sup> great days <sup>for America.</sup> ahead. You can coast with the crowd or be a part of that greatness.

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