

Commencement Address
Rhode Island Junior College
June 1, 1969

I am happy to be here today and to have this opportunity to share some thoughts with you. First, however, I want to congratulate you, the graduates, for your achievements and for the contributions you have made to the excellence of this young institution which in a short five years has acquired both stature and status; I want to congratulate also the faculty who have provided a meaningful and relevant education for you; and I want to congratulate and extend my personal and warm best wishes ^{my dear friend,} to your distinguished President, Dr. William F. Flanagan, whose scholarly attributes, whose humor, whose humanity, whose leadership have made bright the torch of learning within the ~~college~~ walls *of this college.*

It was the best of times, it was the worst of times, it was the age of wisdom, it was the age of foolishness, *it was the epoch of belief* it was the epoch of incredulity, it was the season of light, it was the season of darkness, it was the spring of hope, it was the winter of despair...

I suspect that those words, first used by Dickens to describe the stormy period of the French Revolution, may someday be aptly used to describe our own historical epoch.

One would have to be singularly insensitive to ignore the symptoms of restlessness and of restiveness in our own society and in the world at large. "The times they are a'changing," as the folk song puts it. We are, it seems to me, in the midst of one of the major crisis periods in the history of our species. Just what the future holds I do not pretend to know with certainty. (Assuming, please God, that there is a future for humanity on this planet and not just an atomic wasteland.) It does seem that the basic tendency of the vast sociological changes which are so radically affecting our world is towards unity, towards a keener sense of universal fraternity, and towards a fairer partition of the goods of this earth.

But that is but my personal prophecy. A more pressing matter is the development by each one of us of a set of realistic and relevant attitudes towards the phenomenon of social change itself.

I want to examine first a series of what I consider inadequate moral and psychological responses to the phenomenon of change. I term those responses "inadequate," yet I am well aware that on a certain level they may be profoundly appealing--and is any temptation stronger than an intellectual one?

The first inadequate response to the phenomenon of social change is that of wishing it away, of pretending that the world really is not essentially different from what it always has been. This is the response of the man who proclaims that there is nothing new under the sun, that all things pass, that if we just tread water everything will eventually be as it once was. The peaceful days of yesteryear (one cannot help wondering if they really were so peaceful as one recalls vague history book chapters about Civil War Draft Riots, the Pullman Strike, the Bonus March, and the like), those "halcyon days of yore" will come back--if only all these people would just stop shouting! This response increasingly reveals by itself its inherent invalidity. With the arrival of each morning's newspaper, it is increasingly clear that the "halcyon days of yore" just are not coming back; we will have to wait forever for this Godot. It increasingly seems that, in our epoch at least, the tendency of historical events is linear and not cyclical.

Moreover, those who hope for the return of an imagined past golden age of harmony usually tend to ignore, as I have already suggested, the fact that no prior historical period can be cited when justice was genuinely universal. In this light, it would seem profoundly immoral not to reject the past to the degree that the past was imperfect.

Quite similar to the man who earnestly hopes for what he considers to be the inevitable return of past harmony is the man who actively seeks to restore a former world as he imagines it. This is the Don Quixote who would reestablish, by force if need be, a hierarchal social order where fixity is the watchword and change the great enemy. Usually cloaking his goals beneath a narrow and perverted type of patriotism and beneath a respect for "tradition" which is but a code word for class and racial prejudice, this is the man whose dreams are fixated on his conception of the virile "glory" of San Juan hill, the quaint "charm" of the McGuffey reader, and the patrician "dignity" of Scarlett O'Hara's ante-bellum social life.

He will not admit that the past of which he dreams was in fact heavily tainted with elements of unabashed imperialism, pedagogical ignorance, and profound racism. What is more, this crusader of the Right blithely ignores the fact that the world of 1969 is different from the world of two or twelve decades ago. Instantaneous global communications do exist; weapons capable of continental annihilation do exist; above all the downtrodden of this earth have awakened to the possibility of a new and better form of existence.

These are the cold, hard, empirical facts of our modern world; their presence changes completely the rules of the game. In fact, the old game is not only irrelevant; it quite simply has ceased to be playable.

Yet, to my mind, inadequate responses to the phenomenon of social change are not the sole possession of benighted rightists. The very process of change itself can be perverted from within by the anarchists and nihilists whose number seems to multiply at moments of great crisis.

The anarchists and nihilists are those who would seize control of the forces of social change and direct them madly and blindly against all that is,

solely in order to rend irreparably the social fabric. These are men without a goal, without a vision, without an ideal. These are the haters and the destroyers, who--to my mind--represent the greatest danger to the movement of progressive social change and to those who are trying to give direction to that movement.

For, whereas the forces of reaction forthrightly condemn all social change and are thus clearly identifiable, the anarchists and nihilists speak the jargon of the constructive reformers--indeed, to give the devil his due, they understand the linear nature of the historical process. But, in the absence of any guiding ideal, any true love for suffering mankind, the anarchists and nihilists attempt to control neither the historical processes, whose existence they recognize, nor the darker forces within the heart of man. Yet, if these processes and forces are not checked to some extent by rational control, only rampage and chaos will result--as so much of history, past and present, so sadly demonstrates.

Last, but by no means the least prevalent, of inadequate responses to social change is that of "simplism." Human nature and human problems are complex; virtually no phenomenon is the result of a single cause, and virtually no problem can be solved by a single remedy. An appreciation of the complexity of the causes which create social problems and of the consequent complexity of the solutions to these problems should, in my opinion, be characteristic of the man who has truly studied these situations as they are. I would go so far as to say that an appreciation of multi-causality and of the necessity for multi-faceted solutions to human problems should be the chief fruit of a meaningful education.

It is very sad indeed to hear so many well-educated people propose single-level, formula-type solutions to social problems as complicated as racial injustice and racial hatreds, student discontent, and resistance to a bloody

foreign war. The man with the simple solution often speaks the loudest on current issues and proclaims the advantages of being free from doubt and intellectual complications; yet he is also the man who is the least tolerant of divergent opinions, and the least open to meaningful dialogue. Emerson has well said:

You may seek either truth or repose.
You must choose, for you cannot have
both.

I have deliberately devoted so much time to a catalog of inauthentic and inadequate responses to social change because I feel that, to some extent, one or all of these responses tempts each of us--particularly when the evidence of the rapidity and acuteness of social change is as ubiquitous as it is at present.

What I consider to be the only valid and adequate response to these phenomena should be clear by inference from all that I have already said. It is my opinion that the only realistic and adequate attitude in the face of social change is one of flexible rationality coupled with a determination to achieve beneficial goals through appropriate human endeavors.

It is vitally important for every person to be goal-centered, to have immediate and long-term aims which he carefully establishes in the light of an authentic value system--and which he continually reexamines in the light of his own lived experience and the opinions of prudent men. A lack of goal--centeredness is one of the most characteristic features of our age and one of its most notable ills. Far too many men are only "partly living," merely drifting from one day to the next with no sense of purpose or meaning. Again Emerson has well summarized in saying, "Most men lead lives of quiet desperation."

So I would implore every graduate today to realize the preciousness of the gift that is his life and to realize the importance of taking his existence

in hand and of living for something, hopefully something far greater and more altruistic than mere subsistence.

As for the question of social change which is our particular concern today, I would underline the importance of rationality in the pursuit of worthwhile goals. Believe me I am not using "rationality" as a code word for inaction or for the slavish acceptance of overt injustice. I am not so naive as to think that every oppressive condition, every social injustice can be obviated by mere debate. My faith in the essential reasonableness of human nature is not that deep.

I recognize and appreciate the necessity for strong and demonstrative tactics in the face of grave evils. I would insist, however, that these tactics be humane and non-violent.

The use of the sword only provokes others to use the sword: in such a context human values perish and animality emerges. Our rationality is our best defense against the hideous mockery of justice and reform that is the reign of the anarchists and nihilists.

This then is my message and my plea. We must be aware of and concerned about social change if we are to consider ourselves fully human. And while shunning the responses which I have termed inauthentic and inadequate, let us determine to join enlightened idealism, practical realism and determined rationality in an unceasing effort to both comprehend the ongoing processes of social change and to contribute effectively towards the realization of what is most desirable in those processes.

I conclude my remarks with a quotation from Lincoln, apropos of social change, which is as fully relevant today as it was over a century ago:

The dogmas of the quiet past are
inadequate to the stormy present...
As our case is new, so we must
think anew and act anew.