

[bracketed] Pt's said at Nahnemann Medical
College & Hospital
MESSAGE TO THIS YEAR'S GRADUATES
after 10:00 A.M. 6⁵⁴ Commencement 6/10/82

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For thirty years I have been addressing college and university graduates. The early ones are now the fathers and mothers of the sons and daughters I address today. For years, the message was fairly standard: Be good at what you do and keep learning; understand the problems and opportunities of the world you inhabit, especially the less fortunate parts of it; and, finally, be ready to do your bit, wherever you are, to make the world somewhat better for your passing through it.

This year, if one really reads the signs of the times, the message should be more insistent and even more dire. Not that the world has not always been full of problems. But this year, if one listens to the crescendo of protest around the world, if one reads Jonathan Schell's "Fate of the Earth," if one at long last faces head-on the nuclear threat that now forces itself insistently upon our consciousness, graduates must be reminded that they face a challenge that human beings have never faced before in the long history of humanity on earth.

The nuclear threat is indeed the greatest moral problem of all times. For the years of the nuclear age, we humans have been painting ourselves into a corner. As Albert Einstein said: "The splitting of the atom has changed everything save our modes of thinking and thus we drift towards unparalleled catastrophe." We did experience some moral revulsion at the time of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, not your generation, but ours. Then we escalated from A-bombs to H-bombs, from fusion to fission, from nuclear to

thermonuclear. In doing so, we multiplied by a million times the destructive power of those original terrors, the thin man and the fat man, dropped from B-29's over the skies of Japan in ^{August} ~~July~~ of 1945.

Then we graduated to more sophisticated delivery systems, intercontinental ballistic missiles, nuclear submarines and jet aircraft. Then we began to build tactical as well as strategic weapons, to speak of limited nuclear war, to delude ourselves with civil defense plans, ABM's, and all the rest. Now we begin to escalate into outer space, lessening the warning time from a half hour to a few minutes. Our whole future now depends on computers, faulty ones at that, and totally without judgment. We also face the total wipe-out of communications so that a mistake once started cannot be stopped and Doomsday is assured.

With a total of existing nuclear power, poised and ready, capable of destroying the world fourteen times over, thousands of pounds of TNT equivalent for every human being on earth, 50,000 warheads, what are we now planning, the Russians and we? To add more to the stockpile, to make the possibility of reversing creation even more probable.

No longer can we reject this probability as we so easily reject the thought of our own death. Your generation did not create this moral obscenity, this overarching horror. But you will live with it until it overtakes you, or your children, or your grandchildren, and all the world. The mathematical probabilities say sooner than later.

Perhaps the worst attitude is that nothing can be done about it, that tensions between nations cannot be relieved, that the ultimate destiny of all that is good and true and beautiful in this world is to be doomed to utter extinction in our times, that we are indeed without hope.

Do not believe it. Do not surrender hope. What one generation builds another can dismantle. Of course, it will call for creative action, great leadership, new initiatives, much negotiation between ourselves and the Russians, and the rest of the world, but not for too long. Time is on the wrong side of the balance. With your insistence, we will begin sooner rather than later to do what must be done: to put an end to the nuclear threat. But we must begin or there will be another kind of end: no more graduates with bright hopes for a better world yet to be created. Only a sea of coarse grass inhabited by insects, a wasted world; no more bright children, no more birds or trees, no more anything human, no one to love or be loved, only emptiness.

If there was ever a time for commencement, for beginning, it is now.

Rev. Theodore M. Hesburgh, C.S.C.
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