

ADDRESS TO THE GRADUANDS

CLASS OF '80

FACULTY OF SOCIAL WELFARE

UNIVERSITY OF CALGARY

April 19, 1980

Faculty Club

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In attempting to assemble my thoughts for this evening I, with my husband, began to reminisce about occasions, similar to this, in our lives. On these nights of celebration, we were exposed to a lot of high-sounding language, and phrases like “onward and upward” re-appeared in the speeches of valedictorians, principals, and deans. Each person involved in the production of an event such as this struggled to leave the audience with a phrase, a quote, a favorite poem... that would provide a light for them...

THROUGH THE MYSTERIES OF THE COMING YEARS.

Last evening, in the sanctity of my den, I joined that throng of people searching for the precisely correct thing to say. I exhausted my own set of “collectible quotes”. I perused An Irreverent and Thoroughly Incomplete Social History of Almost Everything. I scanned The Oxford Dictionary of Quotations (Third Edition). Time passed; I grew morose, and finally sank to consulting Bartlett’s Familiar Quotations. The wisdom of the ages had not been and could not be encapsulated in a single phrase, to be passed on to you. I was rescued from my growing hysteria by my companion, however, who manufactured a quote which, despite its bluntness, has a good deal of merit, and I offer it to you for your consideration, and your reflection:

“March toward your destiny... but be careful where you step.”

I attribute his insight in these matters more to his (mis)adventures as a city child, spending his summers on farms and ranches, than I do his training in another helping profession.

My remarks to you are in 2 parts (despite the admonitions of a former professor of mine, Canadian author, Dr. Eli Mandel, that things like this are always in three parts): the first, what faces you as you begin marching toward your destiny; the second, what you should try not to step in. And despite having spent nearly five years with Pincus and Minahan, and systems theory, I still have trouble with the concept of “boundary”. Put another way, you may have serious difficulty determining whether I am in Part I or Part II.

My own 24 students, back in Edmonton, have had an entire semester to adapt to my errant thought processes. You, I realize, have not. You have been spared the experience of your Edmonton-based brethren: i.e., the aftermath of a lengthy commentary by me, always at the end of the class, that begins with the innocent, Peter Falk comment, “Oh, one more thing...”

Marching Toward Your Destiny...

Seventeen years ago this month, I was a B.S.W. student who, with my approximately 110 classmates and the faculty of the University of Toronto School of Social Work, made ourselves objectionable in one of the better establishment hotels, by singing tongue-in-cheek and to the tune of “I’ve Got a Sixpence”:

“I’ve had assistance,
Jolly good assistance,
I’ve got assistance,
I’ve had it all my life.
I’ve got two bits to spend and two bits to lend,
And two bits to take home to my wife... poor wife.

No income tax to grieve me,
All programs are designed to relieve me
And I’m morally unfit, believe me,
But I’ve got assistance as my right...”¹

Later... much later in the evening, faced with going away, to our homes in Europe, Israel, China, and all parts of Canada... faced with saying farewell to a faculty (at least one-third of which we, as a student body, had tried to get fired), we sang a different tune. We kept the melody of "This Land Is Your Land", but we changed the words to "This field is your field..." This time, I will not give you the remainder of the words. They are, as your emcee pointed out to me on the telephone last night, embarrassingly hokey. What makes them so was not that group of faculty and students who so unashamedly sang them, but that it is now 1980. Let me explain.

My classmates and I graduated, as the U. of T. B.S.W. class of '63, into the heart of the expansive Sixties. We didn't know they were the expansive Sixties... and even at this age, I possess more hindsight than insight and foresight. (Caveat emptor, for the remainder of this speech!).

We floated through the Sixties, a comparatively rare breed: "trained" social workers. By and large, we were "in on the ground floor", as it were. We were promoted rapidly (sometimes, too rapidly), aided and abetted by seemingly unending provincially- and federally-funded programs, and a North American society that had declared a war on poverty.

In addition to a positive social climate, we as professionals in the field had a sense of community, of bond, between and among us. We believed in Mary Richmond, settlement houses, and social development in general. We had a rich heritage, even if as caseworkers, group workers, and community organization workers, we were often at one another's throats.

We grew older, and we gave up calling ourselves "social workers" (around the time we lost the war on poverty), and we called ourselves executive directors, managers, supervisors, professors, and deputy ministers. We went into the darkened tunnel of our vision in the Seventies... and it may rest with you to see a light, and to lead us out.

Being Careful Where To Step... ²

We were in and of the Seventies so immersed in it that we surrendered being the "observing class", surrendered being social critics. We gave up trying to understand the world, much less trying to change it.

We fought against the idea of a ruling class, in the past, with its tendency to create paternalism and dependency... and we never realized we traded the ruling class that affronted one equalitarian sensibilities for a more insidious one: the managerial elite, the M.B.A.'s who have begun to populate human service delivery systems. That we were not alone in our folly, that we were accompanied by other professional helping disciplines like medicine, teaching, psychology, and nursing is little consolation. We may have disliked the ruling class, the rich, in our society, but when we traded them for the managerial class, bureaucratizing our human service systems, I think we lost.

The rich, born or brought to privilege and power (and I include among them the professions) possessed attributes I fail to find in our managerial class. These attributes, which I found in all professions and in the "entitled", included discipline, courage, self-possession, pride, a pattern of repeated success over generations, insistence on their own authority and the authority of the past, responsibility to a public life as opposed to a solely private one, inter-generational continuity, and a powerful sense of duty and of community. Their wisdom, vision, usefulness, and common sense were used in one generation to leave a storehouse of treasure for the next.

In the Seventies, the North American culture gave up public lives for an emphasis on private lives, on a retreat from politics and the possibility of political solutions. We made narcissism the central theme of our lives; turning our attention from social problems to purely personal ones. We embarked on courses of

self-improvement: “Dealing With Anger”, “Explorations in Consciousness”, “Assertion and Interpersonal Skills Training”, “Self Identity: The Recurring Search”.³

We pursued “being real”, “finding our own space”, psychic improvement and mid-East religions, with fervor. At work, we had (in Lasck’s words) “paternalism without father” and at home we had “creative divorce”, the “fear of pleasure”, and “authenticity and awareness”. We never comprehended that alienation, purposeless, and anomie is abetted, not cured, by disengagement, dis-attachment and disconnectedness.

We trivialized private troubles and public issues. The here and now became important; the past and the future were irrelevant. At a personal level, we glorified non-possessiveness and tore the heart out of intimacy; at a public level, we dismantled and re-arranged social policies on whims and for political expediency, and we confined public debate to topics pre-selected by the managerial ruling class. We knew there was a system but failed to see who was in charge of it.

We trivialized the private and public conditions of our lives; i.e., is Woody Allen and his condescension really funny? Is Johnny Carson saying to the Academy Awards audience last Tuesday, “We are in the 168th day of the Academy Awards and President Carter is trying to free you...” really funny? What do Joe Clark and Pierre Trudeau jokes really mean? How is it that we tolerate the erasure of a man’s whole life and his work by a comedian’s comment? By anybody’s facile comments? Carlyle said,

“If Jesus Christ were to come today, people would not even crucify him. They would ask him to dinner, and hear what he had to say, and make fun of it”.

We thought we had liberated ourselves, and we had only proved Goethe (1749-1832) right:

“Whatever liberates our spirit without giving us self-control is disastrous”.

Marching Toward Your Destiny... Revisited

So you enter the Eighties. If you choose to remain rooted in the Seventies, and refuse to take an interest in anything beyond your own death (to paraphrase Bertrand Russell), go ahead....

I still believe in self-determination. If, however, you choose to go through a few years of unpleasant politics, if you choose to develop great moral discipline; if you choose to live at the interface between private troubles and public issues, both, instead of trivializing all public issues by making them personal, please join a great number of your colleagues. To quote M.B. Thornton (“The New Yorker”), “Royalty in a Democracy is anybody who cares”. Join the growing tip of your chosen profession and be rigorous, energized, and conflicted. Live with ambiguity.

Remember, while you struggle here, you are joining an international brotherhood/sisterhood. As you feel alone in your struggle in Western Canada, remember that there are others, too, who can’t tolerate inaction... think of Gerard Ssenkoloto, in exile in Lesotho, risking his life to sneak across the border of his country, under the protection of night, to meet with his colleagues... think of your Spanish colleagues, on their feet, shouting and cheering and crying on a hot August evening at Hebrew University in Tel Aviv, in 1978, celebrating the first time, since General Franco, that they were allowed out of their country to meet their international colleagues... think of James Baldwin’s words:

“The moment we cease to hold each other, the moment we break faith with one another, the sea engulfs and the light goes out.”

Join together, keep our traditions and our heritage... remain indignant at injustice all of your professional lives while being rational in action... save the rest of us and our ideals and our proud history as a foundation and add the uniqueness of your own involvement. We face nothing less now than the erosion and destruction of our profession by the 21st century. Should you decide to take employment in the field, only, as opposed to being part of the profession of social work in this global village, you will be the poorer... and so will be. It is hard to be bitterly in love with what we cannot prove. So, in the words of my companion

“March toward your destiny... but be careful where you step.”

...to which I add the words of the Professor Emeritus of this Faculty, Albert Commanor:

“Courage, mon amie!”

Footnotes

1. Words by Molly Hancock, grandmother, B.S.W. graduate in 1963, and class leader.
2. I am indebted to historian, Christopher Lasch, and his two major works: *Haven in a Heartless World: The American Family Besieged*, and *The Culture of Narcissism: American Life in an Age of Diminishing Expectations*.
3. These are actual course titles from the January-June, 1980, course selections of The University of Alberta, Faculty of Extension.
4. Paraphrasing Jon Swan's poem, "The Cure" in *The New Yorker*.