

REMARKS OF MARSHALL COLEMAN  
COMMENCEMENT - CHRISTOPHER NEWPORT COLLEGE  
MONDAY, JANUARY 8, 1979

IT IS A VERY SPECIAL PLEASURE FOR ME TO BE HERE TONIGHT.  
THOUGH IT DOESN'T SEEM SO LONG AS THAT, IT HAS BEEN 14  
YEARS SINCE I SAT IN A SIMILAR CEREMONY IN CHARLOTTESVILLE.  
I REMEMBER LITTLE THAT WAS SAID THEN, <sup>in fact don't remember who said it.</sup> BUT I AM SURE  
WE WERE TOLD TO KEEP ON GROWING, NOT TO GO TO SEED. "LET  
THIS BE A BEGINNING." THESE ARE THE WORDS OF THE COMMENCE-  
MENT SPEAKER. IT HAS A GOOD THEME, YET FEW WHO HEAR IT  
HEED IT.

COMMENCEMENT SPEAKERS NEVER TELL US WHY THEIR ADVICE TO  
KEEP ON LEARNING IS SO HARD TO FOLLOW. THOSE INTERESTED IN  
ADULT EDUCATION HAVE STRUGGLED HEROICALLY TO INCREASE OPPOR-  
TUNITIES. BUT WHAT REALLY STANDS IN THE WAY IS: AN INDIVI-  
DUAL'S OWN INTRICATELY DESIGNED, SELF-CONSTRUCTED PRISON,  
THAT IS, HIS INCAPACITY FOR ~~SELF~~-RENEWAL.

THERE ARE OBVIOUSLY MANY OF YOU WHO HAVE <sup>already</sup> STOPPED LEARN-  
ING IN CERTAIN DIMENSIONS OF YOUR LIVES ~~ALREADY~~. MOST OF US  
DO SETTLE INTO RATHER RIGID AND UNCHANGING VIEWS ABOUT THE  
WORLD AND ABOUT HOW THINGS SHOULD BE BY THE TIME WE ARE 25 OR  
30, AND MOST PEOPLE BY THE AGE OF 30 OR PERHAPS 35 STOP AC-  
QUIRING NEW SKILLS OR ATTITUDES IN ANY IMPORTANT PART OF <sup>our</sup> ~~THEIR~~  
LIVES.

WE NARROW THE SCOPE AND VARIETY OF OUR LIVES, WE SELECT AND PURSUE ONLY A FEW INTERESTS, AND WE SELECT CERTAIN--AND PAT--WAYS OF DOING THINGS. (PART OF THAT IS BECAUSE CHANGE IS RISKY, BECAUSE ROUTINE HAS TO BE ESTABLISHED. IT WAS THOREAU HIMSELF WHO LATER IN WRITING ABOUT WHY HE LEFT WALDEN POND DESCRIBED HOW SOON HE REALIZED THAT HE HAD WORN A PATH FROM WHERE HE SLEPT TO THE POND TO WHICH HE REPAIRED EACH DAY. AND HE LEFT "THE WORLD" TO ESCAPE ROUTINES! WE CERTAINLY CANNOT ESCAPE ROUTINES. BUT DO WE HAVE TO SUBMIT ENTIRELY TO THEM?)

LEARNING IS A RISKY BUSINESS AND IT CERTAINLY INVOLVES FAILURE. A CHILD LEARNS AT A REMARKABLE RATE IN INFANCY AND HE FAILS <sup>most</sup> ~~much~~ OF THE TIME AT WHAT HE TRIES. FAILURE SEEMS TO DISCOURAGE HIM VERY LITTLE. BUT IT SEEMS TO DISCOURAGE ADOLESCENTS MORE, AND, TO ABSOLUTELY TERRIFY ADULTS. THAT IS ONE OF THE REASONS WHY SO MANY OF US HAVE ELIMINATED A GREAT NUMBER OF THINGS THAT WE HAVE NO INTENTION OF TRYING AGAIN. EITHER BECAUSE WE TRIED THEM ONCE AND FAILED OR DID LESS WELL THAN WE THOUGHT WE SHOULD HAVE FOR OUR OWN SELF-ESTEEM. (WE EXPECT CHILDREN TO TRY NEW THINGS. WHY NOT ADULTS? HOW MANY WOMEN DO YOU KNOW FOR EXAMPLE WHO WILL CHANGE--OR TRY TO CHANGE--A WASHER IN A SPIGOT? HOW MANY MEN WILL MAKE A PIZZA? MOST OF US ARE AFRAID TO TAKE UP A NEW SPORT FOR FEAR OF FAILURE. LEARNING MUST CERTAINLY SUBSIDE UNLESS WE CAN FEAR FAILURE LESS.)

omit.



WHAT EXPLAINS MOTIVATION OR CREATIVITY? RICHARD MCKENNA, AUTHOR OF THE SAND PEBBLES, BELIEVES THAT "WE ALL BEGIN LIFE WITH A VAST FUND OF CREATIVE ENERGY AND LOSE IT ALONG THE WAY AT RATES WHICH VARY BETWEEN INDIVIDUALS." A STUDY WAS MADE SOME YEARS AGO OF GIFTED SCIENTISTS AND IT WAS FOUND THAT ONE OF THEIR STRIKING TRAITS WAS THEIR WILLINGNESS TO WORK HARD AND LONG HOURS. WE ARE ALL FAMILIAR WITH EDISON'S REMARK ABOUT INVENTION BEING 99% PERSPIRATION AND 1% INSPIRATION. AND WE KNOW THAT THERE ARE A NUMBER OF REMARKABLE CREATIVE PERFORMANCES THAT COME FROM YEARS OF PLAIN HARD WORK. WHAT IS IT THAT MOTIVATES SUCH PEOPLE?

~~MOTIVATION REMAINS SOMETHING OF A MYSTERY. CARLISLE~~  
<sup>Some</sup> ~~AND OTHERS~~ HAVE SUGGESTED THAT MOTIVATION AND ACHIEVEMENT COME THROUGH ADVERSITY AND WE OFTEN HEAR THE MODERN EXPLANATION THAT THE CURRENT LACK OF DRIVING FORCE IN OUR LIVES IS OWING TO TOO MUCH PROSPERITY. BUT IT IS SURELY TRUE THAT FOR EVERY TALENT THAT POVERTY HAS STIMULATED, IT HAS BLIGHTED A HUNDRED. PEOPLE UNDER SEVERE DEPRIVATION ARE NOT FREE TO EXPERIMENT AND TRY NEW WAYS OF DOING THINGS OR TO SEEK EXCELLENCE OF ACCOMPLISHMENT. <sup>OR EVEN TO</sup> ~~BUT YOU CAN~~ SEEK HAPPINESS -- WHICH ACCORDING TO GREEK DEFINITION IS THE "EXERCISE OF VITAL POWERS ALONG LINES OF EXCELLENCE."

JOHN GARDNER IN DISCUSSING THE SUBJECT OF ACCOMPLISHMENT IN HIS MARVELOUS BOOK EXCELLENCE, TALKS ABOUT THE NECESSITY TO HONOR EXCELLENCE, EVEN TO DEMAND IT IN EVERY SOCIETALLY ACCEPTABLE HUMAN ACTIVITY, HOWEVER HUMBLE; AND TO SCORN SHODDINESS, HOWEVER EXALTED THE ACTIVITY.

HE SAID:

"(A)N EXCELLENT PLUMBER IS INFINITELY MORE ADMIRABLE THAN AN INCOMPETENT PHILOSOPHER. THE SOCIETY WHICH SCORNS EXCELLENT PLUMBING BECAUSE PLUMBING IS A HUMBLE ACTIVITY AND TOLERATES SHODDINESS IN PHILOSOPHY BECAUSE IT IS AN EXALTED ACTIVITY WILL HAVE NEITHER GOOD PLUMBING NOR GOOD PHILOSOPHY. NEITHER ITS PIPES NOR ITS THEORIES WILL HOLD WATER."

(DISAPPOINTMENTS MAY FOLLOW BUT THE WILLINGNESS TO EXPERIMENT, TO SEEK OUT, HAS BEEN THE BEST FRIEND THIS COUNTRY HAS HAD.)

YOU KNOW OF COURSE THAT YOU ARE GRADUATING IN A FASCINATING TIME IN WHICH TO LIVE. (OF COURSE THERE IS NO ALTERNATIVE.) AND ALSO PROBABLY ONE OF THE MOST DIFFICULT TIMES TO LIVE IN. ~~CLEARLY THERE IS A KIND OF MALAISE WHICH HAS OVERTAKEN THE WESTERN WORLD. BUT AS SUGGESTED BY WALTER LIPPMANN, IT HAS NOTHING REALLY TO DO WITH COMMUNISM, VIOLENCE OR THE CORRUPTION OF POLITICS, BUT~~

~~"... BY THE IMPORT OF SCIENCE UPON RELIGIOUS CERTAINTY AND OF TECHNOLOGICAL PROGRESS UPON THE SETTLED ORDER OF THE FAMILY CLASS, AND COMMUNITY ... IT COMES FROM BEING LOST IN A UNIVERSE WHERE THE MEANING OF LIFE AND THE SOCIAL ORDER ARE NO LONGER GIVEN FROM ON HIGH AND TRANSMITTED FROM THE ANCESTORS, BUT HAVE TO BE INVENTED AND DISCOVERED AND EXPERIMENTED WITH BY EACH LOWLY INDIVIDUAL FOR HIMSELF."~~

BUT DISSATISFACTION WITH THE PRESENT WON'T HELP -- AND IS  
NO NEW THING UNDER THE SUN. LISTEN TO THE NOSTALGIA FOR AN  
OLDER MORE RIGHTEOUS TIME:

TO WHOM CAN I SPEAK TODAY?

THE GENTLE MAN HAS PERISHED?

THE VIOLENT MAN HAS ACCESS TO EVERYBODY?

TO WHOM CAN I SPEAK TODAY?

THE INIQUITY THAT SMITES THE LAND.

IT HAS NO END.

TO WHOM CAN I SPEAK TODAY?

THERE ARE NO RIGHTEOUS MEN?

THE EARTH IS SURRENDERED TO CRIMINALS.

THESE WORDS SOUND SO MODERN. THEY WERE WRITTEN FOUR THOUSAND  
YEARS AGO BY AN EGYPTIAN CONTEMPLATING SUICIDE.

THOUGH THIS GENERATION <sup>which I repres. + some of you do,</sup> HAS GREVIOUSLY SINNED, IT IS A  
GENERATION WHICH HAS BEEN WILLING TO FACE UNPLEASANT FACTS  
ABOUT ITSELF -- AND ABOUT ITS INSTITUTIONS -- AND IN FACING  
THOSE UNPLEASANT FACTS IT HAS BEEN A GENERATION WHICH HAS  
PROVED THAT IT CAN LEARN FROM MISTAKES -- REDRESS LEGITIMATE  
GRIEVANCES -- AND CORRECT ABUSES OF POWER.

THIS IS A GENERATION WHICH HAS SOUGHT A LARGER MEASURE  
OF FREEDOM FOR THE INDIVIDUAL MAN OR WOMAN TO SEEK THEIR OWN  
GOALS IN THEIR OWN WAY -- AND WHILE WE MAY RECOIL FROM SOME  
OF THE MORE EXTREME MANIFESTATIONS OF INDIVIDUALISM -- I  
STILL COUNT IT A HEALTHY THING ON BALANCE -- AND WHEN VIEWED  
IN PERSPECTIVE.



DESPITE SOME TRAGIC BLUNDERS AND ERRORS OF JUDGMENT OUR RECORD IS NOT SO BAD AS WE MAY BE TEMPTED TO THINK. WE ARE TOO CLOSE TO IT; BUT I FOR ONE BELIEVE THAT HISTORY WILL RECORD THESE LAST TWENTY YEARS AS AMONG THE MOST FRUITFUL AND CREATIVE IN AMERICAN HISTORY.

THIS HAS BEEN A GENERATION WHICH HAS INSISTED ON AN END TO OFFICIAL HYPOCRISY -- WHICH HAS INSISTED THAT THE COUNTRY LIVE UP TO THE CONSTITUTION -- THAT IT LIVE UP TO THE THINGS IN WHICH WE PROFESS TO BELIEVE -- AND WHICH ARE ENSHRINED IN THE TITLE DEEDS OF AMERICAN DEMOCRACY -- PUT THERE BY THE FOUNDING FATHERS.

THIS IS A GENERATION WHICH SAID THAT WE MUST ADDRESS THE CANCER OF RACISM -- THAT WE MUST BRING THE BLACK MAN INTO THE AMERICAN MAINSTREAM -- THAT WE MUST ATTEMPT AS BEST WE CAN TO REDRESS IN A SINGLE GENERATION THE WRONGS AND INJUSTICES PERPETUATED BY MANY GENERATIONS.

THIS IS A GENERATION WHICH SAID THAT SOMETHING HAD TO BE DONE ABOUT DISCRIMINATION AGAINST WOMEN AND ROLE STEREOTYPING FOR WOMEN.

EDUCATION *that you have bn provided & I hope will continue,* GIVES US THE OPPORTUNITY TO STAND ON THE SHOULDERS OF ALL THOSE WHO HAVE GONE BEFORE. EDUCATION IS ECONOMICALLY PROFITABLE. BUT THERE IS SOMETHING ELSE ABOUT IT.

PERHAPS IT WAS BEST SAID BY THE WIZARD MERLYN TO WART,  
THE ONCE AND FUTURE KING, YOUNG ARTHUR, IN T. H. WHITE'S  
THE SWORD IN THE STONE:

"THE BEST THING FOR BEING SAID IS TO LEARN SOME-  
THING. THAT IS THE ONLY THING THAT NEVER FAILS.  
YOU MAY GROW OLD AND TREMBLING IN YOUR ANATOMIES,  
YOU MAY LIE AWAKE AT NIGHT LISTENING TO THE DISORDER  
OF YOUR VEINS, YOU MAY MISS YOUR ONLY LOVE, YOU MAY  
SEE THE WORLD ABOUT YOU DEVASTATED BY EVIL LUNATICS,  
OR KNOW YOUR HONOR TRAMPLED IN THE SEWERS OF BASER  
MINDS. THERE IS ONLY ONE THING FOR IT THEN -- TO  
LEARN. LEARN WHY THE WORLD WAGS AND WHAT WAGS IT.  
THAT IS THE ONLY THING WHICH THE MIND CAN NEVER  
EXHAUST, NEVER ALIENATE, NEVER BE TORTURED BY,  
NEVER FEAR OR DISTRUST, AND NEVER DREAM OF REGRETTING.  
LEARNING IS THE THING FOR YOU."

CONSIDER THIS EVENING, IN THE MIDDLE OF CERTAIN  
EXCITEMENT AND EMOTION: PERHAPS LEARNING IS THE THING FOR  
YOU. (MY ONLY MESSAGE REALLY IS TO SUGGEST THAT YOU  
CONTINUE AS YOU HAVE THESE PAST FOUR YEARS TO FIND OUT  
ABOUT THINGS.)