

PROBLEMS OF PERMISSIVENESS

Thank you for letting me share with you the warmth and nostalgia, the joy and the gratitude, the delight and the fun of the commencement morning. Somehow I feel sure that the thousands of young men and women receiving baccalaureate degrees across this nation this month respond to the notion of commencement with a somewhat lyrical, if not cynical, sense of humor. Since I am a good decade past that magic age of thirty, I ought to approach this platform knowing that there is no chance of communication between thee and me. Let me assure you that at least I shall not deal out to you any of the old platitudes about entering out into the world, about entering into life. To say such things to a generation that has lived much in this world would be ludicrous indeed.

You have lived your entire lives in a permissive culture which is at the same time part of a world which controls your actions and your very lives. Young men you know and love are being drafted to fight in a war about which many of you have ambivalent if not negative feelings. At such moments when you and I seem powerless in the powerful grasp of a mass society, we struggle to try to understand our responsibility for the very power of the society of which we are a part.

Raised and educated in a permissive society which has granted you the favors of affluence, you are baffled as you realize that that society often becomes rigid and rejects your attempts to modify it in any way.

It seems to me that students all over this nation are asking really radical questions about the nature of authority. Is the authority of a nation, of a church, of a corporation, ever absolute? Is there any formula for ethical or moral behavior that holds in every case in every time? Is man really responsible to authority and/or is he responsible for authority? Are you as individuals

or is some superstructure above or around you the real author of your actions?

A couple of years ago I had an intriguing conversation with a magnificent older gentleman in the St. Louis area. We have been friends for a long time. Despite the fact that he is ultra-right politically and though he recognizes me as a liberal Democrat, he continues to support me and the emerging nation we call Webster College. On this particular day, I was in his office to work with him in raising a substantial amount of money for the college. He immediately jumped me about the early news of students burning draft cards. "You see," said he, "it's all this permissive education that you believe in that brings about this kind of nonsense." I answered, "maybe that's so, my friend, but let me ask you some questions." I then asked him what he would have done had he been a member of Nazi Germany in the early thirties. I told him that I hoped with every fiber of my being that I would have committed operational treason, that I would have harbored Jews. I am not sure I would have had the insight or the guts to do so, but I hope that I would have. He agreed that he could see some credibility for this position. "If this is so," I said, "do we not at least have to admit the possibility that operational treason at some point at some time might be heroic virtue?" He answered quickly, "Yes, but not in the United States." We then went on to discuss the whole business of moral responsibility in your generation at this moment in time.

The position I want to take with you this morning is essentially the position I took with him that morning in his office. It is not yet a popular position with my own generation or with many of my colleagues charged with responsible authority. My position is quite simple. Unless we in authority in the universities, in the churches, in the corporations, and in the state and federal governments have the simplicity, the humility, and the courage to face the possibility that there is always at least a .000000...001 probability that authority should

be put in functional question by responsible deviant behavior, then you indeed should charge us with credibility gaps that may indeed widen into chasms. Only if we admit this .000000...001 probability that operational treason may be heroic virtue, is there any viability in our insisting that the weight of authority in most cases may hold .999999999... force and effectiveness. If absolute obedience to absolute authority is always virtue, then Eichmann was the greatest of the saints.

I want to suggest to you this morning that you and your children and your children's children's children's children will come to moral responsibility in your personal lives and in the societies you will continue to make only if you begin to understand and to incorporate what it means to be a finite man in finite time. The norm of behavior, the laws under which we live today are the attempt of other finite men in finite time to come to terms with their fallibility, to make the best approximations they could manage given the limitations of their in-sights at the time of their decision-making. If you and I believe that we indeed live in an evolutionary world, then we see that world and all its artifacts as continuing approximations toward approximated goals. I am becoming more and more convinced that man is defined in his realization of his finiteness, of his fallibility, and of his responsibility in acting within his limitations. If men or nations were compelled to believe that the answers they propose today are final and irrevocable, I submit that both men and nations would be rendered immobile.

#### KENNEDY - CUBA ANECDOTE

I have the courage to act because I so profoundly believe that you and your generation breathing down my back and eager to seize the reins from my hands will modify the contribution which I and my generation will make, both because

and in spite of our successes and our failures. Each man's vision of his personal and social responsibilities at this moment is some paradoxical resolution of the expanding and limiting power of his experience. When one has dealt with the problems of college administration or of world government over a period of many years, one indeed has a range of experience that contributes to vision. But roads travelled over and over again have an obvious facility for turning into ruts. This is why we are so dependent on the corrective and often disruptive power of your own inexperience which will propose to us the alternative behavior which our very experience blocks us from seeing.

A fine scientist friend of mine giving another commencement address a couple of years ago made the statement that all committees ought to be made up only of those who would be responsible in carrying out the decisions of the committees. His second criterion for committee makeup was that all such committees ought to include the very best professionals in a field and always some very bright amateurs. The old may very often be the very best professionals, but only the young, the uninitiated, can play the role of the very bright amateurs who ask the brash and sometimes rash questions opening up new vistas and new possibilities for man and men.

All of us gathered here this morning, the faculty and administration of Skidmore, the graduating seniors, their parents and their friends, are aware of the mounting tensions in domestic and foreign affairs which have become not the exception but the very day-to-day realities of our lives. The emerging minorities at home and the emerging nations abroad have begun to discover the power of authority. They have begun to author their own actions and to bear the consequences of making personal decisions. No longer is man content to be <sup>the</sup> passive recipient of the "charity" of more favored men or of more favored nations. The generation represented by this graduating class either blasphemes God or sees it as a

blasphemy to God if religion becomes the guardian of the status quo. What kind of father would bless the selfishness of one brother who would use his status to hold down his younger brother?

Perhaps only a few grandparents in the audience this morning remember with any first-hand knowledge the company town of less than a century ago. Company towns in which one man controlled the destiny and the day-to-day life of all other men and their families in that town. Much like the plantation system of master and slave, the day-to-day life in many ways depended on the benevolence of the master. But that day is gone. It seems to me that man is struggling between two radically different notions of society. The tribal culture, the imperial system, the absolute monarchy, the monastic cloister: all had their internal consistency in earlier ages. In such systems the only concept of obedience was obedience to authority, and this kind of obedience was the only path to moral responsibility. In such systems, the subject was morally responsible if he obeyed, and the authority was morally responsible if he gave orders. When we begin to realize the terrible responsibility of decision-making, we do not, I believe, necessarily join the marchers in the latest protest, whatever it may be. When we begin to realize the terrible responsibility of decision-making, we may, however, risk ourselves and our reputations to act responsibly according to our conscience. Every rational system, every constitutional government, every institutional form has been forged out of the new and growing experience of men. The very notion of subsidiary democracy, of representative government is dependent on forming responsible deciders of their own destiny.

John J. Chapman, writing at the turn of the century stated that "perhaps all truths whether moral or economic, must be worked out in real life before they are discovered by the student." He gave as an illustration the activity of William Lloyd Garrison, a man of action, which preceded by several years that of Emerson, who was his prophet. He insists that both of them were parts of one revolution.

Your generation, it seems to me, is irrevocably cast in the role of action in an open world emerging from the isolations of tribal cultures. Like it or not, you must forge out the new systems which can cope with the passion for integration and internationalism and religious ecumenism which are surging everywhere in our world. The tribal code and mores of self-contained and isolated little worlds are no longer viable because the tribes are no longer impregnable. Men and societies must learn to integrate themselves, somehow to come to terms with the conflicting views of other men and other worlds around them. Tribal cultures were supportive of clannish arrogance, whether it was in a school, an ethnic community, or in a nation. The world society where instant communication is becoming more and more possible, and even inevitable, cannot fall back on these kinds of external crutch moralities. To the man indoctrinated in the formula kind of moral code, the divergent moral behavior of the young seems always to be licentious. Indeed, you the young, would politely laugh at me were I to suggest that all of your deviant behavior was moral heroism. But you and I both know that the hippy community and the bastions of black power are not categorically the powers of darkness, while the orthodox status quo represents the powers of light.

If peace on earth is more than a fiction of the imagination, or worse, a Machiavellian rationalization for war mongering, then your actions, reached through the anguish of responsible decision-making, must forge for the generations to come new concepts of world government. If the family of man, even in this nation, is not to be a figment of the imagination, or a sentimental rationalization or white "charity," then your generation must continue to invent those deviant actions which will save us from ourselves.

Small men in great nations will, rather, do everything in their power to preserve the status quo. They may, indeed, be successful in their own lifetime and preserve for themselves and their clans the supremacy of their station. But

great men and great women in great and in emerging nations will invest themselves in the force of the future. They will become responsible for authority, and through their authorship, they will continue to invent a world in which their children's children's children's children will indeed rise up and call them blessed. Perhaps it is merciful that none of us know which of you in this commencement class will choose the first or the last investment. If your education has permitted you -- indeed compelled you -- to assume the responsibility for making decisions and living with their consequences, many of you, I believe, will invest in the force of the future.

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