

Fall Convocation

September 1965-

A few minutes ago, Mrs. Stanard, who is Director of our Public Information Bureau, told me that she had had a call from the St. Louis Globe Democrat and they said to her "Did you not give us the title of Sister Jacqueline's speech as VOICE AND THE COLLEGE COMMUNITY?" Mrs. Stanard said she had and they said "Well, it just went out on the AP wire as VICE AND THE COLLEGE COMMUNITY." The latest report is that they stopped the wire, and in case I am burned at the stake tonight or you are burned at the stake for me, know that this is indeed the story of our lives.

I do want to speak with you today about VOICE AND COLLEGE COMMUNITY. Some of you know that during the past two weeks Sister Mary Rhodes and I shared in the formation of what I am going to call a new community. It was a seminar in Innovation in Undergraduate Education held at Tufts University and shared in by some forty people from across the country from various kinds of colleges and universities and from many disciplines going from mathematics and physics to writing and political science to every field in the disciplines. But it was a community so caught up in these two weeks in ideas pregnant to the extent that they must almost take existence in action. One such idea originating with a novelist-playwright, John Hawkes, whom we came to love, fascinated first the section on literary art and then began to infuse the conference as a whole. Mr. Hawkes, a professor of writing at Brown University, but most important a writer himself, is thought by many to be one of the rising young novelists of our time. He did miserably in Freshman English at Harvard, dropped out of college, and returned after the war. Now, some fifteen years later, under a Ford Foundation grant, he has just finished a sabbatical year working with the San Francisco Playhouse. It was his first real involvement in theatre after several years of writing novels. He has come out of the experience convinced that the central force of all effective communication--in written or spoken form--is the finding and the developing of a personal voice.

Let me repeat for you an anecdote which I think is significant. Hawkes watched a very good actor working with a young student at Stanford trying to read a Shakesperian lyric. The lyric, in the reading, was a collection of empty words. Then the actor asked the student to read it to another actor -- to assume that the actor was in great grief and to give him the pure beauty of the lyric as a gift. There was no phony attempt to match the situation of the lyric with the situation of the grief, only an attempt to give a personal and beautiful gift to another person who was in grief. The lyric, in the reading, this time began to be lyrical. Then the actor asked the student to stand behind the grieving man, to rub his shoulders and neck muscles as he spoke the words of the gift-lyric. The lyric, in this reading, was pure beauty. The student had found his own voice in an imaginative, but nevertheless real situation. He could at that point face an audience and speak the lyric with conviction and sensitivity, perhaps even with the wondrous

quality of unfeigned spontaneity of a man who has relaxed enough to accept himself, to speak with his own voice, to trust it in the speaking and to trust those who will hear it or read it.

I share this notion at some length with you today because I believe it has a real lever force on helping us, you and me, understand the whole business of making a speech, of making a piece of writing, or making a college, of making a world, and of making a life. Somehow, each of us must find his or her voice, be willing to hear the sound of that voice in spoken and written word and to live with the sincerity of those words at any and at every moment. Your voice, my voice will be shared with many others, will be formed by the interplay with many others -- but my voice can never be a copy of any if it is to be real, neither can it be a synthesis of many other voices. The real joy and the real terror -- the mystery of life -- is to speak to life as it exists at any given moment, to open oneself to life speaking to us at any given moment, speaking to us always through persons and events and physical phenomena. The man or woman who is afraid to respond will never find a voice. The young student at Stanford who found his voice by giving a gift-lyric to a grieving man opened himself, even in physical movement, to the aches of that grieving man. A genuine response is never hollow words or the cold and hollow detachment of an intellectual scheme. A genuine response is the caring and care-full honesty, the genuine spontaneity of one man for another, or of one man for all the other men who live or will live.

E.M. Forster speaks to this point in a powerful essay entitled "What I Believe," written in England in 1939. He says:

"One must be fond of people and trust them if one is not to make a mess of life, and it is therefore essential that they should not let one down. They often do. The moral of which is that I must, myself, be as reliable as possible, and this I try to be. But reliability is not a matter of contract--that is the main difference between the world of personal relationships and the world of business relationships. It is a matter for the heart, which signs no documents. In other words, reliability is impossible unless there is a natural warmth. Most men possess this warmth, though they often have bad luck and get chilled. Most of them, even when they are politicians, want to keep faith. And one can, at all events, show one's own little light here, one's own poor little trembling flame, with the knowledge that it is not the only light that is shining in the darkness, and not the only one which the darkness does not comprehend. Personal relations are despised today. They are regarded as bourgeois luxuries, as products of a time of fair weather which is now past, and we are urged to get rid of them, and to dedicate ourselves to some movement or cause instead. I hate the idea of causes, and if I had to choose between betraying my country and betraying my friend, I hope I should have the guts to betray my country. Such a choice may scandalize the modern reader, and

he may stretch out his patriotic hand to the telephone (like the McCartheyites and the John Birchers) at once and ring up the police. It would not have shocked Dante, though. Dante places Brutus and Cassius in the lowest circle of Hell because they had chosen to betray their friend Julius Caesar rather than their country Rome. Probably one will not be asked to make such an agonizing choice. Still, there lies at the back of every creed something terrible and hard for which the worshipper may one day be required to suffer, and there is even a terror and a hardness in this creed of personal relationships, urbane and mild though it sounds. Love and loyalty to an individual can run counter to the claims of the State. When they do -- down with the State, say I, which means that the State would down me.

"This brings me along to Democracy, 'even Love, the Beloved Republic, which feeds upon Freedom and lives.' Democracy is not a Beloved Republic really, and never will be. But it is less hateful than other contemporary forms of government, and to that extent it deserves our support. It does start from the assumption that the individual is important, and all types are needed to make a civilization. It does not divide its citizens into the bossers and the bossed-- as an efficiency-regime tends to do. The people I admire most are those who are sensitive and want to create something or discover something, and do not see life in terms of power, and such people get more of a chance under a democracy than elsewhere. They found religions, great or small, or they produce literature and art, or they do disinterested scientific research, or they may be what is called 'ordinary people,' who are creative in their private lives, bring up their children decently, for instance, or help their neighbours. All these people need to express themselves; they cannot do so unless society allows them liberty to do so, and they society which allows them most liberty is a democracy.

"Democracy has another merit. It allows criticism, and if there is not public criticism there are bound to be hushed-up scandals. That is why I believe in the Press, despite all its lies and vulgarity, and why I believe in Parliament. Parliament is often sneered at because it is a Talking Shop. I believe in it because it is a talking shop. I believe in the Private Member who makes himself a nuisance. He gets snubbed and is told that he is cranky or ill-informed, but he does expose abuses which would otherwise never have been mentioned. Occasionally, too, a well-meaning public official starts losing his head in the cause of efficiency, and thinks himself God Almighty. Such officials are particularly frequent in the Home Office. Well, there will be questions about them in Parliament sooner or later, and then they will have to mind their steps. Whether Parliament is either a representative body or an efficient one is questionable, but I value it because it criticises and talks, and because its chatter gets widely reported.

"So Two Cheers for Democracy: one because it admits variety and two because it permits criticism. Two cheers are quite enough: there is no occasion to give three."

This is one of the longest quotes I have ever given in a public speech and I think I have a right to quote such a long passage in a speech today, in a speech which dedicates itself to the subject of voice, because I think I can speak Forster's words with my own voice, because they are words I recognize from the depths of my own being and recognize in another human being and speak not his words but my own through his.

Mr. Forster spoke with a real voice in 1939 in a world just awakening to the reality of Fascist Spain and Nazi Germany. His own democracy and our own were being forced to listen and even to respond to voices which were bringing about the destruction of six-million Jews, voices that were silencing public criticism, voices that were dividing "citizens into bossers and the bossed -- as an efficiency regime tends to do." And the democratic world found its voice almost too late, paid and made all civilization pay in the anguish and tragedy of World War II for the voice it could not or would not find until terror was in sight. And when it found its voice it responded in the voice of atom bombs, a voice no free man ever wants to use again. The democratic world is always in such danger, because freedom of speech implies the freedom not to speak, the freedom of refusing to take a stand to respond to life as one sees it oneself rather than as one feels one is expected to see it. I would maintain that there is no voice of democracy, only the voices of democracy, as many voices as there are real persons, responsible decision-makers in a society. A chaotic world indeed if there be as many voices as there are persons. Chaotic and dynamic and productive in the hold-together tension force of atoms in a molecule, acting and reacting, speaking and responding in a force of dynamic unity.

If there is a person in a family who is discouraged from finding his voice, the family is in trouble. If there is a person in a college who is discouraged from finding his voice, the college is in trouble. If there is a person in the church who is discouraged from finding his voice, the church is in trouble. If there is a person in a nation who is discouraged from finding his voice, that nation is in trouble. If there is a person in the world who is discouraged from finding his voice, the world is in trouble. They are bound to be in trouble, because the family, the college, the church, the nation, the world exist for persons and inasmuch as they deny personal dignity to any person they have literally sold their birth rights -- their right to existence.

It takes a family of deep courage and faith to create a climate that encourages the youngest member to find and develop his voice. It takes a college community, a church, a nation, and a world of deepening courage and faith to create that climate too. The faith is faith in the potential of personhood

and the courage, I believe, is in direct ratio to the depth of that faith in the potential of persons. If I really believe in an Aryan supremacy of any kind in the Hitler sense, I try to create a world, be it a small world or the great world which will be a society of the bosses and the bossed, the tellers and the told, the supervisors and the subjects, the dispensers of rules and regulations. If I really believe in a real democracy, if I really believe in human rights (of which civil rights are an important but limited part), I try to create a world, be it a college classroom, a college campus, a parish, a city, or the world-at-large, which will be a society of co-searchers, a society of co-learners, a society of caring conversationalists who speak with a real voice and listen to other real voices in the conviction that only so can we see and know and do a little more together. And in the seeing and the knowing of the little more together, we may be able to do a little more together.

We often hear speeches (or give them), we often write articles (or read them) on the subject of freedom and responsibility. I would like to suggest that we rather see freedom as the necessary climate in which authority and responsibility operate. The authority of an author who signs his work, who speaks with his voice, his conviction, his very soul. Such an authority, such an authorship produces something worth saying only if the author is responding, is responsible, to reality in more than a superficial way. We have all been part of small talk, the words that fill up silence but do not touch our persons. Small talk is probably unimportant if it encompasses only picayune things though it can destroy a man or woman if he lets his life be dominated by this kind of mock heroic. But small talk is a kind of prostitution if it speaks to great issues, if it speaks hollow words in response -- or lack of response -- to real persons living real lives of joy and anguish because the speaker cannot or will not respond to those real persons.

Economics and education, politics and theology, faculties and student bodies can talk about issues or they can speak to issues, speak to those issues in the persons involved in the issues by allowing themselves to become involved to some degree in the situations that make the issues. And if you do not become involved in some way in a real way in the situations that make the issues, then and only then do I think you or I am guilty of the prostitution of great issues by small talk by superficial gossip by uninformed and non responsible comments. I speak to you today with the only voice I can find, my voice calling out to yours for response -- real response -- so that I can respond to you so that the climate of freedom in the college community (which only our voices, yours and mine, can create) will produce authority and responsibility in each one of us. Not authority in me and responsibility in you, but the shared commitment of co-learners, co-searchers who believe that I will find my voice as you find yours (you will find yours as I find mine) and the growing force of those voices of democracy will have its own hold-together tension force of atoms in a mole-

cule, acting and reacting, speaking and responding in a force of unity.

And I will have the courage to find my own voice, inasmuch as I trust you to let me find it and you the youngest student in the audience will have the courage to find your own voice, inasmuch as I your president and these your faculty and equally important that student sitting next to you conveys to you the trust of letting you find your own voice.

Because this work even of free thinkers is afraid of this kind of honesty, afraid to speak it, afraid to expect it, afraid to develop it because such honesty produces the chaos which is inseparable from freedom. The chaos which takes a trustful and and a courageous man to live with chaos at any given moment and try to bring structure out of the chaos and responsibility out of the chaos. But this is indeed a frightening kind of honesty.

If persons, some called administrators, some called faculty, some called students, but all co-learners, co-searchers, contemplative human beings who haven't a ghost of a show of knowing what life is really all about in one life time, can engage in such an action-conversation at Webster College during this year, our voices will have something to say to a world and will elicit an important response. But it is important to each of us and to the world that the action-conversation in which we will be involved not fall into small talk but touch and be touched by Mullanphy and Mississippi, by Vietnam and Vatican II. We must not be content to carry the sandwich-board signs of the latest developments at Mullanphy and Mississippi, in Vietnam or in Vatican II, the sandwich-board signs which record the latest pronouncements of the voices of authority. If we really believe that the Church means we are the people of God and that the Spirit speaks in each of the members, we will find our voices in the college and in the world. Then and only then can we become the authors of our own actions responding to a real world and coming to a real moral integrity which can exist only in the human person who is not looking for a crutch or an easy way out. If we open our persons to such a real world, if we open our persons to other real persons, we will find our voices and they will be heard, but more wondrously (most wondrously of all) we will begin to find ourselves.