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THE AGE OF QUICKENED CONSCIENCE

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The Age of Quickened Conscience

BACCALAUREATE DISCOURSE

BY PRESIDENT ANGELL, DELIVERED JUNE 14

If any proof is needed to show that men are made with an instinct for associated life, not for individual isolation, it is furnished by the frequent spectacle of the rapid spread through a whole region or a whole people of some taste or passion. It may be a fancy for some game, as croquet or tennis or base ball, and in the space of a few months a whole nation is devoting all its leisure hours to it; or to rise to higher objects the passion for revolution in a few months seizes on the citizens of France and overturns the throne which has stood unshaken for centuries. So the cry of Peter, the Crusader, suddenly startles all western Europe and shakes the continent beneath the tread of armies, inflamed with the unquenchable passion to deliver the holy sepulchre from the hand of the Saracen. It is not surprising therefore that the fire of religious zeal should at times as in 1857, when once kindled, spread even through the market places and that the halls of the money changers should become the scene of prayer and of penitent confession. It is not strange that as in our own time, at least in the middle west, the passion for popular education should be spreading everywhere and overflowing school and college and university with eager youth longing to train themselves in the most efficient manner for business or professions.

Since this imitative spirit, the social instinct, the sympathetic impulse, have so led mankind to act together in masses towards some common end, we need not regard it as astonishing that to our great delight we are witnessing a new awakening of conscience all over the nation. How or why it appeared at exactly this time it may not be easy to say. And for the purpose of this discussion it may not be important to decide. But this awakening manifests itself in a great variety of ways.

Its reaction in our own country against intemperance in drinking has been so sudden and has spread over so wide a territory and among communities where it was unlooked for that the movement has seemed almost incredible. Even in Germany and France and England science is beginning to warn the public that reform in drinking habits is essential to the preservation of national vigor, and that a higher morality is essential to the protection of the public health.

But especially has indignation been excited at malfeasance in the management of great corporations, in the discharge of the duties of public office, in the betrayal of fiduciary trusts. No doubt in the excited state of the public mind reckless charges have been made against innocent corporations and individuals; and have been widely and unjustly circulated before the accused have had opportunity to defend or explain their acts. But even those who condemn such unjust attacks or who deem extravagant the language used in assailing some who are justly criticised confess that there are many public evils rightly and severely complained of.

So the halls of legislation, both state and federal, have been for months resounding with discussions of the most effective legislation to prevent misdeeds of the kind referred to. The courts have been busy trying persons accused of them, and the President with his accustomed vigor of utterance has been appealing to Congress and to the people in stimulation

of a sound public sentiment in the maintainance of honesty.

I need not say to you who have been here for the two or three years that among students there has been a wholesome revolt against certain abuses in what we call college politics, and that this has done not a little to purify the atmosphere of college life.

If we look beyond our own neighborhood and even beyond our own country we find that throughout the civilized world there is a deep feeling that a readjustment is needed in the relations of the employer and employed, that there is a dangerous chasm between labor and capital, that somehow in many cases the workingman is not receiving his shares of the products which his industry is instrumental in creating. However men may differ in their proposed solution of the problem presented by this difficulty, yet the consciences of many capitalists are prompting them to study the problem with as much honesty and sincerity as the poorest laborer brings to it. Never was there a time when the Christian thinkers of the world were so earnestly seeking what remedy the gospels of Christ have for the ailments of the social and economic organization of mankind.

Now this new condition of things, this widespread quickening of conscience is a great, palpable fact which deeply concerns all of you, who are just going out into active life. You cannot, if you would, utterly disregard it.

First, it is a grave warning not to try for success by failing to reckon with this state of public conscience. The legislator who gives himself to the wretched work of drafting laws so that they may be easily evaded, the attorney who makes a special business of helping crafty men evade wholesome laws, the physician who by quackery and pretense seeks opportunities to trifle with human life or to conceal crime, the engineer who draws papers so as to further plans of fraudulent contractors, the

teacher who organizes and conducts his school so as to make sure of drawing inordinate compensation from wealthy parents rather than impart solid instruction to his pupils, the captains of industry who coin their gains out of the life-blood of helpless and impoverished operatives, these and all others of kindred spirit, whatever their vocation, will hereafter face a public more vigilant in exposing and more merciless in punishing their sins than the generation that has just passed from the stage.

I will not dwell on the lesson of warning for I trust you do not need it. The American students as a rule leave their studies with high ideals of character and conduct. But it is well for you to have a clear preception of the environment in which you will find yourselves, I prefer, however, to point this out to you rather as an appeal than as a personal warning. I mean by this that you should regard this awakening of the public conscience, which we so clearly recognize, as an appeal to you to throw yourselves into your work with the purpose to do all in your power to strengthen this determination of the people to maintain public virtue.

I count you as peculiarly fortunate in going into active life in so propitious circumstances. I heartily congratulate you on it. I recall no time in the past half century when one going from college into professional, official or business life could find it so easy and so helpful to himself to set his moral standards high and hold to them. The people at large are everywhere in the mood to welcome men with such standards, to employ them, to give them such positions of trust and responsibility as educated men have a right to aspire to. They are not looking for cunning tricksters, but for earnest, sensible, well equipped men, who can stand "four-square" to all the winds of temptation and honorably serve their day and generation. They wish unselfish, ungrasping men in great industries, who in the spirit of their Lord and Master shall remember the brotherhood of

man. It is for you to say whether you will prove yourselves worthy of the times upon which you have fallen. As you launch your craft this week for the long voyage before you, favoring gales and propitious currents are waiting to help you to a happy haven.

We are this week to lay the corner stone of the Memorial Building which shall keep green the memory of the brave and patriotic young men who, standing where you stand to-day, willingly sacrificed all their prospects in life and poured out their blood on southern fields that you and I might dwell here in peace and prosperity to-day. Do you not sometimes envy them the chance which came to them to make so glorious a record and to render the University and the country forever their debtor? That peculiar fortune can never be yours. But a fortune hardly less glorious is open to you all. You have the chance in this age to be what the Apostle calls "a crown of rejoicing" to the University by lives so pure and noble that she will be proud to enroll your names on the tablets of her memory, and some of you by lives so effective and conspicuous that she will wish to place your names on the tablets of bronze by the side of the young heroes of our wars.

The colleges and universities of the country are about to be subjected to a severe test. The public seems convinced that they are furnishing the intellectual training to fit their graduates for useful service in every vocation. Never were these graduates more in demand, whereas a few years ago many questioned whether a college training afforded the best preparation for certain pursuits, especially for business and for engineering. Now there seems to be a pretty general consensus of opinion even among those who emphasize what they are pleased to call a practical education that the college or the university or the technical school furnishes the best mental outfit for life in most vocations.

But now it is to be demonstrated whether with the intellectual outfit our graduates carry away from the

University that high moral purpose which the quickened conscience of our day is going to demand of all upon whom the seal of public approbation is to be set. No intellectual furniture will supply the lack of that. No institution will long command public esteem, whose graduates do not command the confidence of the communities in which they dwell. Hence it is that the teachers urge with an insistence that often seems to the undergraduate excessive and puritanical that he shall in his college life cherish high ideals of character and life. It is the habits formed at that age that are to abide and shape the future career. The habits you have to-day are likely to be for most of you the determining factors in the years-in which you are to make your reputation. If we, your instructors, have felt called to give some of you friendly monitions at times, it was because we saw in your present the presage of your future. We are often criticised because we do not impart ethical and spiritual ideals with a compulsory force. But that is impossible with persons of the age of college students. We can affect them only by example and by personal persuasion and warning. Perhaps we do not employ those means enough. But really, when we come down to the hard facts, the shaping of the student's moral and spiritual ideal and purpose is his individual work, and in the last analysis can be done by none other than himself. And so it is that you come up to this eventful day with your character, whatever it is, shaped by yourself during all these formative years. That is the moral capital with which you go forth to your destiny. Not that it is complete and unchangeable. Not that you cannot yet repair your errors. Not that you need despair of moral growth and improvement, if they are needed. But your reputation and that of the University are largely committed to you as you are to-day. Hence for our sake as well as for yours we look with such intense interest upon you, as you turn your steps from our doors, and we follow you

with our sympathy through all the trials and vicissitudes of your career.

For notwithstanding what I have said to you concerning your good fortune in going out into the world when there is such a widespread awakening of conscience, it is still true that along your path you will meet not a few who will ridicule your scruples, and by example and by advice will strive to persuade you that the discreditable roads are the short and sure roads to success. They will paint for you the contrast between the practical wisdom of the sharper in the market place and the mere theories of the professor in the class-room to the sore disadvantage of the latter. They will argue to convince you that it is by the shrewd tricks of the unscrupulous politician rather than by the straightforward march of the upright soul that most men have reached positions of eminence. These assaults upon your intelligence and your honesty will be repeated in so many forms and with such untiring assiduity and seductiveness that you are in danger of having your confidence in your own opinions and in your own conscience shaken and weakened. You will need to have your self-reliance reinforced constantly by an inspection of the solid moral ground on which you are standing to-day. But I adjure you to follow the great Apostle's counsel when he says "take unto you the whole armour of God that you may be able to withstand in the evil day, and, having done all, to stand."

In spite of what I have said at the outset about our instinct for associated life and our spirit of imitation, we should remember that if we are to build character on a stable and enduring foundation, we must not trust merely to being borne along on the current of opinion and feeling which is moving our community. We must place ourselves with deliberation and purpose, regardless of the sentiments of others, in right relations to God. Life is personal. To your own master every one of you stands or falls. It is

not the question whether we are doing as well as our neighbors. Their consciences do not furnish the measure by which we are to be tried. Public sentiment does not always furnish a safe, permanent standard of right conduct. Like the tide, it ebbs and flows. It may be your high calling at times to confront a debased public opinion on some subject with the lofty moral standard which your conscience void of offence towards God and man has erected in your heart. What shall be the test of the standard? It must be that which is found in the life and teachings of our Lord Jesus Christ. Philosophers have framed many theories of right living. But the simplest and best, the only one which so moulds human character that it reflects the divine image and glorifies our humble lives with the spirit of righteousness and truth, is found in the example and teaching of our Lord.

One of the most striking and encouraging characteristics of the last decade is the increasing power of the life and teachings of Jesus over large classes of men, who hold themselves aloof from churches. In Europe as well as in America associations of laborers who have persuaded themselves that the great ecclesiastical organizations are controlled by men who lack sympathy with them have confessed that He is their friend, and that His instructions and His example are full of hope and cheer for them. Even many in non-Christian nations who have not abandoned their old religions have come to see and acknowledge the charm of His life. He is gradually conquering the world. He is fulfilling the prediction He made in full view of the great sacrifice He was to make, "If I be lifted up, I will draw all men to myself." In this age of quickened conscience, may you with the help of the Divine spirit yield yourselves up completely to His gracious influence and find in Him your guide, your exemplar and your Savior.



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