

Remarks by the Honorable Frank M. Coffin
U. S. Circuit Judge, U. S. Court of Appeals
for the First Circuit
at the
Commencement Exercises of the Cape Elisabeth High School
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On The Importance of Being Yourself

The fateful moment is at hand in the tribal ritual of graduation - the commencement address. All over this country in over 30,000 high schools and 2,500 colleges and universities, students await the event stoically; parents, accustomed to the privilege of turning off speeches with a twist of a knob, find themselves a captive audience; teachers and school administrators count the minutes until they can call their time their own; and speakers, who thought in the quiet of their studies that they had a great message to give, look at the skeptical if not hostile faces before them and pray for speedy deliverance.

No one has ever probed the logic of all this. Why, after four years of exposure to science and the humanities, visiting new realms and using the most advanced techniques, is it thought a good idea to call in someone who would flunk most of the courses to try to distill the wisdom of life in twenty minutes? I suspect this ancient rite has more voodoo than logic in it. I suspect that my role is that of the witchdoctor or the rabbit's foot - to bestow the blessings and good wishes of the community on you. If I am expected to give you a key to life, it is a ceremonial key which will unlock no more doors than a key to a city.

The first thing I did to prepare for this exercise was to look around and see what the theme was this year, for the class of '66. I see by the papers that you are supposed to keep this country strong, to modernize the art and science of government, to enlighten the practice of diplomacy, to prevent a resurgence of McCarthyism, and to eradicate urban ugliness among a thousand or so other things. You are to be - if you did not know it - "the generation of involvement", "the swinging generation", and "the protest generation". Either that, or as one expert has it, you may turn out to be middle aged "apathetics".

I reflected on some commencement speeches of my own. I had difficulty remembering them. And then I realized they had the same fate as the hundreds of thousands of other such speeches - almost immediate oblivion. Perhaps the reason is that, geared to absorbing occasional droplets of wisdom throughout the year, we simply cannot bring ourselves, on one day in June each year, to digest so rich a diet.

The fare I chose for today's serving is not a full course meal. It is more in the nature of a breakfast, and not an elaborate one at that. My theme is "The Importance of Being Yourself". I could have said "The Difficulty of Being Yourself". For this is one of the hardest and most important tasks you face.

It used to be taken for granted that everyone was an individual. And there were so many rugged individuals that the chief task of education was to smooth the edges and polish the surface so that individuals could work effectively together. But in the world of

today there are few opportunities to do useful work except with a great many other people - whether we speak of government, business, education, or other fields. We are increasingly a society where the building blocks are much larger than individuals. These are the towns, school districts, states, labor unions, great industries, educational institutions, foundations, churches, trade and professional associations, and committees across the land.

TV, movies, national magazines, supermarkets, transistor radios, discount records, and paperback books are within the reach of nearly everybody. As a society, we are more and more homogenized. To keep afloat as an individual in this sea of togetherness is no easy accomplishment. Your task in this respect is such harder than that faced by your mother and father. True, you have had a better start. Already you know more mathematics, biology, physics, and languages than they did at your age. You are on the whole healthier, have had better homes, food, clothes, and equipment. But if you have more things working for you, you also have more working against you. You are under far more intensive competitive pressures. You are part of the post-war baby boom and you are entering a society that is growing both bigger and younger. I used to think of a nation of 136 million; you will see a nation of 436 million. But you are in the middle of not only an educational and a demographic revolution but of a technological one as well. For automation and cybernetics mean that fewer people will be needed to produce more goods. Our goods-producing society will increasingly become a service-providing and leisure-using society. And with bigness and automation and widely shared leisure will come pressures on space and privacy and toward standardization and depersonalization.

So, while you are the most highly favored youth in our history, you are also pawns of the most intense competition, and look forward to the dubious conditions of population density, automation, and social homogenization.

One of the toughest and least mentioned battles you will fight is for the defense and preservation of yourself as an individual. In all of the advice which your elders pass on to you, there is a wealth of wisdom about what you should do in life, what you should be for, and what you should be against. But there is little thought given to what kind of a person you should be. And yet, even if each graduating class should devote itself as never before to the causes of citizenship and if all the advice were carried out, we could wind up with the most efficient and prosperous society, with a good life for all - but a society peopled by dull, drab, fat, and complacent individuals. Even the dissenters could be pretty uninteresting.

There are some bargain basement routes to individualism. One is the individualism of eccentric dress. This has its kicks but really means no more than exchanging one tribal costume for another. A second route is that of habitual protest. I do not speak of involvement in a protest demonstration or movement as a matter of your own decision prompted by your own conscience. But to rally to every flag of protest as a conditioned reflex is about as individualistic as a flock of lemmings following their leader into the sea. And a third way is to be really far out - to sit out this society as unworthy of your tastes and talents, to be above this "madding throng". The extreme version of this way is LSD and other narcotics. This is the abandonment of individualism. This is oblivion.

The job of being an individual is not easily done. It takes a lifetime of decisions, many little ones, and some big ones. There is no royal road. And no formula. But, as a

starter, I would suggest three "Don't's" and three "Do's".

As for the Don't's", they have to do with resisting various pressures about deciding what you want to do in life. The first pressure is that of time. Don't be in too much of a hurry. If you are going on to college, don't feel that you have to decide now on your career direction. You may very well see yourself, your interests, and your talents quite differently one, two, or three years from now. If you are not going on to college, there is all the more reason not to make a final judgment now, for the opportunities of further training and education are more widespread than ever before. In a year or so you may decide to take advantage of them. Use the next few years to keep your antennae working. Take time to know yourself and to explore the opportunities of the future. Suspend judgment.

A second "Don't" has to do not with when you decide on what you want to do but what you decide. Don't be pressured into choosing a vocation or profession simply because it is available, expected of you, fashionable, or highly paid. On the other hand, don't be obstinate and resist advice for the sake of proving your independence. In thinking about your future, don't assume that the opportunities of your future will be the same as those of the past. You live on the threshold of a major reshaping of the work of our world and you should be thinking of that work, not as it is done in the '60's but as it will be done for the rest of this century and two or three decades in the next.

I have pointed earlier to the threat of automation and the lessened need for humans to work at producing goods. There is a positive side to this - the need for humans to work with humans in extending needed services. The new manpower needs of this country in the long decades ahead for you are in the fields of education, health, social services, cultural activity, economic research and development at home and overseas, conservation, recreation, and government - local, state, national, and international.

Whether we assess our domestic or foreign programs, national or international, in rich countries or in poor, at the federal, state, or local level, in government or in nongovernmental agencies, there is already a serious shortage of people equipped with skill, wisdom, and motivation. I urge you to anticipate what is beginning to be obvious: that the needs of our society are in the process of radical change. It is far better that we produce trained people for the jobs and careers of the future than that we find ourselves trying to salvage and retrain a generation already lost because of its blind preparation for needs that no longer exist.

In addition to the "Don't's" about the "when" and "what" of decision regarding your future, I have a "where". Don't rule out Maine as a location for your life and work. It may be that there are simply no opportunities here for the kind of work you want to do. But don't be too sure. As yet we have not developed efficient ways of determining job or professional opportunities for young people in this state. You will have to take the initiative in asking, writing, even visiting other communities. But I suspect your inquiries will meet a widespread willingness to help. The effort may not be successful, but it is worth making. In any event, even though your work carries you away for a while, keep alert to opportunities of the future. For I have no doubt that, in the decades ahead, Maine, which has always been an excellent place for living, will see expanding opportunities for satisfying work. And, as far as being an individual is concerned, this is Maine's most important product.

So much for the "Don't's". As for the "Do's", my first positive suggestion is that in

deciding on your vocation, there are three questions you should ask yourself. Is it interesting to you? Is it something you feel you would be good at doing? Is it helpful to others? If you - not now, but when you know yourself and society a little better - can answer "yes" to all three questions, the chances are that you won't make a mistake.

But the choice of the right vocation is not everything. For an individual ought to leave room in his life for two other fields to cultivate - service to others and service to self. These are the two sides of the complete individual - the self-seeking and the self-giving. Being human, we cannot eliminate the self-seeking and we should not pretend that it does not exist. Without ambition, such men as Lincoln and Churchill would not have reached a position where their innermost forces of character and intuition could play their historic roles. But, as one of this century's leading thinkers, Reinhold Neibuhr, has said, ". . . self-seeking, practiced too consistently without regard to the social substance of self-fulfillment, must be self-defeating."

Therefore, whatever may be your occupation - whether you be in the happy position of the artist in whom talent and rewarding work are perfectly matched, or are engaged in work with a direct service objective, or are in an enterprise for the production of goods or services for profit - there are myriads of opportunities for the cultivation of your present instinct for service to others. We depend more than any other nation on the direct service, stimulation, and cross fertilization which stem from tens of thousands of organizations and associations across the land. There are no closed doors to a career of service to your fellow man.

But one cannot best serve his fellow men without serving himself. Therefore leave room for yourself. Begin to cultivate your leisure. This is more than perfecting a hobby. Develop your tastes in literature, art, nature, travel. Save time for pondering the deepest perplexities and yearnings of life. Learn to read and to enjoy reading. We can count on increasing leisure. But the vacuum that nature abhors is all too easily filled by the tastemakers. To achieve a leisure of privacy, and a privacy of depth, sensitivity, and quality marks the civilized man and woman.

Finally, after all the waiting and reflecting and planning and choosing, there is the doing. Here is the joy and the living of life. Emerson says, ". . . do your work, and I shall know you. Do your work and you shall reinforce yourself. . . . Insist on yourself; never imitate. . . . That which each can do best, none but his Maker can teach him. . . . Abide in the simple and noble regions of thy life, obey thy heart Nothing can bring you peace but yourself." These sentences come from Emerson's famous essay on Self Reliance.

The same theme has never been better expressed than by Justice Holmes. In 1900 the lawyers of Boston gave a dinner to honor their Massachusetts Chief Justice. He was 59 years old. You would call that old indeed. But two years later he was appointed to the Supreme Court where he was to enrich our nation in 30 golden years. On that occasion he distilled what he thought was the secret of a happy life. What he said is worth passing on to you. He said: "The rule of joy and the law of duty seem to me all one. . . . from the point of view of the world the end of life is life. Life is action, the use of one's powers. And to use them to their height is our joy and duty, so it is the one end that justifies itself."

And, a half century later, another great man and judge, Learned Hand, in one of his last speeches, said much the same thing: ". . . put among the most precious and dependable of our satisfactions the joy of craftsmanship. In that I include all efforts to

impose upon the outside world an invention of our own. . . . It is not important what form that may take; it may be in clay, in bronze, in paint or pencil, in a musical score or in words; it may even be in a sport; it may be in the mastery or exercise of a profession; it may be in a well-balanced nature, like Aristotle's 'Great-Souled' man; or it may be in redeeming the world. It is enough that we set out to mould the motley stuff of life into some form of our own choosing; when we do, the performance is itself the wage. 'The play's the thing'. Never mind that we are bound to fail, for the artifact will never quite embody the image . . . [but] let us not fear failure: 'Tis not in mortals to command success but will do more Sempronius - will deserve it.' [and] in the work . . . we shall find our reward"

What these three wise men are saying is that how you work at what you do is of the essence of life, of being an individual. That is why your choice is so important. For if your choice is something that merely gives you the means for the good life, the good life itself will escape your grasp. If early retirement and fringe benefits are your goals, you will have bartered away the joy of life.

There is nothing more difficult today than being an individual. It is not a goal easily or quickly achieved. It requires a vocation that uses well your powers. Such a vocation may be as old as organized society or as yet hardly dreamed of. It requires a balance between the self-seeking and self-giving parts of your nature. This means an avocation of service. And it requires a constant tending to the quiet reaches of the mind and spirit. For it is only in these places that an individual is made.

As you enter a world of increasing pressures, use them as a good sailor uses the wind. He knows he cannot always make his buoy by sailing before the wind. He must head at times into the wind. Without the pressures of the winds he would be becalmed, but he goes where he wills, not where the wind wills.