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Enduring Qualities

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Commencement Address
Columbia-Greene Community College
Saturday, May 16, 1987
1:00 P.M.

Enduring Qualities

I am happy for the opportunity to participate in these commencement exercises, because this is something of a homecoming for me. For a period of about five years in the 1970's, my wife and I were members of the adjunct faculty at Columbia-Greene, and we are very proud of that association. Many of my former students already have achieved great success in their careers. One now is Director of the Non-Credit Program here at Columbia-Greene, and I am sure that he is just as fine an administrator as he was a scholar. Several of my former students have become members of my own profession. One served as a law clerk in my chambers and now is an Assistant Attorney General of our State.

Today, you graduates join my former students as alumni of a magnificent college. I call it magnificent not because of its beautiful setting, or its superlative facilities, or the strength of its programs, or even the outstanding accomplishments of its graduates. I say that it is magnificent because of the special quality and the commitment of its people -- the trustees, administrators, staff, teachers and students who participate in the enterprise known as Columbia-Greene Community College.

The enterprise successfully serves not only a community of scholars engaged in academic pursuits and research projects here but also the larger community comprised of Columbia and Greene Counties. Because of the many aspects of its service to that larger community, the College is a vital part of the cultural life of the local citizenry. Through this Institution, the residents of the twin counties enjoy the benefit of lectures, concerts, art exhibits, non-credit courses, library facilities, meeting rooms and athletic activities. When my wife and I wanted to gain some computer literacy, we enrolled in a course at Columbia-Greene; when we needed library resources for research on an historical article we were writing, we turned to Columbia-Greene. And whenever I can't resist the urge to hit a tennis ball, I find the tennis courts here the best available in the area.

While the college serves many people in many ways, the service it has provided to you graduates extends far beyond the substantive information imparted during your course of study here. Inevitably, you will forget a great deal of the material covered in your coursework. What you will carry with you always are the sense of curiosity, the capacity to be critical and the appreciation of excellence that the faculty of this college has instilled in you. A sense of curiosity; a capacity to be critical; and an appreciation of excellence -- these are the enduring qualities that will enable you to advance in your

careers, to continue your intellectual growth and to make a contribution to the betterment of the human condition.

Dr. Samuel Johnson said: "[c]uriosity is one of the permanent and certain characteristics of a vigorous mind."¹ The desire to learn, to understand, to examine, to probe, is unique to the human spirit. It continually occupies the vigorous mind and never is satisfied. The great advances of civilization were driven by the inquisitiveness of men and women who were not content with received wisdom. They pushed ever forward in their quest for knowledge, opening new frontiers, finding new ways of doing things, discovering how things work. To be curious is to seek, and to seek is ever to learn and to know. In all your endeavors, you should maintain and cultivate the sense of curiosity that your education has awakened in you.

Through your studies, you also have developed a capacity to be critical. You have discovered that first appearances and first impressions may be deceptive, and that things are not always as they seem. You have learned to be skeptical, to question the opinions and conclusions of others, and to think for yourselves. Your critical sense will serve you well in the future. It will enable you to challenge the people who will say:

"We've always done it this way" or "we've always done it that way." It will enable you to choose between competing interests and to make the selective judgments that are so vital for the preservation and progress of our society. The critical sense cautions you against blind acceptance of everything you see or

hear or read. It calls upon you to analyze and scrutinize in order to discern meanings and consequences. It requires you to reject what is irrational and to make independent decisions based on all the facts it is possible to gather. In the final analysis, it enables you to distinguish between right and wrong, true and false, good and evil, beautiful and ugly, ethical and unethical, mediocrity and excellence.

Excellence! What a wonderful and rare thing it is! Yet, it is the cornerstone of all human achievement and is found in every vocation. James Bryant Conant said: "Each honest calling, each walk of life, has its own elite, its own aristocracy, based on excellence of performance."² It seems to me that the ability to recognize excellence is one of the most important benefits you have gained from your education. Aristotle tells us that "[w]ith regard to excellence, it is not enough to know [it], but we must try to have and use it."³ Although we all should strive to excel, as Aristotle urges, not everyone can acquire excellence. What everyone can and should acquire, however, is the ability to appreciate excellence in others. To have such an appreciation, we must understand that people have different abilities, just as they have different qualities and talents. All are not equal when it comes to excellence. There are but a few who have that surpassing ability to achieve exceptional performance. Those few must be identified, acknowledged and accorded the leadership roles to which they are entitled by virtue of their accomplishments.

The enduring qualities you have derived from your education, and which I have been describing, must not be applied only for your own advancement. They must be placed at the service of your fellow men and women, including, especially, the less fortunate. As educated people, you now have a public responsibility to allocate some of your time, talent and resources to your community, and to the society of which you are a part. As citizens of a democracy this year marking the 200th anniversary of its Constitution, you are obliged to participate in your own governance and to assume some of the burdens of public service. It is essential that you apply your curiosity, your critical eye and your demands for excellence to the institutions of government and to those who populate them. You must be aware of the duties of citizenship and ever mindful of the admonition of Edmund Burke that "[t]he only thing necessary for the triumph of evil is for good men [and women] to do nothing."⁴

I conclude by offering my congratulations to you, to your families and to all who have worked and sacrificed to make this Commencement Day possible. I congratulate you not only for your past achievements but also for tolerating this graduation ceremony and sitting through this speech. Commencement means beginning, and I know that this is only the beginning of a lifetime of achievement for each of you. Good luck and God bless you!

Thank you.

Footnotes

1. Dr. Samuel Johnson, The Rambler (Mar. 12, 1751).
2. James Bryant Conant, Our Fighting Faith (baccalaureate sermon June 16, 1940). The title is taken from a statement in an address by James A. Garfield [1831-1881], The Future of the Republic: Its Dangers and Its Hopes (1873).
3. Aristotle, Nicomachean Ethics, bk. 10, ch. 9.
4. Letter from Edmund Burke to William Smith (Jan. 9, 1795).