Commencement Address

By WILLIAM MATHER LEWIS
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Mr. President, members of the Board of Trustees, members of the faculty, members of the graduating class, and friends:—When the world’s list of heroes is completed, when the roll is filled to the last line, far up on that scroll will be found the names of those who each spring sit in auditoriums of this kind and listen to what is known as the Commencement Address. It is to you who have suffered that my heart goes out. I have nothing today which I can give to you which will alleviate the pain, and so, if I may, I would like to forget, without any discourteousness, you of the audience.

I feel it a very great honor to come to speak in the place where Dr. Waller has made such a mark on education, to speak where other alumni of Lafayette have contributed so greatly and so unselfishly. Nothing that I can say will mean anything after what they have done here. As a matter of fact, it is almost impossible, it seems to me, in this day of critical situations to say anything that will be of great value to you. The air is full of voices today—there are so many conflicting opinions. Events are coming about so rapidly that it is almost impossible to keep up with them.

I heard the other day of the president of a college out West who, after saving for years, had the ambition of his life satisfied. He bought a car. It was a third-hand Ford that rattled along. There were no rings in the cylinders, and it was in rather bad condition. One cold day he drove up to a service station, and not wanting to chill himself, yelled through the closed window, “Fill ’er up.” Because it was so cold, he kept the engine running. Pretty soon the service man came around from the back and shouted through the window, “Brother, you’ll have to shut off the engine—she’s gaining on me!” That is the way it is these days. Events are gaining on us so fast that is is very difficult to say anything on an occasion of this kind.

THE ALUMNI QUARTERLY, July, 1941
It's a very great challenge, because I say to you at this time, with all earnestness, that if any commencement means anything this year, it means something in a place that is preparing young people for educational leadership, because if America at this time does not realize her educational responsibility and her educational opportunity, then I think it is perfectly evident that the dark ages are going to come again, not only in Europe, but in the United States. The New York Times had a statement emanating from Germany that the German youth are showing a lack of training, a lack of education. Their schooling has been neglected and they are beginning to show it, and the thoughtful German people are becoming concerned. The ancient University of Athens is closed today. Only a few years ago they closed the two universities of Holland because of the fact that certain Jewish professors insisted upon teaching the truth. I was talking to a gentleman from England the other evening, and he told me that Oxford and Cambridge are practically depleted—the boys have gone out of them to the service of their country. In Germany, where the great scholars of the world have been produced, where our young people went for so many years to get their doctorate in Philosophy—most of those institutions are still open but all of them are propaganda institutions. Freedom of speech, truth—the things of the mind—are out. So it goes in the world. The great University of Poland is absolutely destroyed. That is what is going on. And those millions of pitiful little children along the roadsides in France and Poland—they're not thinking of school, they're just thinking today of keeping body and soul together. And so I repeat, that you who are going into teaching have a responsibility greater than any generation ever had, and I'm optimistic enough to believe that we are going to face these issues squarely by ways of intensifying educational processes in America. It is obvious that we must stop thinking in terms of credits and years of time, of diplomas—we must stop thinking of the form of education and get down to its substance.

America has always changed its front to meet the challenge of a new epoch. Go back to the time the discoverers began to settle on our Atlantic seaboard and began to build villages in the wilderness. They discovered that they had no intel-

THE ALUMNI QUARTERLY, July, 1941
lects, no clergymen, who were the teachers of the time, and out of that demand there came the answer in Harvard College founded a little over 300 years ago. It was the law of supply and demand working. Then there followed the other colleges—Princeton, William and Mary, and others. The Revolution came and the greatest propagandist of the Revolution was the President of Princeton College. We secured our liberty and then there came that great movement to the West. The covered wagons started out, and then there came a new type of institution. Wherever these wagon trains settled, there grew up small institutions to supply the demand for leaders—the law of supply and demand working again. I live in Easton where Lafayette College is just across the river from New Jersey, and across that old bridge between New Jersey and Pennsylvania there came in one year thousands of covered wagons, thousands who wished their children to have educational advantages, and almost everywhere they went there sprang up a small denominational college. They needed teachers, and they needed preachers, and they needed, essentially, surveyors and others to conquer the wilderness. Then came the Civil War. During that time Europe was in the throes of the Industrial Revolution. After the war, we were out of step. We didn’t have the engineers or the machines. We started the soldiers laying the rails of the transcontinental railroad, but we didn’t have men to maintain those roads. The vast industrial schools sprang up in answer to the call of the Industrial Revolution. Industry became very strong and we needed scientific agriculture very greatly. Thus grew our agricultural colleges. We began to have women demand political equality with the men and there grew up the women’s seminaries. Then came the city colleges in answer to the demand for education close at hand for a large majority. Why? Because science was advancing so rapidly that people had to run to keep up to it, and people wanted to go to college and couldn’t run away—they had to do it right there. I’m saying these things as rapidly as I can, to say to you that you go out to a challenge in America schools to save civilization.

Isn’t it a peculiar thing that at a time when a million people

THE ALUMNI QUARTERLY, July, 1941
want peace to every one who wants war, that we’re having war? Those who wish war are organized, intelligent, are willing to pay the price. Those who want peace are unwilling to pay the price, are unorganized. We’re not going to get peace that way. We’re only to get it by teaching in the schools of America year after year after year. Human relationships in the family, in the town, in the nation, internationally. That is the challenge that comes to us today. The challenge to save civilization and save democracy. How then can we do this?

In the first place, we have got to stop this get-rich-quick policy which we have had all these years and begin to teach thinking, to teach people to weigh the evidence. It is very distressing to hear public men calling each other names. That is no way to settle great subjects. The way to settle them is through calm thought. Bruce Barton once suggested in one of his editorials that in addition to all the other holidays we have, there should be added a “Grandfather’s Day,” and on that day he would have everybody in the United States go out on a hillside with a pine board and a knife, and if the ladies will pardon me, a corn-cob pipe, and just sit still and whittle, thinking and keeping quiet for 24 hours. He said that would revolutionize America, and I am sure he is right. That is what is needed—the power, the capacity, the desire for thought. You and I often see in the national magazines a time budget of how you ought to spend your time—so many hours for work, so many hours for recreation, so many hours for sleep, and yet I challenge you to remember one in which there was 15 minutes a day for thought, meditation, and for weighing evidence. And that is what you must teach your pupils. I know in my own college we can be open to criticism because we have so many classes, so many laboratory periods, so much extra-curricular activity that there is no time for the student to digest what he has been subjected to. There is no successful democracy in the world that is based on mental laziness. You and I are sure that ours is the finest type of government yet devised, by the thoughts of man, and because it is the finest type it is the most difficult type to administer. If we don’t think intelligently and calmly and take a courageous
stand about its problems, then democracy is on its way out, and that is just how serious education is. I beg of you when you go into an educational career to see that those whom you teach have time to think things over and to grasp what the thing is about.

In the second place, we’ve got to broaden our vision of education and we’ve got to teach history in a different way than we have done before. Defeatism is rising in America today when we need sound thinking so much. When I went to college I took small sections of history at a time. There was no unity in it. I started up in the air and ended up in the air. There was no continuity. I believe that there is only one way of teaching history—beginning with man when he came out of the mud and the slime of prehistoric times, from that day right direct to the present. That long process teaches us something. Civilization is not going to go down in defeat. Civilization is always on trial, and after each trial it has always come out just a little bit ahead. But what about Hitler and the rest? Well, what about them? If you will go back along that procession a little further you will find a skeleton in uniform—Napoleon Bonaparte, who said the same thing Hitler is saying today—“A new order for Europe.” He nearly had the world in his grasp, but he died a lonely man on a little island. Along further back is another skeleton, Louis XIV, who talked about the Divine right of kings; who drove my ancestors, the Huguenots, out of France and murdered thousands of them; who went out and conquered his country. Fate finally caught up with him in the marshes of the Danube and then the Divine rights of kings didn’t do him any good. And all the rest—Nero, Caesar—each dictator has always almost conquered the world, but not quite. Because, his great ambition has made him reach too far. I prophesy, I have faith to believe, that history will repeat itself and what we look upon today as Hitler’s victories is going to be his defeat. Civilization is not going out of the picture. We must stop this defeatism idea and realize what history is teaching.

What we need, again, is a great faith in the future of America. That faith must be moral, must be spiritual. At a time when
immorality is no more a personal matter, it is a matter of international importance. When they use murder to reach their ends and lying and murder and dishonesty and immorality are so rife, isn’t it up to us to teach our oncoming generation again the simple, humble American virtues? I believe that just as the athlete has to be trained, that we cannot have moral strength if we don’t train those moral elements in any thing. There’s been a great change. A man once told me recently that he had never tasted the white meat of a chicken. When he was young his mother wouldn’t let him eat it, and now that he has grown older his children won’t let him eat it. There’s been a great change in the discipline of America in a few years. And don’t forget: while America was growing soft, Germany was growing strong. She was building up her youth to hardness. We must do the same thing in a finer way if this country of ours is to survive. That means loyalty of teaching; that means standing for something in the community that isn’t soft. France was beaten from within, not from without. Belgium went down from propaganda from within; from those who had lived and enjoyed the Belgium way of life for years. “Trojan horse,” “Fifth Column” are simply new and soft terms for age-old crimes. There was a leader of the fifth column among the disciples of Jesus of Nazareth. There was a leader of the fifth column in the armies of General Washington who would betray his country. They called them traitors then, and such we should call people today who are not loyal to the American way of life, who are attempting to tear down the greatness of this country. It is for you as young leaders to prevent and overcome this.

And finally, the spiritual element must be taken into consideration. Religion is out of the window. We ask if a just God would allow such things to go on as we see today. The great Founder of our faith said nothing of that kind when He was sent to the most humiliating death that any man has ever known. There must be something in faith that will cause those Jews and Protestants in Germany to stand up and tell Hitler that he is wrong. Spiritual strength. I would challenge anyone to prove to me that religion has not been the great moving force in the world; not the denominational creeds of our world, but the per-

'THE ALUMNI QUARTERLY, July, 1941
sonal contact of the Individual with his God. And that is a question you have got to answer when you go out. Are you going to laugh God out of your life?

Let me repeat again that we are coming through this thing. We have a great example of unity. We people in selective service looked with amazement last fall when thousands of people in Pennsylvania and throughout the United States came out enthusiastically for registration, even though some of them did not approve of the plan. That was a day of great disappointment for the Totalitarian powers who had hoped we would have a great deal of trouble. America is united today in soul, and is going to see this thing through. I think we will follow, as we need to follow, the example of Great Britain in unity and courage and all the rest, whether it is in the battlefield or in the school room or in politics.

The story is told of the tourist in Switzerland who was doing some mountain climbing. He and his guide climbed for some distance and then took refuge for the night in a cave. Suddenly, there came a tremendous crashing and rumbling. The traveler awoke and was frightened. He wakened his guide and asked, "What is this—is the world coming to an end?" The guide very calmly said, "No, the sun touches the snow and loosens it and some of it comes tumbling down. It touches the face of the glacier and it cracks. No, the world is not coming to an end—it is the dawn of a new day."

And I say to you young people this morning that this is not the end of the world. It is a dawn of a new day if you and I in America want to make it so, and I am sure we do, and I know you are going to contribute your part in the school rooms of America to bring about a finer civilization than we have ever had. That is the challenge—to make a finer civilization than we have ever had.

President and Mrs. Harvey A. Andrus entertained the faculty and trustees and their families at the Annual Lawn Party at the College Residence on Saturday afternoon, May 10. Over one hundred people were present.

THE ALUMNI QUARTERLY, July, 1941