

“The Greatest gift an education gives is perspective”
Commencement Address by Geoffrey Parker
21 March 2003

Thank you.

President Holbrook, Provost Ray, members of the Board of Trustees, distinguished guests and colleagues, soon-to be graduates and our very special guests: the parents and loved ones of our graduating students.

Addressing you all here today is a humbling experience for me. First because you graduates have all achieved so much. My job is to write about History; it is therefore a special privilege for me to speak to you, who will *make* History. Second, I feel humble in the presence of your parents and loved ones, who have done so much to help and nourish you through your time here. Their presence here now to watch you graduate serves as a reminder that they are “there for you” when it really matters. Third, I feel humble because one of the historians selected in the past to give the Graduation Address at Winter Commencement was Woody Hayes in 1986. Wayne Woodrow Hayes, who commanded destroyers in the Pacific during World War II, also taught courses in military history in his “off-quarter” when he was not coaching and plotting the defeat of “that team from up north.”

I found the theme for my address today in the autobiography of Carl Upchurch, entitled *Convicted in the Womb*. After narrating his remarkable career from gang leader in South Philadelphia, through a sequence of detention centers and prisons, to urban peacemaker, he wrote: “The Greatest gift an education gives is perspective.”

Carl Upchurch, who honors us by being here today, did not find that out at school but in prison. He got his GED in one, he graduated while in another. He then founded and now directs the Council for Urban Peace and Justice, and from his home here in Columbus he strives to show others “convicted in the womb” that education can provide the **structure**, as well as the perspective, to keep them out of prison.

He faces a daunting task, for roughly 2 million Americans are currently behind bars and 3 million more have been there: that is one American man in every 20. More disturbing still, despite the fact that this country spends \$54 billion a year on the prison system, two-thirds of all prisoners are re-arrested within three years.

Mr Upchurch, with a tiny budget, devotes his life to reducing that figure, reminding us that the investment of an irrationally large amount of effort to help others, even though it apparently offers no benefit to the giver, produces the finest fruit.

Carl Upchurch was born in 1953, the year in which Ohio celebrated its 150th birthday and was the 5th most populous state in the country. Its citizens then enjoyed an average annual income of \$2028 – more than double the average income in any other country, including Britain where I then lived.

[The more alert of you will have noted that this accident of birth has afflicted me with a strange accent, for which I apologize; however, since most of you can recite the soundtrack of *Monty Python and the Holy Grail* from memory you should be able to get the general drift of what I'm saying.]

The year 1953 saw not only Ohio's 150th birthday, but also the first frozen TV dinners; the discovery of DNA's double helix structure; the first non-stop transcontinental flight (from LA to NYC by TWA); and the first IBM Computer (Model 741; Memory 4 KB) and, with it, the first "virtual" computer simulation [devised by Enrico Fermi, the father of the atomic bomb.] In the 1950s, "a good deal of what had seemed [a few years earlier to be] science fiction became everyday life" [Fred Siegel.]

These and the many other achievements of Americans produced a general sense of well being.

- Liberal columnist Max Lerner boasted that "we are further on the road to reducing poverty to a very marginal phase of our life than any other social system in history"; while George Meany, head of AFL-CIO, claimed that "American labor has never had it so good."
- Bookstores were full of works with titles like *The people of Plenty* [David Potter, 1954] and *The Affluent Society* [J. K. Galbraith, 1957] that gave the impression that poverty and inequity were steadily declining.

Of course, it was partly an illusion. Ohio in 1953, like the rest of the United States, was disfigured by segregation and by Joseph McCarthy.

- In Ohio, schools and parks remained segregated (Coney Island, Cincinnati's amusement park, remained segregated until 1961.)
- Ohio (like several other mid-Western states) created its own "Un-American Activities Commission". And
- Here on the OSU Campus in 1952 the president fired a fine arts instructor who refused to cooperate with that Commission and the following year fired a tenured associate professor of physics who took the 5th Amendment rather than testify.

Fifty years on, in 2003, as Ohio celebrates its Bicentennial, we have at least made some progress on **those** issues. The courts enforce integration, protect our First and Fifth Amendment rights, and guarantee my tenure against the arbitrary acts of the university president.

But still all is not well.

- Bookstores now offer a wide selection of works on fear, on failure, on unhappiness, on how to cope with *the inescapable mid-life crisis*. In my day, only *adolescents* suffered from identity crises; *you*, however, can look forward to half-a-century of them.
- Above all, the problem of poverty is far worse, not far better, than it was 50 years ago.

In Cornwall, England, you will find something called the "Eden Project". One of their striking posters is entitled "If we could shrink the world". It shows that if we could shrink the earth to a village with a human population of precisely 100 people, preserving all the existing ratios:

80 would live in sub-standard housing,

70 would be unable to read,
50 would suffer from malnutrition;
One – yes only one – would have a high school, never mind a university, education.

So please remember: if you have food in your refrigerator, clothes on your back, a roof over your head, and your own bed to sleep in – then you are richer than 75% of the world's population. And if you have a high school diploma, you're in the top 1%.

This is where you, our new graduates, come in. In our Bicentennial world of restricted opportunities and rewards, our system will inevitably operate to the benefit of the strongest and the best-organized groups of citizens; and you, with the professional expertise that we have tried to give you here, will be among the most powerful of these groups.

Many hard decisions will face you in the years ahead. The admirable commitment to excellence and the breathtaking skills that have brought you here today will help you; but please remember that the foundation of lasting power and privilege has always been **responsibility and morality**.

Therefore, as you make those hard decisions, please look beyond your own personal welfare, and beyond the advantage of your own professional and social group, to the well-being of the whole world in which we *all* must live. Please follow the example of Carl Upchurch and invest an irrationally large amount of effort to help others, even though it apparently offers no benefit to you, because eventually, cumulatively, it will reduce inequity and so enhance our collective chances of survival.

- We need you agriculture, architecture, business, engineering and science graduates to be the inventors and investors who will make and market goods that we can afford – without destroying the livelihood of others;
- We need those of you in pre-med to become the doctors who treat the illnesses produced by our own high standard of living – without neglecting the diseases caused by poverty and deprivation;
- We need you Law graduates to reconcile disputes and heal differences so that even the “losers” will feel they have been treated with fairness and respect;
- and we need you Arts, Education, HEC, SBS and Humanities graduates – some of whom I have had the pleasure of teaching – to become the artists, educators and administrators who will show us how the world can be better than the one that you inherit.

Soon to be graduates: this ceremony marks a “goodbye” and a “welcome” in one. We say goodbye and congratulate you on your very real achievements: we – your teachers and advisors – are all enormously proud of you. We also welcome you into a family of graduates going back more than 130 years. We will continue to strive to make you all proud of us, of this *your* University. And, we hope, over the coming years, that you will keep in touch with us and share with us your own successes.

Congratulations again to you all; enjoy this unique day; may happiness, health, wisdom and success be yours. Or, as Coach Hayes would have put it: *Go Bucks!*