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Address to Graduates

McMaster University

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If a graduation address is an occasion for reflection, then the topic for my present reflection is settled by the studies you have been pursuing. Your work has been in the humanities and in social studies. Common to both is concern with meaning, and it is on that common concern that I propose to dwell -- to dwell briefly.

Meaning, of course, is not the whole of human living. In so far as one is lost in dreamless sleep, or lies helpless in a coma, meaning is no part of one's being. As long as one is an infant, a non-talker, one is limited to the earlier stages of Piaget's program of operational development. When first hearing and speech develop, they are directed to present objects, and so meaning initially is confined to a world of immediacy, to a world no bigger than the nursery, and seemingly no better known because it is not merely experienced but also meant.

But as the command and use of language develop, there comes a reversal of roles. For words denote not only what is present but also what is absent, not only what is near but also what is far, not only the past but also the future, not only the factual but also the possible, the ideal, the ought-to-be for which we keep on striving though we never fully attain. So we come to live not as an infant in a world of immediate experience, but in a far vaster world that is brought to us through the memories of other men,

through the common sense of the community, through the pages of literature, through the labors of scholars, through the investigations of scientists, through the experience of saints, through the meditations of philosophers.

There is a further aspect to the matter. Besides the world as already there to be known, there is the world that we make. But what we make we first intend. We imagine, we plan, we investigate possibilities, we weigh pros and cons, we enter into contracts, we have countless orders given and executed. From the beginning to the end of the process, we are engaged in acts of meaning; and without them the process would not occur or the end be achieved. The pioneers in this country found shore and heartland, mountains and plains, but they have covered it with cities, laced it with roads, exploited it with their industries, till the world man has made stands between us and a prior world of nature. Yet the whole of that added, man-made, artificial world is the cumulative, now planned, now chaotic product of human acts of meaning.

Man's making is not restricted to the transformation of nature, for there is also the transformation of man himself. It is most conspicuous, perhaps, in the educational process, in the difference between the child beginning kindergarten and the doctoral candidate writing his dissertation. But the difference produced by the education of individuals is only a recapitulation of the longer process of the education of mankind, of the evolution of social institutions and of the development of cultures. Religions and art-forms, languages and literatures, sciences, philosophies, the writing of history,

all had their rude beginnings, slowly developed, reached their peak, perhaps went into decline and later underwent a renaissance in another milieu. And what is true of cultural achievements, also, though less conspicuously, is true of social institutions. The family, the state, the law, the economy are not fixed and immutable entities. They adapt to changing circumstance; they can be reconceived in the light of new ideas; they can be subjected to revolutionary change. Moreover, and this is my present point, all such change is in its essence a change of meaning -- a change of idea or concept, a change of judgement or evaluation, a change of the order or of the request. The state can be changed by rewriting its constitution; more subtly but no less effectively it can be changed by reinterpreting the constitution or, again, by working on men's minds and hearts to change the objects that command their respect, hold their allegiance, fire their loyalty.

To speak of respect, allegiance, loyalty is to speak of community. For what is community? It is not just a number of people within city limits, a provincial boundary, or a geographical frontier. It is an achievement of common meaning, and there are kinds and degrees of achievement. Common meaning is ~~potential~~ potential when there is a common field of experience, and to withdraw from that common field is to get out of touch. Common meaning is formal when there is common understanding, and one withdraws from that common understanding by misunderstanding, by incomprehension, by mutual incomprehension. Common meaning is actual inasmuch as there are common judgements, areas in which all affirm and deny in the same manner; and one withdraws from that common agreement

when one disagrees, when one considers false what others consider true and true what they think false. Common meaning is realized by acts of choice, especially by permanent dedication, in the love that makes families, in the loyalty that makes states, in the faith that makes religions. Community coheres or divides, begins or ends, just where the common field of experience, common understanding, common judgement, common commitments begin and end.

The common meanings constitutive of communities are not the work of isolated individuals or even of single generations. Common meanings have histories; they originate in single minds; they become common only through successful and widespread communication; they are transmitted to successive generations only through training and education. Slowly and gradually they are clarified, expressed, formulated, defined, only to be enriched, and deepened, and transformed, and no less often to be impoverished, emptied out, and deformed.

As it is only within communities that ^{people} men are conceived and born and reared, so too it is only with respect to the available common meanings of community that ^{one} the individual becomes ^{one} himself. The choice of roles among which ^{one} he can choose in electing what to make of ^{one} himself is no larger than the accepted meanings of the community admit. ^{One's} His capacities for effective initiative are limited to the potentialities of the community for rejuvenation, renewal, reform, development. At any time in any place what a given self can make of ^{one} himself is some function of the heritage or sediment of common meaning that comes to ^{one} him from the authentic or unauthentic living of ^{one's} his predecessors and ^{one's} his contemporaries.

For many years you have been attending to meanings, piecing them together, coming to understand them more fully and more comprehensively, comparing and discussing them from divers viewpoints. That whole process leads to an existential moment, a moment of high significance both for the personal life of each individual and no less for the community of which ^{one} he is destined to form part.

As has been said, meaning is intrinsic both to man's transformation of nature and to man's transformation of man. But that transformation may occur consciously or unconsciously. It occurs unconsciously in the drifter. ^{one} He has not yet found himself. ^{one} He has not yet discovered ^{one's} his own deed and so is content to do what everyone else is doing. ^{one} He has not yet discovered ^{one's} his own will and so is content to choose what everyone else is choosing. ^{one} He has not yet discovered ^{one's} a mind of his own and so is content to think and say what everyone else is thinking and saying. And the others too may also be drifters, each doing and choosing and thinking and saying what others happen to be doing, choosing, thinking, saying.

By the existential moment is meant the moment when drifting ends, when one discovers by oneself and for oneself that one has to decide for oneself what one is to make of oneself. If anyone has not yet reached it, ^{or she} he need not worry. Some reach all the maturity they ever are going to have at the age of twelve years. They are not to be envied. On the other hand, do not neglect it. Your education at ^{B.C. Concordia} McMaster University has been a sustained effort to make your personal existential moment of greater depth and fuller reach and higher significance. May your profit from it be thirty, sixty, one hundred fold!