

RIGHT ON

A Speech from Bruce K. Nelson, PhD (1915-2017)

Ypsilanti High School Graduation

June 11, 1970

Dr. Barber, Mr. Grimes, Members of the Class of 1970, Distinguished Platform Guests, Relatives and Friends of the Graduating Class.

One of the few quotable expressions heard at campus rallies and demonstrations this spring is “Right On,” These two words, said together with vigor, give a listener a quick means of saying rather forcefully that he agrees with what is being said or done. “Right On” differs somewhat from the church worshiper’s “Amen,” because it does not have the same sense of reverence and finality. And then, too, “Right On” is not only an expression of agreement, it is a command – a command to keep going. It says, in effect, don't stop now. You're on the right course. Continue in that direction.

It is, therefore, an appropriate and timely expression for those of us who are relatives, friends, teachers, or school board members to say to those of you who are being graduated this evening. We say it because we are genuinely proud of what you have done, what you are, and what you can become.

Your teachers throughout the years – and I have a number of expired PTA membership cards to prove that I was there– have said that you have been a good class. Miss Ethel O'Connor, emeritus fourth grade teacher at Roosevelt School; Mrs. Thelma Warmington, retired sixth grade teacher at Estabrook, and a proud grandmother here tonight, Mr. Goodman, at West; Mr. Joslyn at East, and at the high school: Mrs. Distler, Mr. Lounsbury, Mr. Parker, Mr. Oullette, Mr. Grimes, and many, many more have been your staunch advocates.

The unprecedented number of honor graduates and the perfect all “A” record of Sandra Kelly attest to your scholastic achievements. The coveted high rankings at the state level for your band and orchestra, in which many of you played first chair rolls, is another evidence of quality. Helping to win five league championships in sports – football, basketball, golf, wrestling, and baseball – speaks to your physical prowess. And then, as was pointed out at the Honors Assembly last week, you are the world’s greatest homecoming float builders, winning first prize an unheard of three years in a row. I remember the one with Marmaduke gobbling up Dearborn players. I believe you called it “Breakfast of Champions.”

It was that winning of the homecoming prize which clearly revealed the distinguishing characteristic of your class – and that is your ability to work harmoniously together. Recollect, if you will, the events in this critical year demonstrate how unique this trait has become.

This was the year in which police patrolled the corridors in countless high schools throughout the country.

This was the year in which our Board of Education, but in a larger sense our teaching profession, and in a still larger sense our whole community, by building fences around our elementary schools, admitted publicly major shortcomings in our ability to teach people how to live together.

This was the year in which our neighboring high schools – Willow Run, Inkster, Ferndale, Battle Creek, River Rouge, Bay City, Creston High in Grand Rapids, to name only a few – found it necessary to shut down and call in parents to talk with administrators, teachers, and students, about how to restore an environment in which learning could take place.

This was the year in which college campuses erupted all over our nation, violence threatened the continuation of university classes in Ann Arbor and here at Eastern, and four students at Kent State and two at Jackson State were tragically killed. Yes, friends, this was the year when leaders of our country revealed a disturbing ineptness in “bringing us together,” and many of us were found wanting also. And, yet, on the most tension filled morning at Ypsilanti High School this year, at a time when even the advisability of holding a meeting was questioned, the 400 members of the senior class met for over an hour conducting business with orderliness and thoroughness, and by keeping their “cool” proved that: They believe in the democratic process and its workability. They were not about to be panicked into irrational or violent action, and they had faith in themselves, in their fellow students, their teachers, and their administrators to solve the perplexing problems of high school life in a rational manner.

That example, and let us not underestimate the impact of seniors on juniors and sophomores, at a crucial moment—at a moment when other action could have escalated to violence— had a calming effect on the entire student body. The learning process, through which all of us become better able to build a more enlightened, a more just, a more compassionate society, continued without interruption.

I say Right On. Class of 1970, Right On.

Remember well what you were able to do at that critical time and carry that unique skill with you as you widen the span of your activities in our society. Our society sorely needs the skills that bring people together.

The New York Times recently began an editorial with a five word sentence— “The nation is in disarray.” Our mechanisms for change have appeared to be hopelessly ineffective, particularly to young people, and many have been testing out the technique of confrontation. We have seen locally within the past few months what fruits confrontation begets. Margaret Chase Smith

summed them up succinctly in the United States Senate last week when she said that we are in grave danger of narrowing our choice for future government to anarchy or repression. Neither of these alternatives, I would judge, is acceptable to anyone here this evening, but either of them is horrifyingly possible if those of us who believe in the middle ground of functioning democracy fail to insist continually that democratic principles and techniques be strengthened and utilized. We need an infusion of the spirit of the Class of 1970.

In his baccalaureate sermon Sunday afternoon, Mr. Rood recommended that we adults accept our sons and daughters as somebodies right now. I like his recommendation, and further suggest that, while many avenues of reconciliation in our society are open to us, we might well begin by acting together on those issues of significance to our young people. They tell us, for instance, that they need a more meaningful voice in the governing of our community, our state and our nation. They say that we should exploit earlier their energy, their enthusiasm in a productive way to do the many tasks which now remain undone. They say that as a nation we should clarify the moral and spiritual values by which we live. Let's look at each of these examples of their concern.

First, the need for a meaningful voice. At least some, and perhaps a major share, of our national disarray may be attributed to the fact that millions of our young people, sensitive to the inequities in our society, idealistic in their approach to their resolution, face only inexpressible frustration in finding a way to participate personally in the reordering of national priorities.

Certainly smashing windows in school and university buildings will not hasten our withdrawal from Indo-China, will not reduce racism and bigotry, will not improve the educational system, will not reduce the pollution of our environment or slow the wasting of our natural resources. Rather such action tends to drive us further apart, polarizing beliefs, radicalizing both the "left" and the "right," and making further violence inevitable. But lowering the voting age to 18 would provide a tangible release for pent up emotions, would show the dimensions of support for, and opposition to, major issues, and could result in the election of local, state, and national officials who would be more sensitive, and respond more quickly to curing the ills of our culture.

In 1968, President Lyndon Johnson said, "I believe we should move forward, now, to grant the vote to 18 year olds." In the Detroit Free Press recently, Vice President Spiro Agnew was quoted as saying, "...I have been an advocate of the 18 year old vote since I was governor, and I still believe 18 years old is a good age for a person to be able to vote." If two of our national leaders of such differing political persuasion can agree on this basic issue, it would appear that within the great state of Michigan, where this matter has been under discussion for sometime, we could act decisively and expeditiously to involve young people in an enlarged electorate.

We soon may have that chance. By telephone I learned just before leaving home this evening that the proposal for placing the 18 year old vote on the November ballot was reported out of committee to the floor of the Senate in Lansing, where it appears that favorable action will take place tomorrow. If approved and signed by the governor, those of us 21 and older will be able to show visibly in November our faith in the integrity of those between 18 and 21.

Meanwhile, as adults in business and industry, in churches and universities, in service clubs and local government— we can engage more young people in decision making. It's an activity in which all of us can come together—and promises in the process the injection of fresh ideas for solving our problems.

A second major concern of our young people is that of becoming productive citizens in the world of work. The depressed state of our economy this summer somewhat emphasizes the reality of this problem— but actually it has been with us for many years—ever since the disappearance of those good old days when a son followed the trade of his father. Then the transition from training period to full job status was so smooth as to be unnoticeable. Now the opportunities in the particular occupation for which a high school graduate is trained may be scarce—and he may not have the skills to succeed in those occupations in which positions are available. Consequently the transition period from high school to the world of work can be frustrating and ego-reducing.

This problem has so many dimensions that it should command the attention and action of all of us. There is the need for relevant education. Ypsilanti High School took an imaginative and creative step in this direction this year by having a group of students plan and build a house. The Co-Op and Junior Achievement programs continue to bridge the gap between school and business and industry. Some labor unions in the skilled trades are beginning to admit more apprentices, accepting young people of all races. The Ypsilanti City Council is sponsoring the Hire Ambitious Teens office. The Job Corps and the College Work-Study programs are examples of federal government participation. Despite these efforts locally and similar programs in other areas, a recent study by the Federal Bureau of Labor Statistics estimates that this summer we will have 650,000 active job-seekers in the 16 to 22 year old range who will not find work to do. Somehow we must recognize that such a waste of talent is symptomatic of a basic underlying need in our society for a more orderly introduction of young people into the world of work—a problem of almost the same magnitude as education, welfare and health. Here, also, we can use the resolute spirit of the Class of 1970 in working together toward a solution.

We come finally to the third example of an issue of significance to young people—the clarification of the moral and spiritual values by which we live. It's what Vali Terhune talked about with such feeling in her salutatory address. It is an issue which deals with the basic relationships between people. Thus, it is readily apparent that unless we can reach an understanding in this area, all else will have been for naught.

Change in this field of human relationships has been so swift and so widespread, that it would appear at times that the old guidelines are being completely swept away, and that a new code of situational ethics in which anything goes is taking over.

Some of our youth have become disenchanted with the institutional guardian of our spiritual values, the church, and have deserted it for Oriental mysticism and astrology. Some have turned to drugs in search of an ever elusive utopia. But these are at best detours and at worst—dead ends, on the road to expansion of the human spirit, the humane treatment of others, and peace on earth.

Fortunately, people of all generations—beat, bop, and battered—agree that undergirding all viable human relationships is love. Philosophers have long sung its praises. Theologians have identified it as the essence of the Christian ethic. And now scientists, as reported by anthropologist Ashley Montagu, have concluded that it is absolutely essential for survival—for ourselves and for humanity.

Love for our fellow man. Belief in the dignity of each human being. Caring for others. Willingness to turn the other cheek, go the extra mile, sacrifice the shirt off our back. These are the elements of a value system that can turn this world around, give peace a chance, dispel the disarray of our nation, remove the alternatives of anarchy and repression, make the 18 year old vote meaningful, and in an age of contrived obsolescence, never wear out.

As seniors this year, you have been living in an environment in which love has been a top priority. Because actions do speak louder than words, I know that I am not betraying any confidence when I report that after the Honors Assembly a week ago, your principal, Mr. Grimes, said to me, “This is a good class. It’s my first class, and I love every one of them.”

Such an expression, coming from the educational leader of the school, set the tone for life there. Importantly, you reciprocated, and that spirit and that experience have helped to form your value system— a value system you now take with you to use in shaping the quality of life wherever you may go.

Right On, Class of 1970, Right On...

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