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Spring 1967 Convocation Speech

Louise Cowan
University of Dallas

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SENIOR CONVOCATION
UNIVERSITY OF DALLAS
May 18, 1967
Dr. Louise Cowan

President Cowan. Monsignor Maher, Dean Fandal, Members of the Administration, Faculty, Students—and graduating seniors, who in a short time will no longer be seniors but will take your places in a larger world of practicality and responsibility, away from this blessed island of impracticality and apparent irrelevance, where arbitrary goals have been pursued, artificial tasks imposed, where indeed, for all its high seriousness, life has been a kind of game:

Let me say to you on this occasion—as one of your teachers and as someone who loves you—something about what I think you will face: You will face a world that will not, in all probability, require you to fight, but to be peacemakers; a world that does not need your right ideas so much as it needs your love; a world that cries out not for your knowledge, but for your vision. For you will face a civilization that in the four years in which you have been in college has taken one of those great turns that make history; you will go into a society that is on its way toward a destination; and all your right theories, your high principles, your ready-made conceptions will not change its course, though your very lives can transform and redeem—and ransom—the times.

When you entered the University of Dallas in the Fall of 1963, John Kennedy was still alive, the Vatican Council had just finished its first year's work, Niliita Kruschev was still premier of Russia, T. S. Eliot was literary dictator of the English-speaking world, Existentialism was still a fashionable concern—there still seemed some chance to continue a long requiem for a dying culture. But during your career the situation has been radically altered.

It has been in your four years here that the War in Viet Nam has entered upon its long heroic stalemate, fighting out the great battle between Communism and the Tradition, not directly but in a kind of symbol, a little self-contained world of pain and death that keeps our own world safe; during these four years of yours, the new media have assumed positions of staggering importance; photographs of outer space have altered our imaginations, the Civil Right movement has changed the American concept of law; popular music has gone over to the electronic troubadours who write and perform their own songs; clothing and hairstyles have turned "mod"; the University of Dallas has built a gymnasium, technology has assumed a bright, garish, and friendly aspect, we have emerged from the existential angst into an age of comedy, and The Church has entered the modern world.

Not since the 17th century has so complete a change confronted a generation. "In 1600," Douglas Bush has written, "the ordinary educated Englishman's mind was more than half medieval; by 1660, it was more than half modern." The modern world view came after a geographical expansion such as the world had not before witnessed and after the invention of printing, with its consequent emphasis, as McLuhan has made clear, upon the book and linear thinking. The modern era established the scientific method as the universal criterion for truth; it redefined time, nature, reason, and reality; it developed a new math, a new grammar; but chiefly what the new age witnessed was the fragmentation of medieval Christendom, the most splendid cultural construction the world has ever known.

For the past 3½ centuries, then, the Western world has been dominated by a quantitative world view—it has been an era designated by many authorities as the Protestant Era, the "Modern" Age; heavily influenced by Calvinism (even in its recent revolt against all restraint), it has looked upon success as a mark of divine favor, has regarded poverty as a vice, has produced the industrial revolution (which brought destitution into the world on a heretofore unimaginable scale); it has fostered an individualism that

left each person increasingly alienated from society, its literature has depicted the picaresque hero, the rogue, the ineffectual idealist, the superfluous man, the alienated hero, the rebel, the underground man, the stranger. These past three centuries have been an age of ideologies, of systems, of polarities, of legalism, of rationalism. Thrift, industry, respectability—these have been the supreme virtues, with purity somehow distorted into prudery (and its opposite, absolute license), with charity becoming humanitarianism, hope becoming optimism, with the feminine principle in men's lives—honored so greatly in the Middle Ages in its arts, its devotions, its code of courtesy and chivalry—denied, suppressed, and distorted by modern man.

It is this world view that is dying: the God is Dead movement is a reaction to this severe change, .just as is all the discussion of The Secular City. Finally the Western world has thrown off puritanism: has turned once more to the idea of communion, to the concept of work as joy; has recaptured a generosity, a warmth, a comic spirit, and a hilarity missing since the Middle. Ages. (You are the first harbingers of that spirit in this University; your class has been hilarious.)

These three centuries that I have designated as the Puritan Age have not been without their splendid achieve-

merits, however, as well as their dark destructions; just before the 13th century the two movements within the new world view (almost antithetical in their import) manifested themselves in two quite different revolutions—the French and the American, as Professor Ross Hoffman has pointed out in his fine book The Spirit of Politics and the Future of Freedom. The French Revolution introduced something into the world that was radically new and completely secular—the frightening power of man when he is not restrained by any pieties at all: when the "invisible presences" are ignored—in man's life—his relationships with orders totally outside himself to which he is obliged by his very nature to pay homage—Nature, the City, the family, the past, the divine. The supreme virtues held up by the proponents of the French Revolution were not true ends; liberty, fraternity, equality are ideals that must be superimposed on a society that has already sought the good, the true, and the beautiful. By themselves these aspirations produce an almost demonic aberration; reformers who seek to establish them absolutely are faced with a fundamental impossibility. Indeed, Dostoevsky's The Possessed could be described as having set itself the task of evaluating these new ideals. What it shows us is a teacher, a learned man, himself civilized and gentle, who, assuming in his young charges

this same base of civilized and traditional values, passes down to them the fruit of the Enlightenment and the ideals from the French Revolution. Their disordered and violent lives make their own charges against him; and before he dies, in a shattering series of catastrophes he discovers his own guilt. It is he, the older generation, the teacher, then, who is the man possessed by devils? they go out of him into others, who run wild and destroy themselves. Dostoevsky's insight in this work assumes a prophetic depth: he shows us that there is no end to egalitarianism and secularism except a holocaust, a blood-bath-betrayal and death.

But the other current in the modern age has expressed itself in another revolution—our own, of course, the American War for Independence. As Professor Hoffman has pointed out, "the American Revolution originated in a determination to conserve what men believed to be a good order of life . . . provoked by an aggression against liberties long held and prized." We could go on to say that it was a struggle for the old verities that were being abused by a decadent aristocracy—~~itself~~ the deviator from tradition. The American philosophy of man was the same magnificent one that had been built by European man in its Graeco-Judaeo-Christian formulations—it assumed that man exists under God and

finds his true meaning in a supratemporal realm of enduring values. Puritanism in New England took on a different cast in its new world situation, colored and modified by its federation with totally different kinds of culture—the American South, Anglican, aristocratic, chivalric, classic-, and the Catholic culture of Maryland.

America was founded in pluralism, then, not secularism. Our deepest cultural symbols, our truest ideals, 'our most profoundly felt images in America are permeated with traditional religious overtones; it is almost as though it has been the destiny of this new country—a transplant, an amalgam from many cultures in Europe—to discover anew the Christ that is in things—to discover Him who, by becoming incarnate, by dying on the cross, and by descending into the depths of things (as Karl Rahner, Ladislaus Boros, and other recent theologians have made clear in our time), entered into the very heart of the cosmos and so left nature radically changed. This at any rate is the theme of our greatest writers: of Melville and of Faulkner, as well as of Emerson, Whitman, Dickinson, Stephen Crane, and most of the other Southern writers. An Ishmael, caught in a wrong philosophy, a religion without hope, a family without love, an acquisitive society, can, in Moby Dick, make a journey into the unknown, into the very heart of mystery, into a confronta-

tion with God's universe itself, not man's, and find there the mystery and the terrible beauty of the whale: "the great floodgates of the wonder-world swung open, and in the wild conceits that swayed me to my purpose, two and two •' there floated into my inmost soul, endless processions of the whale, and, mid most of them all, one grand hooded phantom, like a snow hill in the air." Ishmael can find in Nature the benevolence and beauty manifested him in his sight of the whales as they exist in themselves, beyond the predatory grasp of man, away from the harpoons, the lines, the cruel lances:

Some of the subtlest secrets of the seas seemed divulged to us in this enchanted pond . . . and thus, though surrounded by circle upon circle of consternation and affrights, did those inscrutable creatures at the centre freely and fearlessly indulge in all peaceful concernments, yea, serenely reveled in dalliance and delight.

Having discovered the mystery of the whale and submitted to it—its beauty, its joy, its awesomeness, its suffering— Ishmael has come to terms with Nature and with himself, and after the sinking of the Pequod

for almost one whole day and night I floated on a soft and dirgelike main. The unharming sharks, they glided by as if with padlocks on their mouths; the savage sea-hawks sailed with sheathed beaks . . .

William Faulkner, likewise, can show us men finding themselves by digging deeply into the world outside them—

selves wherein they encounter a redemptive principle. Isaac McCaslin is granted the vision of a magnificent buck, deep in the wilderness:

Then once more he and Sam stood motionless together against a tremendous pin oak in a little thicket, and again there was nothing. There was only the soaring and sombre solitude in the dim light, there was the thin murmur of the faint cold rain which had not ceased all day. Then, as if it had waited for them to find their positions and become still, the wilderness breathed again. It seemed to lean inward above them, above himself and Sam and Walter and Boon in their separate lurking places, tremendous, attentive, impartial and omniscient, the buck moving in it somewhere, not running yet since he had not been pursued, not frightened yet and never fearsome but just alert also as they were alert, perhaps already circling back, perhaps quite near, perhaps conscious also of the eye of the ancient immortal Umpire. Because he was just twelve then, in less than a second he had ceased forever to be the child he was yesterday. Or perhaps that made no difference; perhaps even a city-bred man, let alone a child, could, not have understood it; perhaps only a country-bred one could comprehend loving the life he spills.

Then later, after Ike and Sam have heard the "flat single clap of Walter Ewell's rifle which never missed and the mellow sound of the horn," the boy sees the buck.

It was coming down the ridge, as if it were walking out of the very sound of the horn which related its death. It was not running, it was walking, tremendous, unhurried, slanting and tilting its head to pass the antlers through the undergrowth. . .

Then it saw them. And still it did not begin to run. It just stopped for an instant, taller

than any man, looking at them, its muscles suppld, gathered. It did not even alter its course. . .just moving with that winged and effortless ease with which deer move, passing within twenty feet of them, its head high and the eye not proud and not haughty but just full and wild and unafraid, and Sam standing beside the boy now, his right arm raised at full length, palm outward, speaking in that tongue which the boy had learned from listening to him and Joe Baker in the blacksmith shop, v/hile up the ridge Walter Ewell's horn was still blowing them in to a dead buck.

"Oleh, Chief," Sam said. "Grandfather."

This is the Ike McCaslin who is later to witness the death of the old bear, ancient enough and honorable enough to have earned a name, like a man—a boy who must have learned the virtues of humility and pride and courage and restraint from living in harmony with nature, the past, the men and the creatures in a world created and redeemed by God and therefore sacred.

This deep sense of the holiness of the human enterprise, of the sacredness of God's creation is at the very heart of American culture. It will be long before it can be obliterated. Ours is no wasteland; here is no deep ennui, no boredom with the tedium of life; the secularism in American society is unable to deprive life of its sense of mysterious dimensions. And it is into this culture that you will emerge, after your apprenticeship, a culture that cries out for the very sort of persons