ADDRESS

THE NEW SENSIBILITY

Fall Convocation, 1964
University of Dallas Campus

Dr. Donald A. Cowan
President
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The Fall Convocation in academic institutions is, by long tradition, an occasion on which the state of education is assessed. Where have we come from? On what prominence do we stand? Where do we go? It is an occasion on which a school's individual accomplishments and shortcomings are reviewed and a clarion call for excellence is sounded. Let me waste little time in sounding that call.

The state of the University is good indeed. Not only is the freshman class the largest in the school's short history; but also, this new class seems, from all reports, the best prepared, exceeding slightly the excellent class of last year. The administrative staff has been bolstered, the bookstore expanded, the food services taken under our own wing. The two new dormitories are occupied, the addition to the Art Building is nearing completion, the Science Lecture Center will be underway in the near future, with the laboratories, the graduate building, and the gymnasium to follow. Plans for graduate work are developing, made possible by the $7 1/2 million dollar Blakley-Braniff gift of last spring. A few faculty members have been
added to an already distinguished staff, and an increasing output of scholarly and creative work comes from their hands:

The current showing of Professor Heri Bartscht's sculpture at a gallery downtown is a major artistic event, one which, if encountered anywhere in the world, would startle a person of taste into saying, "Here is a great artist."

I have just read the opening chapter of a novel by Professor Curtsinger, to be published by Macmillan in the spring -- a beautifully written, wonderfully imagined episode.

Scholarly books, critical articles, scientific papers, creative works, dissertations (Father Hardi now holds three doctorates) -- the abundance testifies that this faculty is made up of scholars who are not only teachers but also, to an unusual degree, professors of their disciplines.

And the student body is responding in kind. Graduates of the University are pursuing advanced study at such widely separated graduate schools as Yale, the University of Chicago, Marquette, Vanderbilt, Fordham, Catholic University, the University of Detroit, the University of Texas, the University of Tennessee. There is every evidence that our students are well prepared for advanced
work. 

We cannot, however, be complacent. There are flaws that need to be amended among us, most of them stemming from our youth. We need a somewhat larger enrollment; and yet we cannot in conscience admit inadequately qualified students. Our growth, therefore, will have to be gradual, matching our increase in prestige, since of necessity, we shall be competing for students with the best of the long-established and noted institutions. But aside from our as yet incomplete physical development (and we have been in existence only eight years), we fall remarkably little short of the goals set in our statement of purposes. There are, to be sure, a few yet-to-be-corrected weak spots in our generally admirable program of studies. But, chiefly we shall be making changes from time to time because new and startling methods need to be tried in the transference of information and the engendering of wisdom. Certainly, in this place where tradition has meaning because it is alive, the new will always be with us. And, despite any shortcomings, we can say quite soberly that in this University excellence is not something yet to be achieved; it is now with us.

The Value of Values

But let me turn from a somewhat narcissistic preoccupation with our local virtues to some more general considerations of education in our day. If we are to believe TIME magazine,
the primary message delivered by college presidents to their constituencies at convocations this fall concerns the value of values. The presidents of Brandeis, of Yale, of Lawrence, of Pomona, of Princeton, all are emphasizing that the educated man in our society is the man whose moral sense has been instructed along with his intellect and whose courage has been developed sufficiently to enable him to exercise that moral sense. Those of us at the University of Dallas, who have witnessed this university's development, seeing it as a kind of revelation of the nature of education in our day, have become aware that this new concern for moral values is not so much a turning away from practicality in education as it is a realization that the noblest aspects of the human apparatus -- not the basest -- are those demanded in the strange and interesting marketplace of our day. Utilitarianism and pragmatism are no longer the dominant tendencies in our economy. The beautiful and the genuine are demanded by a society just now coming of age economically. Far from drawing up our academic skirts in horror at such a fraternization with commerce and technology, then, we should shout huzzah and look busily for the significance of this development.

What we have on our hands is the triumph of the machine age, the actualizing of automation, releasing man from routine and freeing him for "the human use of human beings," in fulfill-
ment of the dream of that untidy little genius who died recently, Norbert Weiner, father of the science of cybernetics. The transition is by no means complete. Processes are still to be developed, inventions to be made, social and economic practices to be adjusted. But in principle the machine has triumphed over the brute processes of labor, over that "numbing weight of centuries" which, as Edwin Markham saw darkly a generation ago, bowed down the man with the hoe. In our day the machine has triumphed over the hoe and the ledger; and man is in the process of triumphing over the machine, an event that we could hardly have foreseen clearly even a decade ago. But as much as two years ago we could discern quite clearly, as I pointed out at the time, that we have entered a new epoch, the post-technical age.

What sort of education, I asked then, and I still must ask, is needed for the post-technical age? In this new era, men need to be specialists only superficially; their fundamental vitality must be drawn from a common fund of experience -- experience of some depth shared with a community. "Man is a creature who lives best in a polis," Professor Kitto translates the familiar Aristotelian dictum "Man is a political animal." If a polis, a community of citizens who have known each other from birth, is lacking for most Americans today, if the traditional community has disappeared and we have become a
mobile society, then there emerges a greater role for the university than it has played before. It must itself be a community, and not merely an intellectual one; it must impart to its members the wholeness that comes from a participation in a noble endeavor, inspiring loyalty and affection.

The members of a community communicate through a shared set of felt convictions, expressed by and through specialties, perhaps, but in terms of fundamentals understandable to one another. No longer can the teaching of mere skills constitute an education; if a person is to be fully human in our day, he must know how the parts fit into the whole. In industry, with the turning over of routine operations and routine decisions to machines, the important decisions based on value judgments become increasingly dominant. The man who has a firm sense of values and the judgment to apply them possesses economic worth. And that is why, to put it briefly and perhaps oversimply, president after president of educational institutions across the land can speak, without any fingers crossed, of the value of values.

The New Coherence

If you understand this recent healing of an old fracture in our culture, the beginnings at least of the putting back together again of what T. S. Eliot labeled "dissociation of sensibility", the unifying of the two worlds of C. P. Snow, if you understand that this process is going on, that the world
you will live in has a "new coherence that makes it large with possibilities, then you can better understand the form of the education you are obtaining at the University of Dallas. It has been shaped and reshaped and it is yet to be reshaped in an awareness of this new coherence.

There are many aspects of this new coherence which can bear discussion: the role of science, for example, for as the philosopher Suzanne Langer has noted, it was science that gave rise to the dissociation, and it is science that will heal it. She writes

"A new culture is probably in the making, which will catch up with the changed human environment that our runaway, freewheeling civilization has visited on us. But one cannot force the emergence of a real culture. It begins when imagination catches fire, and objects and actions become life symbols, and the new life symbols become motifs of art. Art, which formulates and fixes human ways of feeling, is always the spearhead of a new culture, for culture is the objective record of developed feeling.

What really fulfills and establishes a culture, however, is not art, but something that follows—the deeply and tacitly felt life of overt action, institutions, ways of living, things produced. We do not know what the driving force and the substance of the next cultural epoch will be, but I suspect that, as so often in nature, the same development which is breaking the old frame of our thinking will fashion the new one: namely, the development of science."

The development of which Mrs. Langer speaks will occur through the effect of science on business, in part, in such
things as automation, and in establishing a single world economy.

The Rise of the New Sensibility

But what I want to address myself to at this time is an aspect that caught my attention this past summer, and which, again, has implications about our kind of education: that is, what I had assumed was a somewhat specialized and local mode of instructional experience is in actuality a response to a general appetite in our society. I am speaking of the rise of a new sensibility.

The sensibility of which I speak is the responsive and reactive ground of feeling shared by most people in our society. And I am suggesting that this sensibility has changed rather abruptly in our time.

There are evidences of the new sensibility all around us. The design of commercially produced objects, for example, demonstrates that with some frequency the objects which the public will find desirable have been designed by men of taste -- even by artists. These objects represent not a pandering to an established appetite -- in the past a safe course for commercialism -- but a confidence that new objects of taste will find a general acceptance. Another example lies in the flood of paperback books of remarkably high quality, testifying to the generally developed desire for individual intellectual
selection -- a major step beyond the ready-made selections of that huge promotional device -- the Book of the Month Club. I suspect that there is a further example of this new sensibility in even such small manifestations as the autumn leaf that falls from the pen of Charles Schulz into the contemplation of the wondrous Linus.

Everywhere about us there is evidence of a new Wholeness of sensibility, in both individual and social life. We are farther along in our cultural development than Susanne Langer recognized three years ago. Already the "deeply and tacitly felt life of overt actions, institutions, ways of living, things produced" has come into being. But we have not yet reached the broad plateau of the new culture -- not yet reached a position of stability. The artist, operating from the higher ground of the general sensibility, still must spearhead the climb. And, more to our point, the educated man must be one who has to an accentuated degree the new sensibility. Just as man the technical expert is outmoded by the man whose technical proficiency is directed by moral and ethical principles, so will the man prevail who has added to these qualifications a heightened sense of form, an insight into the aesthetic, and an unerring taste in judgment. That ancient triumvirate, the good, the true, and the beautiful, will again as in all high cultures rule a single dominion.
How does this new sensibility affect education? And, in particular, how does it show itself in the studies at the University of Dallas? In this way:

We consider no course a legitimate university course if it merely gives information or merely teaches techniques, even if that information or technique: is in philosophy or science or art. The mark of a university experience in this new age is the enlargement of the spirit. Instruction enters not only the mind but the soul. Unless you as a student experience this stretch of the imagination, this deepening of insight, this sharpening of aesthetic appreciation, I do not think you will do well at the University of Dallas. But if you respond to this instruction, if you exercise these new-found abilities in the curriculum and out, in full participation in the life of this campus, you will discover new resources of joy, new dimensions of knowledge, new experience of what it is to be a human being made in the image of a creator.

I have said from time to time that two studies have ushered in this new age: physics and poetry -- in their discovery of the model and the symbol. If I have seemed to place the stress on the science side, let me balance that somewhat by reminding you that we have been living in a great age of literature. We have had with us in William Faulkner one of the great writers of all time. And he was but a mighty tree in a verdant forest
of no mean growth. The poets, especially, will bulk large in
the anthologies of centuries: William Butler Yeats, T.S. Eliot,
Ezra Pound, Robert Frost, John Crowe Ransom, Allen Tate, W.H.
Auden, Dylan Thomas, Richard Wilbur ... the names string on.
Literature has provided a springboard for the leap to the new
sensibility and it continues to serve that function here in our
curriculum, though the heights may come for any one of us in
politics, philosophy, history, or other fields. Always we
are reminded in literature that what we build here is the
city of man, not the city of God; but we are reminded too that
what we build here is built for eternity. "This world is the
only site we have on which to construct our salvation. We
cannot fulfill ourselves by living in the crumbling past;
we must construct our own edifice out of all the vigor, the
knowledge, the ethical and the aesthetic senses with which
we may be graced. Richard Wilbur has reminded us of this
necessity in his commemoration of the new railway station in
Rome, its sleek contemporary beauty rising beside the tawny
ancient ruins:

Those who said God is praised
By hurt pillars, who loved to see our brazen lust
Lie down in rubble, and our vaunting arches
Conduce to dust;

Those who with short shadows
Poked through the stubbled forum pondering on decline,
And would not take the sun standing at noon
For a good sign;
Those pilgrims of defeat
Who brought their injured wills as to a soldiers' home;
Dig them all up now, tell them there's something new
To see in Rome...

What city is eternal
But that which prints itself within the groping head
Out of the blue unbroken reveries
Of the building dead?

"What is our praise or pride
But to imagine excellence, and try to make it?
What does it say over the door of Heaven
But homo fecit?"

Man made it: in some mysterious way man is commanded to use
all the talents at his disposal to build; and what we are permitted to see in our day is that to build well and beautifully in time is to build for eternity. The whole and truthful action extends sacramentally even into that other world. The new sensibility, then, marks the extension of grace into all the crevices of our lives. This year, in our University, we must open our hearts to a refinement of feeling as well as our minds to a clarification of thought.