UNIVERSITY OF DALLAS

FALL CONVOCATION

September 11, 1968
Athletic Center

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President
This convocation marks the official opening of the thirteenth session of the University of Dallas. The formality of the occasion is emphasized by the academic regalia worn by our faculty. These are medieval costumes, as symbolic of wisdom as a knight's armor is of chivalry. Certainly there must have been un gallant knights at times and even ignorant professors, but it is the ideal that the dress symbolizes, and, therefore, we wear the robes and hoods with respect for what it is that we desire, if not possess.

Knights, of course, no longer come in shining armor; and we might well question, then, the fitness of an academic apparel that is a vestige of bygone days. Might we not at least shorten it a bit—wear mini- robes, say, or micro-mortar boards? Just what are we trying to say with all this? (And this is a question that we shall encounter increasingly about any symbolic gestures in our lives.) For one thing, we are saying that there is such a thing as ceremony and that the gathering together of persons committed to a serious purpose is an event worthy of some formality. Indeed, the coming together of a faculty and a student body in a fall convocation has for centuries marked an important ceremony in the civilized world. It is a kind of liturgy celebrating the sacredness of wisdom. Fanfare, regalia, some panoply, are signs, not of self-congratulation—not of triumphalism—but of respect for mutual purpose. We may be unworthy, but our cause is not: so speaks the tone and form of a convocation, a peaceful assembly with some ceremony.
All this gentle—and perhaps somewhat foolish—decorum is threatened, of course, in our time. "Things fall apart," as Yeats predicted in 1926; "the center cannot hold... the ceremony of innocence is drowned." What is lost in the violation of the dignity and formality of public gatherings—in their disruption by violence and anarchy and abuse all over the world—is the elevation which people are capable of giving each other in public testimony. For we either elevate or degrade each other when we come together in public groups; we do not remain simply the aggregate sum of our numbers. We become a Greek chorus, or frenzied Dionysiac revellers; a court for justice or a lynch mob; a peaceful assembly restrained by a fundamental respect for the opinions of others or a mocking horde of nihilists that must finally descend to the demonic in its inspirations: obscenity emblazoned on foreheads, grotesque behavior become a kind of anti-image of the formal decorum of centuries of civilization. Something sacred is mocked by bad manners, disarray, and name-calling in public—something that in our attempts at ceremony we guard as precious to the well-being of man.

Is this long increment of civilization really to be lost? For we must make no mistake about this point: the protesters in our time are not really protesting specific abuses (not Viet Nam, not the black ghetto): their intention, their calculated technique, is to disrupt—to jar people loose from adherence to civilized behavior.

Esquire magazine last month published, under the heading "Where
the Action Aint," the results of an inquiry asking various organizations what colleges they would recommend where a person might reasonably expect to get an education rather than an immersion in political activism. The University of Dallas had the dubious honor (in Esquire's mind) of appearing on two of the lists. We had good company; some of the best schools in the nation were there. But if we are where the action isn't, perhaps we need to think about what action truly is, and what it is considered to be in our time.

Aristotle has told us that "life consists in action, and its end is a mode of action." He goes on to make clear that action is what art imitates--a movement in life of some large proportion which holds together through an inner cohesion of purpose. It is the form of this happening, its particular quality, that gives it a teleological significance which the artist can discern and make apparent. Not a bad term, action. In physics it also has to do with an event; it is a combination of energy and time. The limit of our knowledge, the smallest possible knowable event, the indeterminacy principle, is expressed as action.

Esquire was not likely aware of Aristotle or Heisenberg in selecting the word action out of the popular lingo; but the consistency of the term in its implications is apparent. It is a happening of some magnitude with an inherent uncertainty--a gap in our ability to understand it. Yet we must understand the significant actions in
our world. And, we would say, it is right for an academic
community to stand more in the role of knower than of actor.
In all the turmoil and seeming chaos of the times, it is the task
of the university to sense the significance, the inner pattern,
the form of the happening—by viewing it in the light of philo-
sophical principle and cultural tradition—down the long per-
spective, that is to say, of a liberal arts education, in which
the different vantage points and various intellectual skills
enable the student to evaluate an event more accurately and
perceptively in its many contexts. Few universities in our time
any longer attempt this task with any earnestness; most have
abdicated any responsibility toward the formation of moral
judgment. We do attempt that task here; we do not always succeed
in the attempt, but we do not doubt the necessity of the task
simply because of its difficulty of achievement. Students in
reassuringly large numbers at the University of Dallas "get the
picture," see the design, know that they have contributed to its
definition and therefore feel themselves part of it. They have
taken part in an action that is heroic and communal, one that
benefits all men, the action of understanding some truth in all
its contexts. What they do then with this "knowledge carried
to the heart" will follow from their moral judgment; their action
will not be dictated by mere instinct nor from a naive idealism:
they will be free persons, confronting the complexity of life and
able in its midst to take significant action.
The reformation of society, then, does indeed turn out to be the function of the university. On this point we are in total agreement with the student revolutionaries. The classroom is not an instrument for preserving the status quo. There is no possibility of pushing society backward to a former day, and I know of no person on this campus who would have it so. The time is now and the river keeps flowing. We build out of the present, however entangled with mistakes it may have become, and as we disentangle it, we find growth has occurred. This sense of the present is important to the liberal arts concept of education held by the University of Dallas.

What a liberal arts education recognizes is the continuity of time and the increment of history. The Iliad is important not because it is the first literary document—not because it tells us about early Greek civilization, but because it tells us about ourselves. Aristotle speaks to our day, and we find in St. Thomas our most basic tenets of belief. There is, of course, a delight in history as history; I am tremendously grateful to the scholars who have made the history of medieval science available to us. It is a dramatic story, quite enlightening about the manner in which a high culture is put together—and enlightening, too, about the willful ignorance men can assume in concealing for four hundred years an important development of thought. We can learn a great deal from the history of science—but we do not learn science from it. Science is residual—not incremental. To study medieval science as science would be antiquarianism. For all our piety toward tradition, nowhere in our curriculum do we
mean to be antiquarian. It is the relevance of the past that we discover.

Having been instructed by the past, the University of Dallas student, we hope, will not approach the future naively. New philosophical paths which he explores will be found to connect to old ones. New works of art, new music may surprise him, may even jolt him, but once he recovers he is not relieved of the critical responsibility of saying whether or not the new work is good. That is the responsibility of the liberally educated man; that is the duty of the builders of civilization. No work is good simply because it is new or different. Your task is not only innovation—and you must be in this sense the artist, discerning the form of the action about you—but it is also judgement—for you are the critic, setting up normative standards for the moral health of society. Every course in the curriculum is expected to prepare you for these tasks. The whole experience on the campus is aimed in this direction. The action, so to say, on this campus is one of understanding. Like Dante's pilgrim in his epic, you are to find your heroic action not in fighting bloody battles nor in crossing adventurous seas, but in journeying progressively into true knowledge. That is where the excitement is. That is why you are here, now, in the academic year 1968-69, which, with this ceremony, officially begins.