

## Commencement Address: What You Will Be

by Milton Mayer

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As you are now, so I once was; as I am now, so you will be. You will be tempted to smile when I tell you that I am middle-aged and corrupt. You should resist the temptation. Twenty-five years from now you will be ineluctably middle-aged and, unless you hear and heed what I say today, just as ineluctably corrupt. You will not believe me, and you should not, because what I say at my age should be unbelievable at yours. But you should hear me out because I know more than you do in one respect: you know only what it is to be young, while I know what it is to be both young and old. In any case, I will not lie to you in order to make you feel good. You will be old much longer than you are young, and I would rather that you believed me the longer time than the shorter.

I tell you today that instantly is not a moment too soon if you are going to escape the fate I predict for you and embody myself. For what was said long ago is still true, that corruption runs faster than death and the faster runner overtakes the slower. It may indeed be too late already, unless you mend your ways this least of all likely moments. I once heard Robert Hutchins tell a graduating class that they were closer to the truth that day than they would ever be again. I did not believe him. But I have seen most of the members of that class since, and I regret to inform you that Hutchins was right. Mind you, he did not say that they were close to the truth; he only said that they would never be so close again. They had been taught what right and wrong were and had not yet had a chance to do what e.e. cummings calls "up grow and down forget." If my own history and the history of the race is instructive, this commencement is for nearly every last one of you the commencement of disintegration. A cynic once said that he would not give a hang for a man who wasn't a socialist before he was twenty or who was one after that. I do not know if socialism is a good ideal, but I know that it is an ideal and I know that the cynic was confident that you would lose your ideals. You may even have trifled, in your springtime, with such radical aberrations as pacifism. But you will soon stop trifling; and when, at thirty, you have already begun to molder, your friends will tell you that you have mellowed.

All societies are deplorable, and history indicates that they always will be. You have lived twenty years in a deplorable society. You have lived sheltered lives, but you have had no one to shelter you from your parents and teachers. Your parents have done what they could to adjust you to the deplorable society to which they, as their advanced age

testifies, have successfully adjusted themselves. When they said you were improving, they meant that you were getting to be like them. When they said they hoped you would keep out of trouble, they meant that you should not do anything that they wouldn't do. But some of the things that they wouldn't do should have been done. The condition of the society to which they have accommodated their lives is the proof of their criminal negligence. Your teachers have been no better, and no better an influence on you, than your parents. They may have had higher ideals; it takes higher ideals to teach children than to have them. But your teachers' survival (like your parents') testifies to their adjustability. They have done as they were told, and in a deplorable society there are some things that men are told to do that no man should do. A high-school teacher in California told me that not one of his colleagues wanted to take the anti-Communist oath required of teachers in that state, and neither did he; but every one of them took it in order to hold his job and escape the national black list. As they are now, so you will be.

Like your teachers and your parents before you, you will be told to do bad things in order to hold your job. In college you may have quit the campus daily or defied the old fraternity on principle. It will be harder to quit the metropolitan daily or defy the old country on principle; it will be easier to forget the principle. And if, in addition to holding your job, you want to be promoted, you will think of bad things to do on your own. And you will have good reasons for doing them. You will have wives (at least one apiece) and children to maintain. You will have a home and mortgage to enlarge. And life insurance, purchased against the certainty of death, dread of which in turn adds preciousness to staying alive at any price. And neighbors who are having their children's teeth straightened. Your dentists' bills alone will corrupt you. You will have doctors' bills to pay, and they will increase as you grow older, becoming extremely heavy when you are moribund and powerless to earn money. You will have lusts, as you have now, to gratify, but the lusts you have now are relatively inexpensive and they will give way to more expensive if less gratifying lusts. You will have worthy philanthropies to support and the respect of people whose respect depends on your supporting those philanthropies. You will have an automobile (if you are so wretched as to be a one-car family), and you might as well turn it in every year because the new model will be so revolutionary that it will depreciate the old one to the point where there's no point in keeping it.

Some of the things you will be expected to do (or will expect yourself to do) for the sake of your wife and children, your community, your health, or your burial are bad things. You will have to have good reasons for doing them; and, thanks to your education, you will have

them. The trouble with education is that it teaches you rhetoric while you are young. When, for rhetorical purposes, you embrace the doctrine of the lesser evil, you ignore its fatal flaw of present certainty and future contingency; being young, you think you will live forever, so that you may do bad things today in order to do good things tomorrow. But today is certain, tomorrow contingent; and this night an old man's soul may be required of him. When you are old, and too tired to embrace doctrines for rhetorical purposes, you will find that the doctrine of the lesser evil has embraced you and destroyed you. You protest my melancholy prediction, but the Great Actuarial Table is against you. Twenty-five years from now nine out of ten of you (or all ten) will tolerate an existence which, if you could foresee it now, you would call intolerable. If such an existence has any virtue at all, it has only one: it will give you a wistful old age. You will look back to your springtime, fifty years gone, and say, "Those were the days." And you will be right.

The only thing that will save you from wistfulness is the one talent whose lack now redeems you -- the talent for self-deception. You won't even know that you are corrupt. You will be no worse than your neighbors, and you will be sure to have some that you won't be as bad as. You will have friends who praise in you the characteristics you have in common with them. They will persuade you that there is nothing wrong with either hoarding or squandering as much money as you can get legally. And if, some sudden night, you go berserk and bawl out that life is a sell, they will put you to bed with the assurance that you will be all right in the morning. And you will be. Worse than being corrupt, you will be contented in your corruption.

Twenty-five years from now you will celebrate your twentieth wedding anniversary. Because you love your wife -- still more if you don't -- you will want to celebrate it in style. You will reserve a window table for two at the choicest restaurant in town, and the champagne bucket will be at the table when you arrive. You will not be the cynosure of all eyes, but you will think you are. The head waiter (or maitre de, as he is known here) will address you by name. As your eye travels down the menu it will be distracted by something outside the window, which will prove to be a hungry man. What will you do? Do you know what you will do then, twenty-five years from now? You will call the maitre de and tell him to have the drapes pulled, and he will tell the waiter, and he will tell the bus boy, who will do it.

Your table, even before you have ordered, will be laden with rolls and crackers (of several sorts) and butter pats on butter plates. Hungry, and a little nervous, as you should be, you will break up a roll and

butter it and eat it as you wait for your wife to make up her confounded mind. The waiter will ask you if you want the champagne poured, and you will say yes; and he will open it with a pop which, beneath the dinner din, will be unheard by the rest of the diners (but you won't know that). Thirsty, and a little nervous still, you will sip your glass, forgetting to toast your wife, and resume your study of the menu. And then, for the first time, you will see, in fine italic print at the bottom, the words "The Management reserves the right to refuse service to anyone." And then you will know (for you will be an educated man) that you are sitting in a Jim Crow restaurant -- that being the meaning of the words "The Management, etc."

Now the country in which you were raised calls itself a Christian country, and the parents who raised you up called themselves Christian people, and the church whose vestry has just elected you calls itself a Christian church, and you call yourself a Christian. Jim Crowism is un-Christian. It is also un-American, and you call yourself an American. What will you do? What will you do then, twenty-five years from now? The champagne is open and sipped. The roll is buttered, half-eaten. Will you get up from the table and tell your wife to get up and tell her why, and tell the waiter and the maitre de, and maybe the management that you are leaving the restaurant and why, and pay for the champagne and the rolls and the butter pats and, if necessary for the dinner, but refuse to eat there? Or will you pretend, as the management (by printing the notice in fine italic type) intended you to pretend, that you did not see the notice. You will stay at the table and order your dinner and eat it.

You will have been measured for corruption and found to fit. You may be the man who raised the flag on Iwo Jima -- a hero abroad but not at home, where it's harder to be a hero. At Iwo Jima you had either to raise the flag or drop it. It was publicly shameful to drop it. But the night of your anniversary dinner it would have been publicly shameful to /raise/ the flag by leaving the restaurant. And public shame was what you could not bear, either at Iwo Jima or in the restaurant.

There are a lot of involuntary, non-voluntary or reflexive heroes. I am one myself. I do not doubt that I would have raised the flag at Iwo Jima rather than let it drop in public. But I was the man who took his wife to dinner at the Jim Crow restaurant. Believe me, there is no contradiction between the corruption which will consume you, day by day, in the face of unpopularity or public shame and the heroism of the moment accompanied by public praise. And when you have been measured often enough and long enough for corruption, you will like what you see in the mirror. I don't mean that you won't continue to have good impulses. You will. But you will have persuasive reasons for suppressing them. From time to time, as the vestige of your springtime idealism

stirs you, you will want to do the right thing. But you will have to put off doing it until you have buried your father, and then your mother, your brother, your children, and your grandchildren. You may live to be very old, but you will not outlive the last descendant for whose sake you will suppress your good impulses.

What life did to me, because there was no one to tell me what I am telling you now, it will do to you if you do not at once adopt /Principiis obsta/ as your motto and spurn every other. "Resist the beginnings." At twenty I was what you are; I had had all the middle-class care that a middle-class society and a middle-class home could provide. My parents wanted me to have what they took to be advantages, and I had them. But my advantages were of no use to me at all when life came down on me, as it will upon you, like a ton of bricks. I had studied morality, just as you have, but it was the easy morality designed to sustain my character in an easy world. I would not steal another man's watch unless my children were starving, and my children would never be starving. Nor will yours if, with what your parents call your advantages, you do as you are told and get to the top. The reason your children will not be starving is that you will have been corrupted. Your corruption will save you from having to decide whether to steal another man's watch. I was prepared, like you, to be a hero the instant heroism was required of me. I saw myself at Iwo Jima, at Gettysburg, at Concord. But I did not see myself at home, so weakened by the corrosive years ahead that I would not be able to stand up on my hind legs and say no when I had to do it alone. Never knowing -- as you do not know -- that my needs would be limitless, I never imagined that my surrender would be complete.

My education prepared me to say no to my enemies. It did not prepare me to say no to my friends, still less to myself, to my own limitless need for a little more status, a little more security, and a little more of the immediate pleasure that status and security provide. Corruption is accompanied by immediate pleasure. When you feel good, you are probably, if not necessarily, doing bad. But happiness is activity in accordance with virtue, and the practice of virtue is painful. The pursuit of happiness requires a man to undertake suffering. Your intelligence, or your psychiatrist's, will tell you whether you are suffering for the right reason. But it will not move you to undertake the suffering.

God is said to come to us in little things. The Devil is no fool: he comes that way too. The Devil has only one objective, and if he can persuade you to justify your derelictions by saying "I'm only human," he has achieved it. He will have got you to deny the Christ within you, and that is all he wants. If you are only human you are his. The Devil will

keep you quiet when you ought to talk by reminding you that nobody asked you to say anything. He will keep you in your chair when you ought to get up and out by reminding you that you love your wife and it's your twentieth anniversary. He will give you the oath to take and say, "As long as you're loyal, why not say so?" He will tell you that the beggar outside the restaurant would only spend the money on whiskey. The Devil has come to me in little things for twenty-five years -- and now I say and do the things in which, when he first began coming, he had to instruct me.

I tell you that you are in mortal jeopardy today, and anyone who tells you differently is selling you to the Devil. It is written on Plato's ring that it is easier to form good habits than to break bad ones. Your habits are not yet fully formed. You are, in some measure still, only potentially corrupt. Life will actualize and habitualize every bit of your corruptibility. If you do not begin to cultivate the habit of heroism today -- and habits are formed by acts -- you never will. You may delude yourselves, as I did, by setting about to change the world. But for all that you do or do not do, you will leave the world, as I do, no better than you found it and yourselves considerably worse. For the world will change you faster, more easily, and more durably than you will change it. If you undertake only to keep the world from changing you -- not to lick 'em but to avoid j'ining 'em -- you will have your hands full.

Other, more agreeable commencement orators have warned you of life's pitfalls. I tell you that you are marked for them. I believe you will not escape them because I see nothing in your environment that has prepared you even to recognize them. Your elders tell you to compare yourselves with the Russians and see how much worse the Russians are; this is not the way to prepare you to recognize pitfalls. Your elders tell you to be technologists because the Russians are technologists and your country is technologically backward; this is no way to prepare you to recognize pitfalls. You are marked for the pit. The Great Actuarial Table is against you.

What you need (and the Russians with you) is neither pharisaism nor technology. What you need is what the psalmist knew he needed -- a heart, not a head, of wisdom. What you need is what Bismarck said was the only thing the Germans needed -- civilian courage. I do not know where you will get it. If I did, I would get it myself. You were divinely endowed to know right and to do right, and you have before you, in the tradition of your country and of human history, the vision to help you if you will turn to it. But no one will compel you to turn to it, and no one can. The dictates of your society, of any society, will not serve you. They are the dictates that corrupted your parents and

your teachers. If Socrates did not know where virtue came from -- and he didn't -- neither do I. He pursued it earlier and harder than anyone else and concluded that it was the gift of God. In despair of your parents and your society, of your teachers and your studies, of your neighbors and your friends, and above all of your fallen nature and the Old Adam in you, I bespeak for you the gift of God.

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