

BACCALAUREATE ADDRESS BEFORE THE FIRST CLASS OF OUACHITA COLLEGE,
DELIVERED JUNE 13th 1888,
BY J.W. CONGER, ARKADELPHIA , ARK.

Class.

Miss Bessie Cross, Ph.B.

Miss Flora Stinnett, Ph.B.

Frank P. Turner, A.B.

Young Ladies and Gentlemen:

Worthy Seniors:

As the representative of the Faculty, it becomes my duty to sever the golden thread of pleasant association which has so strongly bound us together as teachers and pupils. Sweet are the memories to be cherished. Many are the fond hopes for the future lives of you, the first graduates of Ouachita College .

Growing out of the interest in your welfare, we present a few thoughts for your consideration. You are now at the commencement of your active manhood and womanhood. The glory or the failure of your lives will depend not so much upon your intellectual artisanship as upon your intellectual manhood—not so much upon abstract truths as upon the incorporation of those truths into your everyday lives—making the abstract concrete—and thus developing your individuality.

In all high service, there are two essentials to success, viz: self-assertion and self-suppression. You must put yourselves into your work and put your work before and beyond yourselves. If you would have moulding power and give impulse to lives, you must put the stamp of your own lives on your associates. Character along begets character. The life should confirm the belief of the heart. "Vital and pungent personality is a necessity in any effective life. The charm and force of your thoughts, words, acts will be largely due to the quickening infusion of a masterful personality." A truth must become your own before it can become another's." It must first become assimilated and enter into the "spiritual fibre and tissue," become a part of the higher self, before it can be given to another. It thus becomes real, and in giving the abstract truth an element of self is imparted also. This is truth in the concrete—truth individualized—and it is this alone that properly stimulates mind and spirit. Your self-hood must be reflected in all you do.

But, the other essential—self-suppression—though paradoxical—must characterize the successful man. Egotism makes a man obnoxious. As Michael Angelo wore a candle fastened to his cap that his shadow might not fall on his work, so your service should not be blurred by your own image. Self-seeking is a blot and a hindrance, but self-giving is indispensable. You must be yourself, yet you must forget yourself. You must show yourself, yet hide yourself in your work. "Put all the strength of your being in what you do," yet seek something beyond and

above your selfish advantage. Unless above himself, he can erect himself. How mean a thing is man.”

In any sphere of life, no man can become a leader of men without self-assertion and self-suppression. In St. Paul’s language: “I, yet not I.” “I with the whole force of my individuality—using everything I have and am in the service, yet not I, in striving for self, or in quest of my own glory.” This is actualizing the highest and best possibilities and the annihilation of the worst. “It is full-orbed self development, yet complete self-effacement.”

But in the attainment of these two paradoxical elements of self-assertion and self-suppression, there is a prerequisite of obedience.

“It has become almost an educational truism that growth in knowledge can come only from obedience—that a manly independence comes only from a manly dependence. This is as much true in the later growth of knowledge as in the earlier.” “The farthest advance of thought is in the most perfect subjection of one’s thinking to the truth, for “truth is a supreme reality to which every wise person has submitted and to which every wise opinion has conformed. You must become as little children before you can enter the Kingdom.

Insofar as self-will or self-conceit tinges our views of truth, just so far will we fail to know the truth. The humbling of pride, the willing recognition of superiors, the ready obedience to the authority of truth, are requisite to clear and full knowledge.

These reflections lead us to this statement: (which is in the language of Seeley [?]) “All growth is through obedience and all success in life and perfection of character come through submission to authority.”

1st—In the lower, physical realm, we have power and become strong through submission to the laws of Nature. Gravity, heat, life, all stand ready to do our bidding, but only upon the most absolute subjection to their requirements.

“The astronomer reads the great laws of planetary and stellar worlds, but the wonderful heavens unfold to him their secrets only as he moves in conformity to the law of light and vision. (Kepler had to submit to the rigid demands of order and law, before the revelation to him of his three laws.) The mystery is inscrutable until he penetrates it in the precise manner in which the mystery itself has decreed. The chemist traces the movement and combinations of molecular forces and their obey his will, but never until he has submitted to their demands. They obey him, they hear his messages of thought with the speed of lightening, they serve him with the gentleness of the sunlight and the resistlessness of the thunderbolt; but they are mute and dumb, unless he first submits to their behests. “Every so-called marvel of human skill or triumph of human ingenuity, has nothing human in it except the completeness of human obedience. By following nature, by submitting unflinchingly to her authority, all her power is at man’s command.”

2nd—Self-mastery, my Friends, is greater than mastery over nature. “He that is slow to anger is better than the mighty, and he that ruleth his spirit, than he that taketh a city.” The

subjection of your self to the true law of yourself is necessary before there can be true sovereignty over the realm of appetites, passions, and purposes.

There is a law for your highest control, not of your own making any more than the laws of Nature, and to this higher law you must submit yourself, just as to the law of nature, if you would control yourself. This inward voice sounds through the very depths of our being and constitutes personality. Through the submission of yourself to that yet higher, true self, you learn sovereignty. The controlling of appetites, the curbing of desires, the checking of unworthy impulses, is but the submission to the authority of the higher, spiritual law within. This is self-control—desires truth in the inward parts—never yields to falsehood.

You find yourselves, my friends, thoroughly environed by sinful nature. It is in and around you. The desires of the flesh will carry you in the direction of the greatest happiness; the promptings of kindness and prudence will urge you to gratification; constitutional tendency passionate excitement, plausible claims will enter their plea to control you. But there is a capacity of the spirit over and above this nature—supernatural—which becomes a measure and a test of nature. It limits gratification to what may be of honor to the spirit. The sense should render obedience to the authority of the spirit which seeks your highest excellency and truest dignity. The highest happiness should yield its claim to spiritual worthiness, and in the election of spiritual worthiness above all happiness, do we find true character.

3rd—Not only does the power which comes from obedience, have a mastery over nature, and over self, but also over our fellows. If you would master others, you must first feel their mastery over you. The true orator is such because he mirrors and reproduces in his own soul that which is in the souls of his hearers, though perhaps in an unconscious, never-before uttered condition. Mr. Gladstone is the leader of England because he is the foremost interpreter of the English peoples' will—always submitting his will to the true will of the nation. What was, at first, mere instinct with the English, Mr. Gladstone made intelligence and thus became their leader. He became such only after submitting to the unformed impulse of his people. The same might be said of Prince Bismarck of Germany .

4th—Obedience then is the way to wisdom and power and character. The first and the last claim upon self is obedience. The bond of authority should be felt at all times.

(If you would have strong and healthy growth in character—if you would have opened in your souls a well-spring of life, you need to offer your wills in free submission to the Divine will, "God's sovereignty is the exhaustless fountain of life; obedience to him is the endless exercise of life." "And he showed me a pure river of water of life clear as crystal proceeding out of the Throne of God and of the Lamb.")

For a few centuries past the disposition to assert the individual will above the restraints of authority has been steadily gaining in the civilized world. The strongest governments have a sense of insecurity never felt before. Never before have such large police and military forces been necessary to preserve from overthrow by violence the institutions of authority. The disposition to cast off authority and to make the individual self-will dominant is in every issue.

Men in many instances take the law into their own hands. In Europe and in our own country there is being waged a war upon property and upon the family—the two institutions upon which the very existence of society depends.

Our chief peril is in the undue exaltation of our liberty. We have set the Goddess of Liberty upon the dome of our Capital at Washington as though Liberty was the presiding genius in all our laws. We have erected a colossal statue of Liberty at the entrance of New York harbor whose uplifted torch shall proclaim to incoming fleets of all nations that it is Liberty which is to enlighten the world. We boast of our freedom, but who speaks with pride of the supremacy of our law? We are making law dependent on liberty. In other words we are determined to have such laws as we ought to have. If liberty comes first, it soon merges into a license and the license descends into anarchy and anarchy issues in despotism. The law first. The question is not what we will, but what we should obey. This is true and abiding liberty.

History discloses the fact that every nation has pursued some lofty ideal and the degree of prosperity reach in exact proportion to the perfection of the ideal placed before the young. The striving to reach the ideal fixes the character of the individual. Just as a mirror receives and infixes an image, so every divine radiation and inflowing should be retained in the heart and mind of the individual. Then these individuals should reflect their entire self-hood and thus become assimilated and incorporated into the character of society.

The onward march of the faculties, as they go in pursuit of the ideal is a glorious spectacle. To the rhythms of their [trea?] the soul pours out its divinest strains.

But, My friends, what is your ideal of perfect character? What or whom have you chosen as a model? The Greeks would be beautiful, the Roman strong, the Monk pure, the Knight chivalrous. What word or words describe your [?]? What is the standard of excellence towards which you press? What are the constituent elements of true character? Decide this question and strive with all the devotion of the Greek, the fire of the Roman and the heroism of the Monk and Knight to reach it. Do you strive as did the Greek for beauty, both physical and mental? Then add thereto the higher moral and spiritual beauty, the lack of which marked the decay of Greece. Is the obedience of the Roman admirable? Then imitate the stern virtue of the Roman soldier, but be sure that your law is perfect and your leader divine. Do you love the purity and self-abnegation of the Monk? Then add to this a pure Gospel and a pure faith. Are you admirers of the chivalry of the Mediaeval Knight? Then adorn your ideas of Knighthood with the courage to acknowledge the noble and the true even where there are no “stars and garters.”

The great ideals which enchanted the nations of the past bore the sanction of Divinity in so far as the fundamental purpose was to make men perfect. But, insofar as they misunderstood the means to reach this perfection, they all failed. A new ideal has shown out of the mists. The ultimate of thought has been reached. The Divine in the human—Jesus Christ—the actualized Spirit was born. With Him perfection has its center and its key in love, which becomes the law of a perfect leader. This ideal of holiness, of participation in the Divine nature, gives the deepest ground for individuality, sought by Greeks, Romans, and Teutonic peoples. The

aesthetic, the philosophical and the political ideals, are all found in the universal nature of the Christian ideal. The brotherhood of all men and the common heritage of an infinite destiny make the attainment of all kinds of perfection possible.

In all the vast plexus of laws which run with the human faculties, connecting man by his body to the earth, connecting him by his social elements to society, connecting him by his intellect to the universe and connecting him by his spirituality to angels and to archangels, even to God himself—man must render willing obedience before he can realize his ideal—before he can lift the veil which conceals otherwise hidden felicities and grandeur. By such obedience he is elevated to the true sphere of freedom.

The strength of your courage and the success of your endeavors will come from the strength of your obedience and the success with which you lead others to obey. Enjoy all the growth in wisdom and power and character which you have gained and are still to gain through your obedience, in the effort to make more evident the supremacy of law, the authority of righteousness, the unqualified sovereignty of the family and the state, and, finally the headship and lordship, over all, of the Son of God, who has the authority to execute judgment. All that you have of good is not too precious to be laid upon this altar.

[I join the joy of what you have been to us in your college life with the hope of what you are to be, and I find in the devotion which has characterized you as a class in your course here, in the right of your moral purpose and the strength of your faith, the promise of your continued increase in wisdom, power and character and in favor with God and man.] Knowledge is no blessing, unless it is used well and wisely. With it alone, life is not complete. In dealing with things you see, you must walk hand in hand with faith in the unseen, thus only making life beautiful and blessed: ["God gives thee youth but once. Keep then the childlike heart, that will his kingdom be."] Polycarp and Marcus Aurelius.

In conclusion, my friends, lift high your ideal, where no foulness or sordid interests shall stain its purity. "Let it gleam like the face of an angel down upon the mad struggle of wealth and self-aggrandizement till men shall learn that there is something higher than wealth, loftier than station and grander than success.

"And when others shall go to present themselves together in the temple of the Past, among all the gifts they bring, there shall be none equal to the offering which you present, when, you standing, proudly, shall say: "I bring as the result of my work that grandest product of all time—a perfect Christian character.

All of us have heard, with Bryant, from the deep caverns of thought, a voice and a song:

“Build thee more stately mansions, Oh! my soul,
As the swift seasons roll!
Leave thy low-vaulted past!
Let each new temple, more noble than the last
Shut thee from heaven with a dome more vast,
Till thou, at length, art free,
Leaving thine outgrown shell by life’s unresting sea.”

[The Chambered Nautilus, by Oliver Wendell Holmes, MD (1809-1894)

Build thee more stately mansions, O my soul,
As the swift seasons roll !
Leave thy low-vaulted past !
Let each new temple, nobler than the last
Shut thee from heaven with a dome more vast,
Till thou at length art free,
Leaving thine outgrown shell by life's unresting sea.]