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Address at the Central College Commencement, delivered on May 18, 1977

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President Lubbers' Address at the Central College Commencement on May 18, 1977.

As We Pass Life's Open Gates

No college has a school song like CUI. It's out of the 19th century. The lyrics would not win any poetry contest. It's almost archaic. Yet it is one of our songs, the one that has been around the institution longer than any other with perhaps the exceptions of the national anthem and the doxology. Since on this occasion the President and others who consult on such momentous decisions dredged up two former presidents of Central to participate, I thought it appropriate to look to the past and the old song for a title and something that may resemble a theme. I selected the last line before the chorus, "As we pass life's open gates," thinking that it sounded like a title for a Commencement address and provided me enough latitude to say what came to mind when I sat down to prepare these remarks.

There was a time when I felt more confident addressing the Central College community. I used to make a point to visit with faculty and staff before a major address, and they were always generous in their suggestions about what I should tell them. Professor Mills would even provide me with a humorous anecdote
or two to include in my speech, but for some reason they never found their way into the text. I tried to gauge the audience reaction by watching the faces.

Professor Graham, during my early days, was a good barometer of audience interest, approval, or disapproval. He had the ability to give a kindly, pained look and then I knew it was best to stop. But he became Dean and usually sat on the platform behind me when I spoke, which caused me some concern, until I learned to decipher the various countenances of Professor Heusinkveld, whose reactions I learned to read like a book. Never, during one of my speeches while I served as President, did any faculty or staff sleep. I appreciated that courtesy and tried not to violate it by speaking an immoderate length of time. For the most part, Central students were courteous. At a required convocation, which no longer exists I suppose, I made the mistake of scheduling an address the morning after the Beakes initiations. Some of the men didn't quite make it through the speech.

Well, I have reminisced enough. I wrote out this speech for the sole purpose of keeping myself under control and to spare you talk of the good old days and a 30-minute commencement address. We will press on in an attempt to get
through at least one of life's open gates.

From the end of the second World War until the winding down of the war in Viet Nam, generations of college students passed through their college gates into a world that offered them a vocation in the field of their choice. There might be a military duty for some, but that was about the only major interruption in the smooth transition from degree to chosen job. Though this phenomenon is unusual in any society, it lasted for nearly 30 years, long enough to build that expectation into the fabric of our society. That brief interlude many of us enjoyed is over for a while. A softer economy, a new view of natural resources, a decrease in the kind of jobs for which our educational and training systems are designed have brought an almost utopian vocational era to an end. When and if it will return is an open question. For your generation entering the job market, the question is moot.

Before we bemoan the loss of good times, an examination of their consequences is in order. The ease with which a person moved from college or university into his selected vocational field tended to reinforce the
materialistic values of a successful technological society. It made it easy for young people to feel self-fulfillment and purpose through immediate realization of a most important personal goal -- job satisfaction. If for some reason a person was dissatisfied with his working environment, a change was relatively easy. There were more jobs in almost every field than there were those to fill them.

Though immediate vocational satisfaction is a condition few if any of us would reject, there is a consequence to it for individuals that my generation did not realize. When one's job is right, a person assumes life is right, no questions asked. This is particularly true for young college graduates. Vocational fulfillment early tends to keep people from healthy introspective examination early in their adult lives.

Many people are faced with a personal crisis today in their middle years because the ease with which they moved into adulthood through immediate job satisfaction did not require them to ask the hard personal questions that aid the maturing process and give internal direction to life. Their careers carried them along until the inevitable human conditions forced the inevitable human questions. Finally,
failure to achieve some ambition brings frustration. Personal relationships formed in an easy time often disintegrate under unexpected pressure. People do not avoid the unhappiness brought on by their own neurotic tendencies. They must be faced and coped with, and if one does this earlier in life he or she is spared some of the difficulty later.

As college graduates today you are inheritors of a society that was made unsure of itself by Viet Nam and Watergate. You face more uncertainty in career development than most recent college generations. These external forces, however, can serve as a crucible for personal development. When life is uncertain, we can shift our focus to who we are rather than what we do. After all, the "who we are" is the first question which for many is relegated to second place behind "what we do" when jobs are plentiful and lucrative.

You have an opportunity to mature earlier if you use present conditions to the advantage of your personal development. You can learn to cope with uncertainty from wherever it comes. Disappointment can be managed early. You
have an opportunity to know yourself better because society is not able to carry you along except via the welfare route as easily as before. As a generation of people, you will have to draw on inner resources for self-fulfillment. As a result of life conditions today, I am optimistic that we will have a new generation of mentally tough people. There may be a revival of initiative once we put aside the fear that comes with the loss of the easy way early in life. We may see greater maturity as our society copes with its problems. There can be a generation of more sensitive people who possess a truly religious spirit, who have reverence and gratitude for life because they have experienced and understood more about life early in their adulthood.

There is no guarantee that all this will happen. Stress brings strength or collapse, yet I am hopeful. For you Central graduates, there is reason for considerable optimism as you pass through life's open gates. You selected the right college.

Institutions symbolize values. Central not only provides an excellent academic program, it stands for those human qualities of the people who believe, have believed, in love and have loved this institution. Old terms like integrity,
faith, respect, reverence, kindness, forgiveness, gratitude, good humor, they comprise the Central spirit. When Tolstoy, speaking through one of his characters in *War and Peace*, said "If evil men collaborate to gain their ends, so too good men working together can accomplish great things." Those of us who are a part of this college stand for the collaboration of good people.

Before you are completely pushed out of the college gate, I want to comment on the significance of your college for the rest of your life. The next part of the line after "As we pass life's open gates" is, as you have sung so many times, "we'll not forget our college mates." Well, maybe you will forget some of them, but you will remember others all your life. The implication of the last part of this line is that there is something special and lasting about one's college and the associations made there.

After you leave, the college is still here, educating others, but also standing as a symbol of all those qualities that you or anyone else needs to live a healthy, productive, thoughtful, fulfilled life. The institution lives as you live. If times are more complex and a little harder for people now, this institution is here emanating
those values people need to take advantage of whatever the times offer for their
development and maturity.

People need identity. They need a heritage. These are necessary personal
tools for charting, for decision making. Few institutions can provide a point
of identity and roots better than a college. All of your life you can draw on the
Central spirit when you need it. It's a gift you have earned. I hope you use
it. We can generally make it in life if some people love and trust us and there
are institutions on which we can count for support and inspiration. Use your
college experience as a support. Measure your future growth and personal develop-
ment by what you were in college. It's a good beginning point for measurement
and a good chart for future directions.

As I said before, you were fortunate in the selection of your college.

Because of what Central stands for, you probably are better prepared than most for
what lies ahead. Today, Commencement Day, we again celebrate the relationship
between individuals graduating and their colleges. We look forward to what you
will become and are grateful to the college that has nurtured and helped educate you,
to the college that will be a symbol for you in the future. So on this final
day of your college career,

"Let us sing old Central's praise, let us sing of bygone
days, sing of the days she went to war, sing of the days
that are no more. Now as we make a mighty throng, to
the heavens raise our song, and as we pass life's open
gates, we'll not forget our college mates. CUI, Oh CUI,
may your glory never die!"

That glory depends on what all of us who are part of Central do with our lives.

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