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Commencement Address, delivered on June 10, 1972

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Yours is the college generation that lived through the end of the free speech controversy and the height of the Viet Nam war protest. Through all the tensions on this campus and others, two underlying human drives kept asserting themselves -- the individual's need to count for something, to be a factor in the life process, and his need for freedom to be and do what he thinks he wants.

I want to talk about those two drives, how they relate to one another, and where they may possibly lead.
The democratic tradition, the educational system, the instant gratification of material needs, the worship of and fear of technology have combined to create in us an intense desire to protect our freedom. This protection has called forth an almost paranoid concern with decision making processes. Authority in whatever form is always suspect, and we feel we have the right to participate in all the decisions that affect our lives. When we fail to have a voice, a feeling of futility sets in, followed often by cynicism.

In our protection of freedom we are trying to create the conditions in which our lives can count for something. We do not want our individuality stamped out. Each person must feel important, at least important enough to influence his own destiny.

In some respects, technology in the field of communication contributes to our sense of futility. It keeps us from seeing clearly how we can affect life by placing us in intimate contact with decisions and decision makers that are beyond our ability to directly affect. We watch the President of the United States on his visit to China. Daily communiques keep us posted on his conversations with Russian leaders. We are told that his visits and conversations will affect our lives, and we are not participating--just watching. No wonder our feelings of political impotence are increased. We are conditioned to see what the most powerful do, how the best in every field perform, so we believe that what we do and think are unimportant and have no effect.

Add to this the fact that most of us matured at a time when material needs were gratified with relative ease and our problem is compounded. We
are frustrated when we cannot see the direct and immediate result of our
wishes and actions. We are not patient in ascertaining the ways we can
make our influence felt in the best interests of society and for the building
of our own self-esteem. As children, when we wanted an ice cream cone
we wanted it now. When we want ego satisfaction, we want it now.

So our exposure to the world beyond our immediate reach and our
conditioning to instant gratification of desires conspire against the successful
quest for personal identity and satisfying life. We are a people whose
aspirations are high and require persistence, compromise, alteration, long
hours of work, and often surrender of some will to achieve, yet temperamentally
we want fulfillment fast, with a minimum of effort and no compromise if possible.

Though the condition I describe is not universal, it leads many people
away from identification with national and even community goals. It tends
to place them in a perpetual state of dissatisfaction with themselves and others.
It feeds the fires of freedom fighting, but to what end -- freedom to do what?
Even when a large degree of freedom of action and speech is achieved, it
isn't recognized for what it is because the dissatisfaction is still there, so
the battle for elusive freedom goes on but not clearly defined.

The quest for meaning, for self-identification, is the crux of the matter.
Freedom without it is like a vapor. Influencing other people is a way of proving
that we count, that we have identity. For all people, this must begin on a rather
simple level. We must learn to know and care for the people closest to us,
in families, at work, in social and political relations. Influencing does not
necessarily mean controlling, but it does mean what one thinks and feels has meaning for the lives of others and becomes a conditioning factor in their thoughts and actions. I like the term "getting everything together." "Getting it together" implies getting thoughts and feelings sorted out so that the individual can get together with others, live in a way that his thoughts and feelings influence others constructively, and he in turn is influenced by others. The beginning of self-fulfillment is not the achievement of control in all that affects us, but learning to understand and relate to those with whom we live our daily lives. The people who are most successful at that will be the best qualified to exert greater influence in an ever widening circle. No matter how wide the circle, whether it be a nation or a family, the successful achievement of gaining for one's self a positive meaning in the lives of others is the ultimate in human fulfillment and identification.

We live at a time when the commune is again in vogue. Though I do not believe it will be the answer for many people, I admire the motivation behind it: people seeking to share with one another, wanting in simple ways to mean something good to one another, to be important to one another. The word for this relatedness and shared meaning and importance is "community." My pitch to you is on behalf of community. In a mobile society, in one that is bombarded by news about where only a few live and act, the most powerful, the best performers, the most beautiful, we as a people have a demanding task to achieve community where we live.
A community exists when each member recognizes his membership. Membership is acknowledged when each member sees his role in the community as necessary. Before people can build a community through effectively filling their roles, many must experience the feelings that derive from good, intimate, personal contacts. This provides the conditioning that makes it possible for individuals to form a healthy group. The group life is community and within it are many roles to be lived in the interests of all. Improvement of education, wise use of natural resources, a climate for fair dealings in business, improved production and sales of goods and services, fair distribution of wealth, adequate facilities for leisure, a fair tax structure, fair racial practices, adequate political administrative structure to operate public business, good roads, good housing, quality health care delivery, pollution control, and other concerns offer everyone an opportunity to fill a role. With an effective role established, the individual will find identity, and see freedom for what it really is, the guarantee to the individual of opportunities toward an important place for himself in the lives of others.

The problems that keep people from building community, and those of existing communities, are not first solved in Washington or Lansing. If we look beyond the place where we live for their solution, we are doomed to failure. Help may be necessary on the national and state levels, but the solution begins at home in the way people live together. Most people find their roles there.

The usual commencement address urges graduates to set their sights toward the stars. I ask you to look into yourselves and where you live and build community.
During your years at Grand Valley, the college entered upon an experiment in community. As numbers of students doubled, separate colleges and institutes were formed, each with its own identity and sense of community. An important aspect of the experiment is whether several college communities with their own identities can feel an attachment to and an appreciation for the larger Grand Valley State College community. In some respects, our campus is a model of social experimentation, for the success of American society will depend on the quality and development of small, diverse communities. It will also depend on whether or not the individual can feel love, loyalty, and importance within the small communities where he lives and at the same time emotionally transcend his small community ties to give allegiance to a larger social community.

In the past few years, our sense of community has been sorely tested and in some instances shattered. It is tested and shattered by war with its killing and waste of resources, by racial attitudes, by differing values between groups and generations, and by rapid change in life brought on by technology and affluence. As we set ourselves the task of improving our national life by becoming involved in building the communities around us, we can profitably recall Abraham Lincoln's words to the people at a time of great internal strife:

"With malice toward none, with charity for all, with firmness in the right, let us strive on to finish the work we are in, to bind up the nation's wounds, to care for him who shall have borne the battle ... to do all which may achieve and cherish a just and lasting peace among ourselves and with all nations."
7.

I urge you to find purpose and identity in helping people appreciate one another, by providing a psychological cement to hold good relationships together. Fight for and use freedom for this end.

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