

The Commencement Address
to the Class of 1971
of Macalester College

By President Arthur S. Flemming
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Macalester College Fieldhouse
Saint Paul, Minnesota

Introduction of Dr. Flemming
By Jeff Goltz, representing the
Macalester College Class of 1971

As a representative of the Senior Commencement Committee, it is my pleasure to introduce Dr. Flemming as our Commencement speaker.

I could easily list all of the credentials that establish Dr. Flemming as a national leader in the field of education and in government and which would qualify him to be the Commencement speaker at any college or university in the country.

But these are not the reasons why we have chosen him to be our Commencement speaker. We have selected him because he has meant a lot to us and has done a lot for us in the last three years. I am not speaking of any particular program or set of programs or of any procedure or set of procedures that he helped institute at Macalester--although these have been important to us. I am speaking rather of an attitude he has conveyed to us--a feeling, a style. It is a style that is always optimistic, always forward-looking, always positive. If we have picked up just a little of this, then we have profited greatly from his presence. It is this positive, forward-looking style, coupled with his creativeness in education, that has made Dr. Flemming meaningful to us.

The Class of 1971 is proud to present as its Commencement speaker one of our greatest teachers, one of our most innovative educators, and one of our best friends--
Dr. Arthur S. Flemming.

I am grateful for Jeff Goltz's generous introduction. I am deeply indebted to the representatives of this graduating class for inviting me to participate in this manner in your commencement program. It has meant a great deal to me to be associated with you for three out of your four years at Macalester. The insights you have provided me relative to the world in which you live will remain with me throughout my life. It is my purpose this morning to lift up three of these insights.

The first insight is this: You believe that society must recognize and implement the right of all men and women to have the opportunity to develop themselves fully. As a result of this conviction you have demonstrated your concern about policies and systems that deny this right. You have spoken forcibly about war. You have made clear your belief that forcing men and women to live in undeveloped areas -- whether in the ghettos of this nation or abroad -- is a vicious and unconscionable form of slavery.

You have invested time, energy and resources in an effort to change systems and policies that deny this right. At times you have experienced the frustrations that grow out of failures. At other times you have seen a glimmer of light at the end of the tunnel. But whether you have experienced victory or defeat you have discovered that your efforts have brought meaning and satisfaction to your life.

This is why you will continue the struggle for the right of all men to have the opportunity to develop themselves fully. I reject out of hand the cynical comment that when you leave the campus your ardor will cool. You have discovered for yourselves that we find the meaning of existence only as we lose ourselves in sacrificial service in behalf of others. You have found yourselves! This insight you have given me into your world has been and always will be a source of inspiration; you have helped me to discover anew the meaning of existence.

The second insight you have shared with me is this: You believe that the time to recognize the right of all men to have the opportunity to develop themselves fully is now.

You have been characterized as an impatient generation. You are, and for that I am thankful. You believe that the time for action is now.

In his book, "Henderson the Rain King," Saul Bellow tries to describe a man's attempt to shake off what has been aptly described as futurism in order to be able to concentrate on the present. Henderson, the main character of the book, goes to Africa to find himself, to find meaning and peace, to find life. He meets an African king, Dahfu, and this is what he says to him: "Now, Your Highness, I really do not wish to live by any law of decay. Just tell me, how long has the world got to be like this? Why should there be no hope for suffering? It so happens that I believe something can be done, and this is why I rushed out into the world as you have noted -- IF I had the mental constitution to live inside the nutshell and think myself the king of infinite space, that would be just fine. But that's not how I am. King, I am a Becomer. Now you see your situation is different. You are a BE-er. I've just got to stop Becoming -- When am I going to Be?"

Douglas V. Steere, the Quaker teacher and leader, in a series of lectures entitled "On Being Present Where You Are" said:

"... to qualify for ... being present where immediate need is to be found you have to be all there. You have to be awake. You cannot be in a drowse of pre-occupation, in what Pascal called the Gethsemane-sleep, where Jesus' disciples failed him three times by drowsing off, by not being present where they were. Martin Buber in his "Between Man and Man" tells of a student who came to him for counsel. Buber listened to his story and gave him professionally competent advice, and the student went away and took his own life. Buber goes on to tell how he was searched to the core of his being as to whether if he had been really present, really engaged, really all there for that student, the outcome would have been the same."

You have taught me that during any day I am concentrating on getting ready, on becoming, I must set aside a portion of that same day to do something about the human need that must be met today, if it is to be met by me at all.

I am deeply concerned about our tendency as individuals to postpone until another day the finding of the meaning of existence by losing our lives in sacrificial service in behalf of others. The harshest words in the New Testament are reserved for those who failed to visit the sick, those who are in prison and the elderly who are literally cut off from life, and we keep rationalizing our failure to visit and to minister to them.

While you have been in the process of becoming, many of you have participated in Macalester's Volunteer Community Service programs; you have served as tutors to children at schools, churches, community centers and agencies in the Twin Cities; you have served as teachers' aides and Scout leaders in inner-city neighborhoods; you have worked at the Hastings State Hospital; you have worked with discharged mental patients at a halfway house in St. Paul; you have worked with cerebral palsy patients; and you have helped staff Pooneil Corner, a crisis intervention telephone center started by students and staff last year.

You have challenged me as no other group in society has challenged me to be present where I am; to be aware of the fact that I am surrounded by those who can only be helped by me if I am willing to help them today -- not tomorrow.

I am likewise deeply concerned about the tendency of our society to postpone until another day the actions that society must take if our words about the right of all men to have the opportunity to develop themselves fully are to be something more than sounding brass and tinkling cymbal.

Take the field of education. We do need to learn how to do a better job. But right now we know enough to help open up doors of opportunity for those who are in our schools and colleges. Those who advocate delays in committing additional resources for our inner-city schools, for example, until we can demonstrate our ability to do a better job, are deliberately slamming the doors of opportunity in the faces of today's children.

Likewise, those who advocate delays in admitting young men and women to colleges and universities until our inner-city schools can do a better job of preparing them for admission are slamming the doors of opportunity in the faces of today's young men and women.

While our educational system is in the process of becoming what we all hope it may be the students of today are asking that as a matter of right we make a massive commitment of resources, both human and material so as to give them the opportunity for growth and development. For them the only time for action on our part is now.

We are confronted with the same tendency to procrastinate while we are in the process of becoming in other areas directly related to meeting the needs of today's people -- areas such as health, welfare and housing.

While you, however, have been in the process of becoming as students at Macalester, you have given of your time, energy and resources in order to make it possible for Macalester to launch now an Expanded Educational Opportunities program; you have participated in movements designed to bring to a halt now the killing of our fellow human beings; you have made significant contributions to persuading men and women to exercise the right of franchise now both here and in Mississippi; you have joined with those who have sought to accelerate now an increased acceptance of social responsibilities on the part of business and industry; you have been among the leaders in organizing the Minnesota Public Information Research group -- the group that is dedicated to applying Ralph Nader's concept of Action Now to issues confronting this State; and you have been among the leaders in Crisis Colony, a unique cooperative adventure by 12 colleges and universities in Minnesota, Iowa and South Dakota related to the Model City area of Minneapolis.

You have challenged me as no other group in society to oppose those who, whatever the reason may be, seek to slow down society's efforts to deal with human needs and to support those who are calling for action now.

I am about to re-enter the service of the Federal Government. Under the inspiration of the insights you have given me to your world, I am going to draw on the understandings that have come to me as a result of my experiences in government, education and the life of the church in order to bring to a halt now the steady trend in the direction of barring the elderly from meaningful participation in the life of the day, the trend in the direction of ostracizing them from society. And as a result of my association with you I know that my most effective allies can be men and women of your generation, the men and women who believe in action now. I am going to make sure that they play a major part in the program I will be heading, namely, the White House Conference on Aging -- both in the Conference year of 1971 and the follow-up year of 1972.

The third insight you have shared with me is this: You are interested in and concerned about an encounter with God. The best description of this insight that I have read is the following quotation from an article by Louis Cassels, religion editor for United Press-International: "From my own experience in writing a syndicated religion column for secular newspapers and speaking before many kinds of non-church audiences, I can testify that people who have never been interested in theological speculations about God are intensely interested in the possibility of actually encountering God as a Reality to be known and experienced here and now. This is particularly true of today's young people. They may be indifferent toward creeds and hostile toward institutions, but they are powerfully attracted to the idea of God in action, God at work in the world, God dwelling in the hearts and minds of men."

I agree with Mr. Cassels. I am convinced that your generation is reaching out for fellowship with a God in action, with a God who is at work in the world. That is why we are reading many stories describing your generation's encounter with Jesus; that is why many find a message in "Jesus Christ - Super Star." That is why your generation may very well take the lead in bringing about a renewal of the spiritual life of our nation.

You have helped me more than any other segment of our society to understand that God can be a reality in my life only if I am willing to join him in action in behalf of the disadvantaged.

Thank you for underlining for me by your deeds the belief that society must recognize and implement the right of all men and women to have the opportunity to develop themselves fully; the fact existence has meaning only as we lose our lives in sacrificial service for others; the fact that while we are becoming we must be present where we are and must set aside a portion of each day to meet the needs of others; the fact that society must act now in strengthening its program for meeting human needs if we are to bring genuine opportunities for development to today's people; and the fact that true encounter with God as a Reality will serve as a constant re-enforcement of our conviction that the time is now for action to meet human needs.

A few years ago it was a common practice when parting company to say: "Take it easy!" By your deeds you have virtually eliminated this expression from dialogue on this campus. Those who know you recognize that it would be inappropriate. I have always preferred "Good-bye" -- the contraction of God be with you. This is my hope and prayer -- that God will be with you as you continue to live in the belief that the time is now for society to recognize and implement the right of all men and women to have the opportunity to develop themselves fully.

Keep in touch with me. Call on me whenever I can be of help.