

7. Martin's speech, 1991

Michellini text

Winter '91 Commencement

If I told you I was not emotional I would be lying in my teeth. As I sat here on the podium I swore that I would not relive flood memories with a generation that has no recollection of that event. I looked out and I saw the first sight that we saw when we came into the building which was two years old, and there was oily water up to about the row where the graduates end. And there were two Steinway concert grand pianos, which were a tribute to the commitment of this community to the Music Programs and Concert Series and the activities in the Arts that were characteristics of this College's contribution to this community.

I have a lump in my throat and tears in my eyes as you would expect, but I did expect to keep them very personal and now I share them with you. But I also want to share some of the thoughts that Chairman Ross and President Breiseth have already expressed. I have written about five versions of this Commencement speech and I am not going to give any of it and that's partly what happens when you find that when circumstances dictate, you just speak from the heart so I hope you recognize that that's what I will be doing with you.

I came here out of graduate school and my undergraduate experience and I was a war baby; a product of my generation. As President Breiseth noted you are going to be a product of the events that are happening in the world around you. They will shape your life. World War II, the Korean War, shaped my life, shaped much of this College. Faculty members were called back to the Korean War after emerging from World War II. My educational experience at Seton Hall as an undergraduate was twenty-one credit hours per semester, two semesters compressed into summer schools, a three day vacation over Labor Day and then back; because there was a pressure built up to move forward after the devastation of World War II that was reflected in that educational environment. But there was the unexpected outcome of that war that was the hunger of the returning veteran for education. No one expected that. The G.I. Bill, that you hear referenced so very often as one of the paradigms of how government got involved in higher education was not because we had the almighty wisdom to see what the contributions of that educational experience would be to the individual, it was because they did not know how millions of returning veterans would be assimilated into the American fabric of social and economic life of this country. They were afraid of marches on Washington that characterized the post World War I period, and so education was really a very expedient political solution

to what was perceived to be a very dangerous period in the evolution of our American society. So that experience was very intense, particularly, in chemistry and biology. From Seton Hall I went to the University of Delaware where I came under the influence of a marvelous woman, a Quaker woman, Mary Russell, and she taught me some of the beginnings of how in the scientific world one sought for truth. What were the methodologies? What was the discipline? How did you construct the problem and articulate it in a way that permitted you to analyze and pursue it; gather data; information; interpret it; and come to some conclusion?

That continued at the University of Pennsylvania with a new dimension: Students - Mel Belsky, Jerry Schiff, Jewish boys from Brooklyn; Tse Chu Chang a Chinese expatriate; Don Nelson from Canada; Vic Runeckles from England; main line Philadelphians Lukens and Humphrey and this little Italian, Catholic boy sticking in that group. But experience could diversify and show the challenge of what education was all about. And then I came to Wilkes and that's where last Friday my professional career in Education ended and thirty-five years ago it began right here. July 1, 1955 was the initial date on the contract. Twenty percent unemployment in the Valley. Chairman Ross reflected the current economic challenges. Then we had 650 students down from a high of over 1500. Talk about demographic projections. Just devastated by the outflow of students after the Korean War and the economy that did not permit very much of a luxury of higher education.

I was the third member of the Biology Department, with my dear friend, Chuck Reif, who mentored me in so many things; and I could go on with the recollections of curriculum changes, student life changes, the now University, (still Wilkes College in my heart) the graduates. But one of the first things that I experienced when I came to Wilkes as a young faculty member, with all of this behind me, to my first serious faculty meeting in an old converted garage behind Conyngham Hall, was a faculty debate about what constituted the marks of an educated man. I felt, "What the hell do I need this for? I have been educated. I have got all kind of sheepskins to prove it." And yet that debate that I engaged in with faculty members and I ran through the litany of some of those faculty who contributed so much to the building of this University. That debate about "What is education really supposed to have as its outcomes?"

Some of the buzz words are "outcomes assessment" and I would challenge you as you progress through your Commencement and through your life to continuously engage in that process of outcomes assessment. What has your life and what forces have contributed to you in that very personal innerself that is only you, nobody else; wife, family, doesn't matter, there is an inner you that can only address issues and address problems that can make you the human being that you are capable of being - and to me that is what that debate was all about. What do we as a faculty do to contribute something to furthering that human capacity that distinguishes us from all the rest of the animal kingdom, that enables us to progress in what the old Catechism was the "image and likeness of God?" We are created in that "image and likeness of God" and we have an obligation to seek, to fulfill and understand what that means. So, in my formal remarks, I intended to address each of those remarks and identify for you some of the things that I think will help you see the challenges and how you respond to them.

Tom Moran always told a favorite story about the three expectant fathers down in the waiting room of Mercy Hospital and the three fathers are there and the nurse comes running out and she said to the first father, "Sir, you have just become the father of twins," and he said, "Isn't this marvelous, I happen to work for Motor Twins, what a coincidence." Happily, he goes to see his children. A few minutes later, the second nurse comes running out and she said to the second father, "You have become the father of triplets," he said, "Oh! my gosh, what a coincidence, I work for Triple A." A few minutes later the third father was running out of the hospital. The nurse chased after him and said, "Wait, your wife hasn't delivered yet," he said, "Lady, I'm not waiting around to find out, I work for 7UP."

My point is that it is very easy to escape from the challenges and realities. You can get overwhelmed and we see it all now. We escape in alcohol, we escape in drugs and when people confront a human situation they cannot deal with they have no self-esteem, no confidence in their ability to deal with the issues, they escape. Education is one of the first to say you do not take that route to escape. You use your intelligence, you examine issues, you find truth and you seek to identify in a framework of ideals and of faith and of values, those things that enable you to continue plugging and moving ahead. There is no long range vision, we go day to day as human beings and confront different

problems every moment of those days, but if education has helped you understand, and deal with, and cope with that reality -- have a hierarchy of involvement (and Chairman Ross said the exactly same thing) and so it obviously bears repeating.

You will face great challenges as individuals, as families, as communities, as a state, as a nation, and as a world community: and that flow is not accidental because everyone on this planet has a role and a part to play in the resolution of the issues that divide men, that bring men together, that recognizes some of those fundamental values: that nations and peoples under seventy years of dominance in a communist system still grope for the freedom and human rights, the expression of their values and the capacity to do that. And if education helps you see your goal and your place and encourages you to address those issues confidently, and realizing you cannot leave it to the other person, the educated people in this country must be the elite in dealing with these issues and these problems or we will never solve them - and that's you. You paid your money, you've got your choices. I congratulate you and I encourage you to use and continue to use those experiences at Wilkes that have constituted your education.