

A Quest for Excellence: An Address Delivered at
Alliance College, by Eugene S. Farley, 1959 May 31

219

Address by Eugene

Harrel Stark

A QUEST FOR EXCELLENCE

An Address Delivered at Alliance College

Sunday, May 31, 1959

Eugene S. Farley ✓

As I speak to you today, I am reminded of an article that was written on the terrace of our farm some four or five years ago. At that time, the editor of one of the New York papers was visiting us, and in the good weather that we were then enjoying, he moved to the terrace to write an article on the clichés used by commencement speakers.

Although I will avoid the clichés that he commented upon, I find myself wondering if I may not fall into clichés that have developed in the years since his article was written.

It is easy for a commencement speaker to use clichés, for after all, he wishes to say something that is of significance, and it is not always easy to hit upon profound truths. Therefore, there is a tendency to resort to those superficial truths that at the moment seem to have significance.

A few years back it was common to say that the student who was graduating from college had prepared himself for life, that the older generation was waiting to turn over responsibilities to the new, bright-eyed visionary graduating from college, and to predict that the future was bright. Today, experience makes us doubt the accuracy of such statements. We know that the individual must continue his education if he is to keep abreast of modern developments. We have found that the older generations are reluctant to surrender their power, and that maturity and achievement must take place before the responsibility is passed on. And, assuredly, there is no certainty that the future will be bright even though there is the certainty that it should be.

In the years that have passed since the second world war, scientists have given us many promises of material development, but moral, spiritual, and political leaders have not matched the promise of the scientist with a comparable promise. In consequence, we find that in a tortured world, the promise and the threat of scientific development balance one another. The good that is promised by science can be seen by all, but the threat that results from moral and spiritual inadequacy is equally visible.

We do not wish to balance ~~our progress~~ ^{the bad with the good} by stopping the advance of science, but there is little evidence that we are willing to ~~gain~~ ^{attain} a balance by striving to match the scientific developments of a few brilliant minds with the moral and spiritual development of many minds.

We can no longer afford to be complacent about material progress when failure to advance intellectually, spiritually, and morally makes all material gains a threat to the well-being of our entire civilization. If we fail to make those spiritual and moral advances that are necessary to integrate the human race, we face disaster. Misunderstanding, antagonism, and prejudice are luxuries we can no longer afford. Our civilization cannot survive if its people are divided against themselves.

The powers released by science are so great that races, nations, and religious groups are compelled to work together for their mutual welfare. Failing to come to a common understanding, and to work for a common goal, they are forced to accept the fact that mankind can destroy itself. Perhaps we are being forced by the ruthless course of events to accept the dictates of the Golden Rule which have heretofore been pious platitudes,

rather than a way of life. Perhaps we are being forced to translate our ideals into realities, so that those with whom we deal can judge us properly. There has always been a tendency for men to judge themselves by their ideals, while they judge their neighbors by their acts. The need of our time is to identify ideals with acts, so that in judging a man by his acts, we may also judge him by his ideals.

When I was born, the events that happened in China were remote, and seemed to have little effect upon the lives of my parents. Today, all of us know that that which happens in Iraq, in Egypt, in China, in Russia, in Czechoslovakia, in Berlin, in Japan--or anywhere in the world, affects us, and may determine the future of our lives. This, of course, is not true because our world has shrunk; it is true because science and technology have combined to annihilate space, and to bring isolated peoples close together. *In consequence* so that that which affects one people also affects another. Whether we like it or not, the welfare of one people is now related to the welfare of all peoples.

In a world that has been unalterably changed by science and technology, traditional patterns of thought are sometimes no longer acceptable. It is no longer practicable for a man to think that he is superior to other persons from whom he differs. We must recognize that as the other person differs from us, so do we differ from him. The gap between men is the same from both sides; one man is no closer to his neighbor than his neighbor is to him. It seems ridiculous to mention this self-evident truth. But, if you stop to think for a moment, you will realize that we have very frequently criticized people for being different from us. It is salutary, therefore, to realize that we are equally different from them, and that they have the same attitude towards our differences that we have towards theirs. In a great sense the attitude of one person is merely the reflection of the other person's attitude. There is a great lesson in this, and it may be the lesson that we must learn if we are to survive as a people and as a civilization.

To face the future with confidence, we must accept the dual and

seemingly conflicting objectives that open before us. To maintain our free society, we must think more independently and at the same time, we must cooperate more effectively. I say that we must think independently, because only through independent thought and action can we break the barriers that now separate peoples one from the other. We must acknowledge that scientific progress has resulted from individual thought, and we must recognize that intellectual, spiritual, and moral progress also require and depend upon individual thought.

Independence of mind is essential to the advancement and the survival of mankind. But, independence of mind is not enough to assure survival. Although our civilization requires independence of thought, it is equally dependent upon cooperative action. We are challenged, somehow, to make these two extremes--independence of mind and interdependence of action--the solid foundation of our free society.

It is essential to our survival as free men that the individual explore possibilities for common understanding and common action. This

requires not only independence of mind, but also great courage and deep conviction, for, unfortunately, independent action sometimes encourages criticism and social ostracism, and even causes people to question the loyalty and integrity of the person who dares to be independent. As we move forward in cooperative endeavor, it becomes increasingly essential, therefore, that men of conviction and integrity face up to the problems that lie before them. It is not pleasant to hold a conviction that is counter to the thought of friends, associates, and neighbors, but it is essential that the individual thinker move ahead if the whole of mankind is to progress. Without independent thinking, moral and spiritual progress is retarded by the drag of mass opinion. Only when a sufficient number of men possess vision, conviction, and courage is it possible to overcome the inertia of the past and remove the brakes that prevent man from progressing as he should.

As I speak of the need for conviction, integrity, and courage, I cannot help but wonder what would have happened in the world during the

past twenty-five years had a sufficient number of Germans been convinced, and had sufficient courage to counter the dogmatic and dangerous influences of Hitler. Would his doctrine of hatred have become a dominant theme in the minds of a people, had independent and courageous thinkers worked together to prevent the distortion of the German mind? And had this distortion been prevented, would the agony of the world that resulted from it have been avoided? Does not this example indicate the importance of independent thinking, courageous action, and cooperative effort?

In American we are sometimes criticized because we are conformists.

In material ways we are conformists, because we have found that machines can give us many material things. I wonder, however, if we do not have more spiritual and intellectual diversity than we are usually credited with. Assuredly, we have more religious groups than exist in other nations; our regional customs are not identical; and even our prejudices and antagonisms vary from section to section. To the casual observer we may seem to be a nation of conformists, but is this impression a true picture of our real

condition? Is it not true that the great material progress we have made has resulted from the dynamic force that has come from diversity of opinion, diversity of belief, and diversity of effort? Does not progress come from the competition of ideas rather than from the conformity of opinion? I suspect that if we ever become the conformists we are accused of being, we will be a static nation, and the future will indeed be dreary.

Within the past few years Americans have become greatly concerned about their education because of the scientific and material progress of the Russians. Heretofore, we have assumed that our education was adequate. Now we are aware that it must be adequate. We must be concerned, for we must meet the challenge of communism and other authoritarian groups if our freedoms are to be maintained, and our society, based upon respect for the individual, is to continue. If we are not to be destroyed by an ideology of conformity, we must maintain the integrity of our convictions, even while we act together. We must possess a faith that a dynamic force results when people of diverse beliefs and aspirations work together for

a common cause. Without such conviction and such cooperation, a free way of life cannot be maintained. Without these, conformity and authoritarianism will become our way of life.

In this great struggle between the two ideologies of our time, education is of fundamental importance. We doom ourselves to defeat if we accept anything less than excellence. But, the excellence we seek must be as much concerned with independence of thought, as with cooperative action, for these are the cornerstones of our free society. Therefore, as we strive for excellence, we must give thought to the kind of excellence we desire.

Our concern with the productivity of the communist economy and with the progress made by communist scientists, inevitably centers our attention upon their material gains and upon the education that has produced these gains. Unfortunately, their success sometimes tempts us to adopt their techniques. I suggest that if we adopt their techniques, we ultimately adopt their objectives, and in so doing we destroy the roots of thousands of years of ideological and material development in the West.

If we are to compete with the communists, we must be sure that our education is an experience in excellence and a quest for excellence. But what is this excellence? Is it merely the production of more scientific minds capable of developing more sputniks, more projectiles, greater bombs? I doubt that this is enough even though it is one of the prices we must pay for survival. I suspect that the excellence required is an excellence in personal development that will give men reason to trust one another. We know that superior minds are not always directed by superior characters. We know also that no democracy can survive unless men respect one another and have confidence in their neighbors. After all, the unifying force that holds together men of different beliefs, different faiths, and different aspirations is their conviction that men are justified in holding different beliefs, and that these differences result in strength so long as men have confidence in one another. Only when men trust one another and have respect for those who differ from them can they enjoy the dynamic force that comes from diversity. There must be a spiritual force to tie free men together, and I suspect this force is respect for the integrity of the individual, respect

for his ideals and for his differences.

The excellence that we require, then, is an excellence in individual thought and an excellence in cooperative action. We must encourage that freedom of thought and inquiry which are essential to the development of the individual. We must enlarge the vision of the world that lies ahead of us, so that all peoples may be given an opportunity to share the privileges that are made available to us by our scientists and technologists. We must develop that integrity of character which will enable us to withstand pressures and will prevent us from seeking to adopt the expedient action at the sacrifice of moral principle. We must develop an awareness of the forces playing upon us so that we may gain an understanding not only of ourselves but of our neighbors. This excellence of which I am speaking should be the goal of every educated person.

For more than a century we have adhered to the thought that all men must be given equality of opportunity. Unfortunately, we have sometimes been confused as to the meaning of opportunity. We have sometimes confused equality of opportunity with equality of achievement. Our great

concern should be that every man be given the chance to develop whatever talent lays hidden within him. We must recognize that these talents vary from person to person and that the education which benefits one may not be helpful to another. We must understand the meaning of opportunity, and we must extend opportunities to all people who are willing to accept them.

Does not this mean, however, that there is some point in our educational system beyond which men and women cannot pass unless they seek to participate in a quest for excellence? Can we thrust opportunity upon a passive people, or should we concern ourselves only with the extended education of those who strive for excellence?

Our problem in questing for excellence would be easy were it possible for all men and women to make a decision regarding their desire for excellence at the same age. Some people start the search for excellence at the age of fourteen, others at sixteen, others at eighteen, and others are well into their mature and adult years before they are suddenly awakened to the need for excellence. Somehow we must keep the opportunity open for those who are questing for excellence, and this must be the challenge that

confronts us in education.

I believe, however, that you and I who have had the benefits of schooling must recognize that this schooling has not been justified unless it has given us a vision of excellence in thought, in character, and in achievement that will stimulate our growth in the years ahead and will prepare us to meet the great problems that now confront mankind. I suggest that the greatest of these problems today is not so much related to the material progress of our nation, as to the intellectual, spiritual, and moral development of our people.

Somehow each of us must decide for himself what is excellent.

We must then determine how we are going to make ourselves a part of that excellence which is necessary to the progress of mankind.

ESF:mkb
6-4-59

