

The Baccalaureate to the Class of 1963, 1963
June 9th 1963

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The Alphabet of Wilkes

*The Baccalaureate
to the Class of 1963
of Wilkes College*

Dr. Francis J. Michelini

June 9, 1963

It is indeed a pleasure to return to Wilkes as a participant in these exercises that mark the culmination of your years of undergraduate education. It is especially appropriate that this segment of your commencement activities should be attended primarily by the parents of our graduates. Tomorrow evening's ceremonies will be more formal, and attended by a larger number of friends and relatives, but tonight is devoted to sharing more intimately this happy occasion with your families. This is most appropriate, for each of you is aware of the love and sacrifice every parent has made to bring you to this point in your life. This is true of me as well as you, and I would like to publicly acknowledge this debt by presenting to you one to whom I owe so much for the love, guidance and encouragement throughout my life — my mother.

A professor invited to give the baccalaureate address at Yale started by saying he realized they had worked hard for four years to get to this point and that he didn't want to bore them with a long speech. Instead, he would simply take YALE and briefly examine each letter. He then took "Y" and developed the theme of *Youth* for 45 minutes; "A" and discussed *Allegiance* for another 45 minutes; then on to "L" for *Law* for another 45 minutes. As he was proceeding into "E" he noticed a student kneeling in the aisle with his hands clasped. The speaker looked, hesitated in his speech, then said, "Son, is anything the matter?"

Boy said, "No, not really, I'm just thanking God I'm not graduating from the Massachusetts Institute of Technology."

This sufficiently impressed me, as jokes usually do, that I thought about a similar approach; expansion on WILKES — not, I hasten to add, at 45 minutes per letter.

No great problem was presented in finding a word that would convey a significant meaning for *W*. One of the first proofs for the existence of God, as I recall it from one of my courses in Theology many years ago, is the "Nature and Order that exists in the Universe." To a biologist the current understanding of this proof is a wondrous thing. I chose the word *Wonder*, because I think one of the most misunderstood relationships in the world today is the relationship between science and religion. I say misunderstood because today science has produced a deeper insight into this first proof of God than any other sphere of human activity.

Man can be quite an egomaniac when it comes to God — seems strange doesn't it — but in a society where almost everyone tacitly acknowledges that he cannot understand a computer; that he really doesn't know why his car goes (except that if it doesn't when he turns the key, he calls the AAA); that he cannot understand, and doesn't claim to, the elements in a mob that produce riots and hysteria — yet despite all the things he does *not* know

he *DOES* presume to know all about God! In science, one does *not* presume that he knows the answers or completely understands the workings of nature. One of the reasons Western civilization has progressed so fantastically is because we make the assumption that one *can* understand if one makes the attempt and phrases a question of nature that will produce a meaningful answer. In many instances the apparent atheist who said about the thunderstorm and lightning, about sickness and disease, "I do not believe this was caused by God or Gods but has some understandable physical reason or cause" — was expressing a belief of an order in the universe that bespoke a greater, more *meaningful* God, than the ones being ruled out in order to initiate the inquiry. The current understanding of the various biological and physical phenomena that enable us to discuss such things as:

1. controlled atomic fission and fusion to produce power
2. precise orbital position of a Venus probe
3. utilization of a laser beam to surgically reattach the retina of the eye
4. construction of the genetic material from artificially synthesized molecular parts
5. potential understanding of cell and organ development that will make disease a rarity,

and consider them susceptible to our understanding is truly a fantastic affirmation of this first proof of God — the belief in the existence of order in the universe. Without the tacit assumption that such order exists, the scientist would have no cause to expect a logical answer to his questions, no reason to expect that he can extend his results reasonably to predict a new situation and problem. In one of his recent addresses, Dr. Waterman, Director of the National Science Foundation, said, "Perhaps one hopeful aspect of our times is that some part, at least, of the energy and ingenuity that for centuries have been dissipated in wars is being channeled into the conquest of space and other major scientific undertakings. Perhaps we have come full circle; for science, which in the beginning was known as natural philosophy, has in the ensuing centuries opened so many doors and asked so many questions that it must once more link hands with philosophy to help us find the answers."

In my alphabet of Wilkes, therefore, I want to put into some meaningful perspective the Wonders that you will experience and contribute to in your lifetimes — the wonder of an understanding of nature that contributes to the mainstream of a more fundamental understanding of God. All of your human activity exists within this frame of reference of an orderly universe subject to fundamental laws that we as men can yet only glimpse.

I seemed one of the easiest letters in the Wilkes alphabet to develop. Intelligence, Ignorance — certainly we could gain much from a brief concern about what constitutes intelligence — the sorry fact that an intelligent person, when swayed by emotion — with a mind closed by bigotry or a false image — can be more abysmally ignorant than the moron — but this didn't seem quite what I felt I wanted to say. The selection of a theme for *I* came from a Wilkes graduate of 1957 and is expressed by the word *Individual*.

On Memorial Day — when all pay homage to the men and women who gave their lives to preserve our country — we drove out to Arlington National Cemetery. Neil Dadurka is buried there, and we went to visit his grave. It takes a very unusual person not to respond to the deeply peaceful spirituality of those grounds. I thought a great deal about Neil and it seemed especially appropriate that the message he gave through his death should be a part of this ceremony. Neil was not an unusual Wilkes student, true, he was a fine wrestler, with a singleness of purpose when wrestling that enabled him consistently to overcome a superior opponent. He was an outstanding individual performer, yet, in football, he was a real team player who blended his individual efforts with those of others. He was typical too in that he had an occasional academic problem. He graduated from Wilkes and became a Marine jet pilot. Again in his jet training he overcame personal shortcomings by fighting harder and working harder. Finally this chapter of his life ended with a flame-out over the Los Angeles suburbs. Here was a split-second decision to be made — whether to safely eject, but run the risk of his plane crashing into a populated area, or to stay with it and guide it to a rural area at the cost of this opportunity to survive. He stayed with it — coaxed it out beyond the suburbs — crashlanded and died from his crash injuries. What do I feel he stands for? Neil Dadurka was an individual — he had the problems every individual human being has, and he solved them as we all must; by an effort of his own resources and with work. The *I* in Wilkes for individual — what each of us is and must be in every daily effort; an individual in our judgment; individuals in our opinions; individuals in every sense that a democratic society such as ours is dedicated to serving — where the individuals right to speak freely, to read freely, and to arrive at independent judgment must be preserved. Yet at the moment of decision the deciding factor for Neil was not rooted in his freedom as an individual. It was instead the highest order of human achievement; the fundamental recognition of a responsibility above that of self — a concern for others. When the chips are down it is this characteristic of the individual that carries the greatest meaning for us. Certainly

a great deal of your life and its decisions will be based on individual concerns and needs. In addition to this, however, must be the awareness of the even higher concern we as individuals must have for others. Certainly this concern for others is fundamental in our Judeo-Christian traditions. Among Pope John's favorite readings was this, "My son, in proportion as you go out of yourself, so will you be able to enter into me." Wilkes College would not be here were it not for the individuals in our community who go beyond concern of self to give and work for others. Participation in community affairs, United Fund drives—yes—even in alumni activities, is a less spectacular but no less meaningful affirmation of this higher order of human activity by the individual. Your class gift and your commitment to add to it in coming years is a gratifying indication of your awareness of this concern.

Neil Dadurka demonstrated the extremes of these responsibilities that we all have, the responsibility to do full justice to our individual capabilities, yet ever aware of a higher order of concern for others. You cannot be less heroic if you are to fulfill yourselves as contributing members of a free society.

For *L* I selected *Loyalty*. I think we are all aware that we are loyal to something — loyal to our country — loyal to friends — loyal to our school, etc. But as you arrive at this point in your careers it might be well to re-examine your loyalties and what they mean to you.

Certainly we relate loyalty to patriotism, a willingness to fight and die for our country. Are we equally ready to relate loyalty and patriotism to a willingness to actively engage in exercising our responsibilities as citizens? Does this loyalty extend to filling out an honest tax return — to exercising our voting franchise?

We are loyal to the ideal of family responsibility and are willing to sacrifice for our children so that they may get an education; but, are we willing to be active in the community activity necessary to keep others aware of the necessity for new schools, better teachers, good textbooks? How deeply do your loyalties extend?

These may seem like digressions from my theme but in gaining a new perspective on some of the elements of increasing importance in your lives, your loyalties are of major significance. Each of us must develop through life certain loyalties. These may be to an ideal, a specific objective, or both but they are essential to our lives and we must be aware of fulfilling them.

Conspicuous by his absence here tonight is one whose loyalty to an ideal has contributed so much to your presence here. Dr. Farley's loyalty to an ideal resulted in a dedication that is only

too rare in our society. It is a loyalty that ignored material advancement for the more meaningful fulfillment of an ideal — a commitment to the education of youth. The ideals you will probably live by have been forged to a large extent by your family and your education. In that sense Wilkes will forever be a part of you and your life that you cannot erase. I hope that the ideals developed here will bring you pride in your own performance through life and that the examples provided by the members of our faculty and administration, and especially Dr. Farley, will influence your loyalties. A conscious dedication to this element in life will bring rewards of a significance that will never need measurement. Examine your loyalties in this perspective and make them instruments for determining what your achievements in life should be.

For K I have chosen the obvious: *Knowledge*.

You have all been participating in a 16 year process of education and many of you will be continuing even further. Ours is one of the few civilizations in history in which such a learning experience is considered an appropriate human right. As a biologist it has always intrigued me what conflicts can develop as a result of our increased understanding of ourselves and the natural world. People react to this new knowledge in a variety of ways. One very characteristic response is, "Don't bother me with the facts, my mind is made up."

We all know, of course, of the so-called "explosion" of knowledge that is occurring in our time. This use of the word explosion is unfortunate — for this intimates subsidence after the initial burst. This is not the case. Our knowledge will continue to expand at an increasing rate in all areas of human activity. My association with the National Science Foundation has made me increasingly aware of this activity in the sciences, but there is now developing considerable activity in the area of the humanities. Recently a Commission of the Humanities was formed that will, I feel sure, stimulate a surge of new activity in knowledge and understanding in this area.

What do we do when this new knowledge shakes some of our firmly entrenched beliefs? How do we respond to new information giving greater insight into the nature of man? Do we pass laws against the dissemination of these new ideas if they affront us? Do we censor our libraries to "protect the young impressionable minds of our youth?"

Maybe my biologists background is intruding too much here, but it has served to make me aware of one thing; man is irrevocably a member of the animal kingdom. If we are to consider him "Godlike" it cannot be in the physical sense. It is indeed

most logical that the ability of man to think, to learn, to understand his intellect and free will, are the characteristics that set him apart and distinguish him from the rest of the animal kingdom, that truly make him a creature of God. An appreciation of this opens the door to a new insight to knowledge and our attitudes toward it. If this intellectual capability is vested in us by God — a refusal to use this capacity by closing our minds to the fruits of its use becomes a very serious moral issue. It's like a person saying "Thanks God for making me different from the beasts of the forest, for making me capable of a truer understanding of your greatness, but who needs it? I'm happy, I don't want to use this ability, and even more, I don't want to permit anyone else to use it. Burn that book — Ban that idea."

Is this really a morally sound response? I think all of us must recognize the moral obligation to utilize these God-given powers of understanding — to strive constantly to know truth — in all areas of human activity. Truth can only result from increased knowledge and can never be complete. Our greatest sin as children of God would be to ignore this responsibility to use our minds to our maximum ability.

I felt that *Equality* is the only word which is appropriate for *E* in this period of our nation's history. I may be influenced in this respect by the proximity of the problem while in Washington. Unquestionably, this is a potentially explosive issue politically, but more significantly it is basically a moral issue. This will not be resolved by laws, force, token response, but only by the individual who will examine the basic issues posed by a society that offers equality in its documents and words, but does not grant it in practice. I think it is incumbent upon each of you to examine the meaning of equality — determine your values and act consistent with them. Certainly the outcome of the battle for equality now being waged in America will affect the nature of the international environment in which our children and their children will live. We must find a solution to these problems.

As President Kennedy so bluntly stated it — "In these moments of tragic disorder, a special burden rests on the educated men and women of our country — to reject the temptations of prejudice and violence, and to reaffirm the values of freedom and law on which our society depends."

This area of human rights and human dignity is one in which you bear a major responsibility. I only hope to leave you with a recognition of the role you must play in the solution of these problems.

As a baccalaureate address I have tried to develop our alphabet of WILKES with an emphasis on the spiritual perspective we must

develop in all of our human activities. It might seem appropriate for me to select *science* for our last alphabet letter, but I prefer *Spiritual*.

We have gone from improving our national lot as wilderness settlers, to territorial expansion and acquisition of additional natural resources, to improvement by production and development of a complex, but comparatively wealthy society.

Our next great challenge is the development of the individual, not as a regimented automaton, but as an individual with many capabilities. This is an era of attainment characterized by development of our brain-power. Real progress is that which will give the greatest number of people beneficial control over their future. In our efforts to continue our progress we must utilize this resource of the human mind as effectively as possible. This is the great challenge to the educator and it must be met. Through all this educational effort though, we must remember that facts, inventiveness and possession of knowledge are good, but unprincipled and unguided use of the "power of knowledge", could be ruthless.

There must be guidelines for us to follow. Guidelines based on intangible principles have gone a long way toward making this country what it is today. Such words as "ideals, standards, religion, pride and patriotism", recur in any expression of those principles. These are all *Spiritual* words. Are they old-fashioned, outmoded for these modern times? Aren't people "square" who talk about spiritual beliefs? Isn't this rather a time to live it up, look for kicks, grab a buck, live for the day?

There's only one way I know of to answer these questions. It is by looking back to chart the rise and fall of other civilizations. And when you do that you find that spiritual ideals — far from being impractical — are the very "stuff" of survival. Every great society which came into being and long endured, did so on the basis of convictions and beliefs so strong that they lifted individuals clear out of themselves and caused them to live — and die — for some aim or purpose nobler and better than themselves.

Look back and you will see that the whole fabric of this Nation's growth, of its success and its glory, was woven of spiritual belief in liberty and in justice. Look forward and you will see no substitute for these spiritual values if we hope to see our civilization survive and prosper.

WILKES COLLEGE
WILKES-BARRE
PENNSYLVANIA

August 5, 1963

TO: Members of the Board of Trustees
FROM: Gene Farley

Attached is the Baccalaureate address "The Alphabet of Wilkes" given in June by Dr. Michelini, our Dean of Academic Affairs.

Because Dr. Michelini has so beautifully equated the spirit and intellectual aspirations of the College, we are giving a copy of this address to each incoming freshman.

We hope by this address, and through the orientation program for new students, to quicken student interest and to enlist their participation in efforts to increase the influence of the College upon the thoughts and lives of all who attend it. In addition, the faculty in discussions which will proceed the opening of College will consider other ways and means of increasing the constructive and creative influences of the College.

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Encl.

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