

# FOR THE RECORD

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## An American Commencement

*Jacques Barzun*

**A**n American Commencement, when you come to think of it, is an extraordinary event, even though it occurs every year and in many places. Just think: at commencement credit is given to those who have earned it; public recognition goes to hard work, not influence; prizes and honors are awarded according to merit. This will never happen again in the lives of the graduates.

Notice too, that among those gathered to see these miracles, an atmosphere of pure benevolence prevails. You find that strangers have spelled everybody's name correctly on the diplomas and in the program; and to top the pleasure, there is often some form of free lunch. All these signs suggest that utopia is at hand. But as in the Garden of Eden, there is a joker lurking, someone with a line of talk all prepared to spoil the bliss: that is the commencement speaker.

What he does is remind the dwellers in utopia of the harsh world outside; and he does this usually in the most uncomfortable, inappropriate way. Here he is, addressing students who have been toiling so as to enter a profession, to pursue a career on home ground, and the speaker tells them that they must do something for peace in the Middle East; or that they cannot any longer ignore the blight of drug abuse, to say nothing of their responsibility for better policies in South America, South Africa—and the District of Columbia.

Very few students are prepared for such assignments, but they never protest, perhaps because they are flattered to hear from the speaker that the future is in their hands: the world depends upon them. At any rate, neither they nor their parents object, because they are polite and willing to let the speaker get his words in the newspaper the next day, which will happen only if he raises issues of global importance.

For my part, when I speak at a commencement, I prefer to say a few words not about what the newly hatched might do for this world but what they might do for themselves, as individuals. Suppose they are graduating from a music school; the speech might go something like this.

As you are now, the world does *not* depend on you; it is not aware of your existence; it will acknowledge it slowly, perhaps in keeping with your professional efforts, perhaps not. These efforts are unquestionably your main busi-

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ness, now that you have taken such pains to be knowledgeable and proficient. But these very pains, this professional preparation, and all the striving to establish yourselves which comes next, are all activities that narrow the mind and stifle the spirit.

One might suppose that because your studies relate to the art of music, your scope has been both broad and deep. But your studies have made you technicians, specialists, and your further progress will make you specialize even more. In every niche you will be bound by set procedures and compelling needs. You will do what you must much more often than what you want. The higher you rise—as the world measures height of accomplishment—the greater will be the compulsions, the necessary conditions of your professional life. True, if you are a great success as a great artist, you will have some power and some free choices. But that fact itself will make the surrounding limitations all the more galling.

You should also consider the possibility that you will not manage to get even that limited area of freedom. For in our world, which is ever more crowded with talents, success depends increasingly on a run of happy chances. Undoubtedly, after trial and error, you will find a suitable field for your abilities. Looking for it, making it truly your own by (as we say) proving yourself, will be engrossing and satisfying. But after your success, what? There comes a time in every career when this cheerful sense of accomplishment comes to an end. Life begins to repeat, or seems to. And even before you come to occupy the desired spot, there are bound to be moments of self-doubt, when hope and energies are at a low ebb. What do you do then? What are your resources for coping with the usual questions that arise at those moments: what am I worth, really, and, how can I replenish the founts of self-confidence?

There are no guaranteed answers to these questions. But when the will to self-searching has you by the throat, there is immense value in being able to find a Self: that is to say, a solid entity that you can trust, because you have made it yourself and made it well. A well-made Self is not a haphazard collection of habits and prejudices, of notions and fancies; it is an ordered set of reflections, conclusions, and convictions. Now, the task of continually bringing these elements together and putting some order among them requires an outside stimulus and a discipline. This stimulus may be of the regrettable kind, such as a grave illness or a great sorrow; or it may be a strong and sustained religious faith. But for most people, the stimulus and discipline are deliberately chosen. They take the form of getting outside one's routine and filling the mind with vicarious experiences. This is best done through reading.

Reading of course can easily be nothing more than a way to kill time; but if it is calculated and intense, it is a steady extension of one's life. If life is measured by consciousness, one whose mind is full lives longer than one whose life is empty—just as one who is awake eighteen hours a day lives longer than one who sleeps away every twelve hours. You add to life by adding to the

quantity of conscious moments through reading. This is true no matter what you read—history, poetry, novels, essays, letters, diaries, memoirs, criticism. One curious result of the habit is that after a time, even the reading of trash, and certainly the reading of newspapers—(in short, the reading that kills time)—even that brings with it some addition of value, because the mind is equipped to extract some good thing or other from the low-grade substance.

You will ask, How does reading-with-intent help to build a Self? If all it does is eke out your experience with that of others, why isn't your own sufficient? Why doesn't it organize itself into inner strength? What is lacking is the contrast, the otherness, the novelty and strangeness; the shock of difference and the recognition of sameness; in other words, the work of the imagination. For to read intelligently and profitably, your imagination must work every minute, reconstructing the lives, events, and emotions depicted in print.

If this is true, you can see why filling the mind with a vision of what happened to other people, or of what is happening right now elsewhere, is an antidote to the narrowing effect of a profession. It reminds you at critical moments that the present concern, the irritating predicament, the stupid mess created by an individual act or an institutional rule, is not the sum total of the universe. It gives you, as we say, perspective, a sense of proportion. These words in fact refer to that second Self, that solid Self, full of experience, standing like a backstop behind the everyday Self, which is engaged in dealing with the vicissitudes of life.

The second Self is of course of permanent acquisition. You don't lose it like an umbrella and miss it the next time it rains. You carry your strong identity with you through the whole course of life.

I have so far stressed the uses of a cultivated Self in cushioning the defects and annoyances of existence, because at your stage of life utility is doubtless uppermost in your mind—and rightly so. But the cultivated Self is also a source of joy. With it, the idea of leisure gains all its meaning; it is not an empty time, but time in which the mind takes pleasurable exercise, as the body does in jogging or swimming: no need to look for "leisure-time activities," so-called. One can be perfectly idle and also contented, self-entertained. Walt Whitman said, "I loaf and invite my soul." His soul was not a vacuum or jumble; else he would have loafed the shortest possible time and looked for company and a pack of cards. To put it the other way around, to a cultivated mind the boredom of solitude is unknown. Such a cultivated mind can be bored only by other people; and those other people are very few, because ordinary bores, like trashy books, often contain matter of interest.

You may wonder why I suggest filling and organizing the mind by reading. Why not the contemplation of the other arts? And since you have all dedicated yourself to the art of music, why is this happy choice not sufficient to cultivate a Self as resistant and as pleasure-giving as the good life requires? I partly

answered that question earlier, by pointing out how professional studies and work coerce body and mind into narrowness—the fulfilling of immediate demands, the pursuit of self-interest, as contrasted with the pursuit of interest in one's Self.

But there is another part to the answer. It is just possible that all of you like music—or that only some of you do. I am not joking when I suggest that doing music and liking it are two different things. The parallel in ordinary life is familiar enough: a couple who are passionately in love but do not really like each other. One can be a passionate performer, a composer of genius, a dedicated teacher, and yet totally neglect music as a source of cultivation. And this relation applies of course to all the other arts, including literature.

Cultivation, or what I have called for short *liking*, calls for a certain detachment—standing off and looking, comparing, reflecting, concluding. Whereas a performer (let us say) puts his whole soul in rendering the works of a few chosen masters, or at best of a given style or period, the true music-*liker* enjoys many masters, styles, and periods. As for the composers, they very properly equate music with their own or kindred creations. As listeners and beholders we are grateful for their fanaticism; they are wonderfully productive *for us*, but they do not benefit these single-minded beings themselves in the way of cultivation.

Finally, it must be added that music and the plastic arts serve cultivation best when the experience of them becomes explicit, that is, when it is discussed or read about. The reason for this is simple—feelings and memories are stored up and relived most fully with the aid of words. Recall a superb performance of the Ninth Symphony or your first sight of the Chartres Cathedral, and you will find that these recollected emotions are strung upon a thread of perceptions, incidents, details, all couched in words. This is by no means to treat music or architecture in a literary way, but only in the normal way of the human mind. When you tell a friend of a near-accident in mountain climbing, you are not dealing with your life and the Rockies in a literary way: you are giving shape to confused emotions. Complete experience involves words, even though the words do not themselves reproduce the experience. Only one thing gives it—the imagination.

The truth brings us back full circle to our beginning. Whoever wants to build a Self for the sake of inner strength and the pleasures of vicarious experience had best make the play of imagination a part of his program: as Voltaire said, “Cultivate your garden.”

But one last, quick question: isn't this goal of self-sufficiency a piece of selfishness? What about the horrors of the Middle East and of drug addiction? We are not separate islands in the sea, as John Donne reminded us; therefore these public concerns are ours too, in some way and to some degree. A main way is as citizens and voters, and in that capacity the chances are good that a mind rich in vicarious experience will yield sounder judgment than one cultivated only by the newspaper. Part of that good judgment will be to recognize

ability in those one votes for; another part will be to know that ignorant opinions about what to do in complex situations are worse than useless—they are dangerous. “Cultivate your garden” also means: attend to what you are fit to do and delegate the rest.