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THE JOY OF BEING SERIOUS

*Address by Mark Van Doren
Presented at the
New Year Convocation for Students
University of Illinois*

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THE JOY OF BEING SERIOUS is one in a series of papers reflecting the role of the University in the contemporary world. Titles previously issued:

UNIVERSITIES AND ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT, papers presented at the testimonial dinner given by Governor Otto Kerner in honor of Professor Frederick Seitz, President, National Academy of Sciences, September, 1962.

THE ROLE OF THE TRUSTEE IN THE PUBLIC UNIVERSITY, an address by Harlan Hatcher, President, University of Michigan, at the University of Illinois Citizens Committee biennial state-wide meeting, May, 1962.

EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES IN ILLINOIS, an address by Governor Otto Kerner, Commencement, June, 1962.

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THE JOY OF BEING SERIOUS

President Henry, Students, Teachers, and Friends:

Let me say first of all how much I appreciate the privilege of being present as a new year opens at the University of Illinois, where I myself ceased to be a student almost fifty years ago. And it is more than a privilege — it is a high honor — to be asked to speak on this occasion.

I have decided to do so in the spirit of one who has been a student and a teacher through his entire adult life, and who has never lost interest in the question what a university is — ideally is, for I propose to be shamelessly ideal as I consider with you what difference is made, or might be made, in anybody who spends four years or more in such a place as this. There is no other kind of place in our world where persons are supposed to change so quickly and so much. But what is this change, and can it be defined? Permit me to assume that it can; and permit me, furthermore, to address myself directly to the students, new or old, before me. For it is they in whom the university chiefly lives; it is they who will undergo the change of which I speak. Indeed, I should like to think I was talking to one student — any student — rather than to many. Education is finally an altogether personal affair. Its result can best be measured in the individual who has received and enjoyed it. There are those, properly enough, who ponder what it does for society; and there are those who tell the young that they should study for the sake of others rather than themselves. But I prefer to emphasize the difference that study makes in every separate person who gives himself to its delights. It is a pleasure, and pleasure is not collective. In the long run, of course, society benefits from the happiness of its members, no matter by what means their happiness has been achieved. So it may make little difference from which end we view the subject. I shall stick, however, to the near end, the end in you; I shall ask you to imagine what education might mean, at the utmost, to yourself. Once in Virginia I heard a man from Alabama — a university man, a dean, even — ask this simple question: "If we are here to help others, what are the others here for?" In the spirit of that man I suggest that you are here to help yourself to the best education you can get.

What would that be if it were really the best, as with your own assistance, and by your own demand, it might indeed be? For you too must assist, and you must make demands; you must meet at least halfway the education that is coming here to you. You must not only hope you will be changed; you must insist that it happen, and see to it that it does. Changed, of course, for the better, since no one would willingly be changed for the worse. And I mean by changed for the better, changed into somebody who is more like yourself than you are at present. You are here, shall we agree, because you do not yet know who you are. The purpose of education is to give you this knowledge, in whatever form and to whatever extent it may be available. Perhaps it has never been fully available to any man. Perhaps? No, certainly it has never been. For a man who knew everything about himself would know everything about everything else, and there has been no such man. The limits of human knowledge are nowhere so clearly seen as here: the limits, nor the delights either, for in whatever measure we do know ourselves we are happy. And I take it that happiness is the thing we all most deeply desire.

In what, however, does knowing ourselves consist? What did Socrates mean when he said to those who studied with him: Know thyself? He meant, I suspect, the opposite of what we sometimes think he did. He meant: Know in thyself the person thou hast never discovered was there, the person who is identical with all other persons in the end, the ideal, the perfect person insofar as he is knowable. Granted, he is not fully knowable. But education is never serious except when it is trying to dig him out, to bring him to a second birth, to make him think and speak. This person, this self, is the same in all, though in some he is more deeply buried than he is in others. But to the extent that we are human we are more alike than we are different. Good and reasonable people, Abraham Lincoln once said, are the same everywhere. And if this sounds like a superficial remark, consider the profundity of the man who made it. And consider his uniqueness — in which a paradox resides. He was more like everybody else than anybody else was; hence his mystery, which we shall never fathom any more than we shall fathom the mystery of Shakespeare, who knew what everybody has always known, but knew it better, so that it came all the way to the surface in him. The person we all are somehow exposes itself in

his poetry, which is why we call it the greatest. We learn from him what we already know, as in every lineament of Lincoln we recognize the person we would be if only we could — could be, that is, so selfless and so simple. Yet we call him complicated too; and he was. Complicated and selfless; and therefore, in his grand outline, simple. The paradox here has many branches, another of which is this: Those who know best that all men are the same are themselves the most individual, the most personal, the most moving and lovable of men.

If happiness is our deepest desire, then we should be altogether serious in our pursuit of it. Not that it is outside of ourselves, so that we must go somewhere to find it. It is here or nowhere. If all men are the same, it is everywhere; yet the germ of it is hidden in each of our souls, and grows there only if we tend it. We and our teachers. Neither Shakespeare nor Lincoln went to college, but who can doubt that they had teachers: Plutarch, Euclid, with themselves assisting? Each of them made a living, and each of them made a life: a life that was different from other lives only in that it was deeper, more copious, more certain of itself. It is life to which education introduces us: merely introduces us, leaving us to become friends in the best way we can. You may be here to help yourself make a living; but if that is your only expectation, some day you may regret that you did not insist on more. Livings can be lost as well as made. Life, as invisible as air, but also as permanent, is surrendered only with our last breath. And by life I mean once more the thing that all men have in common: the immaterial thing that sets them apart in creation from animals and stones.

The thing that lives uniquely in man is his intellect. No other creature has it, and no other object. It is the one thing that makes us equal, if we are. And the greatest men — Lincoln, for instance — know how to believe that we are. They trust their own intellects, and pay to others the supreme compliment of trusting theirs. They have faith in the only instrument we possess — and who else, or what else, possesses it? — by which the truth can be discovered. Not the whole truth, but as much of it as possible; and if at last we have to settle for a small amount, it is this amount that distinguishes us. Without apology for a term which embarrasses some teachers, a term which all Americans have been accused of despising, or any rate of fearing, I urge you to look within you for the intellect that

is there. To look, and look hard; for as I have said, it hides itself. It seems reluctant to come forth. Who knows, in fact, that it isn't lazy? It is our will that makes it work: our will, our hope, our faith, our preference for being alive. If some of us are weak of will, it does not follow that the intellect itself is absent from us; it is only, with our permission, slumbering. To the extent that it wakes up in us, however, we are happy men. Not at ease, but happy: a more active thing. Thinking is difficult, and even dangerous; nor does it go on by itself, since it is not a little motor we can wind up when we please. It is our very selves, discovering with great labor who we are.

My hope is that each of you will be ambitious for his intellect: will keep it busy by giving it work to do. Or games to play — perhaps that describes its operation better. But whether it works or plays, its own desire, once it has come awake, is to behold the truth — yes, all of it, though it will never satisfy this desire. Yet what of that? Not to have had the desire at all is never to have lived. To have it is to want to know, to want to understand. And when we really mean this, there is no item of knowledge that we dismiss as not for us. The world has plenty of people in it who think that most knowledge is not for them; they have lost their ambition, they have given up, they have become members of an intellectual proletariat which has no longer the right to call itself human. Beware of such membership. Do not give up. Keep inquiring, and remember what you learn. Be suspicious of specialties — even your own, and indeed that most of all. For the specialist can be ignorant of the very field he claims to master. When he is truly its master, the reason must be that he knows other things as well. Short of this, he qualifies as ignorant, and so is a poor pillar to lean upon. The fairly common assumption that we ourselves can afford to be ignorant because somewhere there is somebody who knows the answer — such an assumption builds ignorance fast, and builds it widely. The rapid growth of knowledge we sometimes boast about, seen in this perspective, looks like its opposite: the rapid growth of ignorance. Unchecked, it could become absolute; and that would be disaster. For no one then would trust himself to speculate about the huge central things that matter most. He would have lost the ambition, and to that extent the power, to do so.

¶ To speculate once meant to see, or try to see: to put on spectacles

and peer into the dark. With all our knowledge we are still in darkness about many things. Let me encourage you to cultivate cat's eyes, with which you may at least make out the dim, still forms of truth. As undergraduates you are not too young for this. What better time, indeed, to begin? I hope you will astonish your teachers by asking them the hardest questions you can frame, and by waiting for an answer. The answer may be that no one knows. Well, that is where speculation takes its start; and if some teacher does it before your eyes, so much the better for both him and you. The teacher learns by being asked hard questions, and the student by watching him struggle to do them justice. The whole process yields the richest pleasure possible to man. Nothing is more strenuous, and nothing is more fun.

[I am asking you, in brief, not only to be serious but to enjoy being serious. To bring ideas in and entertain them royally, for one of them may be the king. To talk, and listen to yourself while you do so as if you listened to a stranger who might be wrong; who might be right. To talk better the next time, and better still the next. To read books — whole books, not articles, not digests — and live with them as if they were your friends; or, it could be, your enemies who will have to be put down. And finally, to listen, for listening is the final art a student practices. If speculation consists of seeing, the very heart of it may consist of seeing, or trying quietly to see, what others see. There are twice as many eyes as men, and this is not too many for the truth. To talk, then, and listen, listen — not merely, either, to human voices, but quite as much to the speech of the world, the speech of things, of animals, of the sky. To listen, and take into yourself whatever you hear. To listen, and to notice; and last of all, if it is in you to do so, to adore. For the final stage of happiness is joy — joy that the world, imperfect though it may be, is at all. Joy has no aim except to let the world be what it is, for better or for worse. It is feared these days that men will destroy the world. But any man has already destroyed it who has decided that it is not worthy of his full and continuous attention. It is older than man, and doubtless will survive him. Certainly it will if in his arrogance he wants to be the only creature on it. That will be the end of him, but not of the world. It is a vast place, difficult to see into, and nobody yet has found its center. Nevertheless, the good student — the serious one, the humble one, the joyful one — will keep on trying.]

THE NOVITIATE
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