Intellect and Humanity: Instruments of Life

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INTLECT AND HUMANITY: INSTRUMENTS OF LIFE

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Introductory Remarks:

Someone once said that "Talking that is too long is generally the result of thinking that wasn't long enough."

It is in line with this idea that I believe a speech which is suitable for an occasion such as this, should have three primary characteristics:

1) it should be brief -- very brief;

2) it should get quickly to the point intended;

3) it should have an up-lifting message -- one of spirituality. I will guarantee the first two conditions: brevity and getting to the point quickly, and you can be the judges for the third point.

When I was asked to return to Syracuse University to speak to the College for Human Development class of 1989, I
must tell you I accepted the invitation immediately.

Returning here brings back many fond memories, memories of the good times, of the friendships that were formed, and are still ever so vital, memories of my family and my children growing up (I have a son who is a junior at S.U.), and a few of the contributions I was able to make.

A few weeks ago, I attended one of the concerts of the Florida Orchestra Concert Series in St. Petersburg. The concert that evening included Beethoven's Concerto for Violin and Orchestra in D Major, this piece played by the orchestra with the accompaniment of a guest violinist (named Nigel Kennedy). As the artist appeared on stage amidst the applause, one could not help but notice an unusual appearance for a guest artist. He wore a typical Mohawk haircut, large oversized black jacket, a string necktie, large, black, baggy pants to which was pinned something which looked like a whistle, and black & white shoes. But not to be put off, I closed my eyes and listened to him. He played brilliantly by
anybody's standard. The beautiful music called my spirits; it composed my thoughts; it delighted my ear; it recreated my mind and filled my heart and gave me pure and useful thoughts. And as he appeared and disappeared from stage amidst the applause and standing ovations, and demonstrated his versatility in encore with a selection from rock music and finally one from jazz with more thunderous applause, and as he himself shuffled and swayed, we felt the rapture of the musical triumph -- the man, his humanity and his instrument. When the music sounded sweetest in my ear, truth commonly flowed clearest into my mind and I suddenly recalled a story of which I have heard many versions since. I want to share it with you now.

There was a great house on an estate which was being auctioned. All the contents of the house were also being sold. The auctioneer had sold many beautiful things, including paintings, jewelry, oriental rugs, silver ware and antique furniture. Finally, standing alone in a corner was
an old violin in an old dusty leather case, opened for everyone to see. Someone in the auction picked up the violin tightened and plucked the strings to see if it were useable. As the auctioneer listened to the tone, he said: "What do I hear for this violin?" He started at $50 and the bidding died. No one had any interest in the old instrument. The harder the auctioneer tried, the more it seemed that the instrument would go for a low bid -- if it were sold at all. Sitting in the back of the room was an old white-haired man in tattered clothing. He had purchased nothing. He rose from his chair and walked to the raised platform. He picked up the violin and turned the knobs to tune the instrument. He reached into the case and took up the bow, and tightening it, lifted it to the violin. He began to play and played very beautiful music, smiling occasionally with a sense of satisfaction and as if he himself were under the spell of his own musical mesmerism. The man, putting his humanity with his instrument to produce music. He replaced the violin and
the bow and walked away. Meanwhile, the crowd was completely transfixed and the auctioneer, recovering from almost hypnosis, called out: "I have $50, now $10,000, now $20,000, going for $25,000, once, twice -- sold for $25,000." It is obvious that what made a difference here was the touch of the master's (the artist's) hand.

And so today you, too, are artists as you graduate from the College for Human Development, whether from the Dept. of Child & Family Studies or Environmental Arts -- Consumer Studies-Retailing, or Human Nutrition -- you did not elect, obviously, to become historians, writers, painters or one of any number of other distinguished professions. Instead, your presence here today is indicative of a desire to extend yourselves into an intimate human dimension for improving the quality of life. Surely, economists, linguists, physicists and all other established vocations are exceedingly important in their own way and do, in varying degrees, contribute to the improvement of the quality of life. But your professions
are among the noble few, which when viewed from any perspective, reveal a singular orientation -- the improvement of the quality of life.

Yes, you too are artists of a sort, each with your own instrument which you developed over the years while here at the University. The instrument to which I refer constitutes, for purposes of this presentation, the total assemblage of your knowledge, skills and talents, your trained capacity to think critically and logically and to reason soundly, your total experience in the liberal arts tradition, your honed intellect and your professional experience. These instruments are, therefore, as varied and different as the number of graduates.

The instruments about which I speak are those essentials which must last through your lifetime. As such, your responsibility will be to guarantee their optimum performable capacity at all times. Your knowledge base must be augmented continuously, your talents and skills perfected;
your ability to think creatively, critically, logically and analytically should be tested with regularity and declared efficient; your power of reasoning should likewise be tested regularly and declared maximally functional; the whole area of general liberal education and professional education must be addressed continuously for currency and applicability. It is what some call "lifelong learning."

But the instrument, in and of itself alone, no matter how finely honed, cannot make music - sweet music -. It requires the humanity of the artist to be added to the equation in bringing life to the music. The touch of the master's hands brought their humanity to their respective instrument. They brought passion and love and beauty and understanding and patience; they brought feeling and sensitivity and strength and awareness and a spirit of sharing. They brought commitment and the only level of acceptable performance -- excellence. I believe they brought the total range of their human experiences and their
character -- all of what I call their humanity -- into a peculiar blend to produce a special music.

Each of you has developed your unique instrument; your instrument together with your blend of individual humanity will determine the quality, scope and versatility of your music. And play you will on life's stage because that is the nature of life. You will be viewed and judged on two bases: the quality of your individual performances and the degree to which you are able to harmonize with and be integrated effectively into life's symphony.

Let me mention now four final thoughts which I ask you to contemplate later. In this age of high technology, computerization, and robotics, it becomes difficult at times to exercise the true nature of our status which characterizes us as human beings in the first place.

1. The internal power of your humanity: the renowned writer John Locke stated: "The most precious of all possessions is power over ourselves; power to withstand
trial, to bear suffering, to front danger; power over
pleasure and pain; power to follow our convictions; and
the power of calm reliance in scenes of
....(adversity)." This is the character of your own
personal accountability -- your humanity.

2. Opportunities: A philosopher was once asked what
was the first thing necessary for a man to win the love
of a woman; he answered, "opportunity." You will have
many opportunities to do a lot of things. Let me
advise you that the sure way to miss success is to miss
the opportunity. Thomas Jones told us about that
"....Many (people) do with opportunities as children do
at the seashore; they fill their little hands with
(dry) sand, and then let the grains fall through, one
by one, (more and more), till they are all gone." This
must never happen to you. But I tell you, "....If you
want to succeed in the world", according to John B.
Gough, "....You must make your own opportunities as you
go on. The man (person) who waits for the seventh wave
to toss him on dry land, will find that the seventh
wave is a long time a coming (if it ever does). You
can commit no greater folly than to sit by the roadside
until someone comes along and invites you to ride with
him (to play your music) for wealth and influence.

3. The third point concerns the cultivation of a
renewed philosophical approach to living; that is, in
making excellence a way of life. George Crabble put it
this way: "There is a moral excellence (your humanity)
attainable by all who have the will to strive for it;
(but strive also) for intellectual and physical
superiority."

4. I have heard it said that "Every action of our
lives touches on some chord (on our instrument) that
will vibrate in (through) eternity." (Chapin). It is
for this reason that I urge you to increase the love in
your hearts that will vitalize and transform your
actions. I urge you to move in harmony with life, using your intellect and humanity. Put all your passion into this thing called life and really live.