



ITHACA COLLEGE

Ithaca, New York 14850

In response to many requests, we have printed Mr. Serling's address to the Class of 1972. This copy is sent with the compliments of the College and the Senior Class.

The Commencement Address Of ROD SERLING May 13, 1972

Ladies and Gentlemen, graduates, honored guests, members of the Ithaca College community.

If, through the vagaries of fate, and the manipulation of the accepted order of things, I should be granted certain prerogatives; if somehow mystically and unexplainably I were to be told that I might in some omniscient form alter or dispense with whatever were the existing rituals, I believe I'd immediately address myself to the elimination of the following 20th century tribal rites: The expensive wedding, the long funeral, and that portion of the graduation proceedings known as the Commencement Address -- that predictable and pretentious intrusion by convenient visiting firemen designated to provide the onward and upward elocution. This, happily enough, is your day. It belongs to you young men and women. It's with some embarrassment that I usurp this segment of your graduation, and I do so with apologies, and perhaps this prefacing disclaimer: My brief remarks do not come to you from the mount, engraved on rock as undying truths. They are the opinions of one man -- sometimes subjective, sometimes emotional. And my qualifications for delivering them up are simply that I've lived longer than you graduates, and perhaps age supplies perspective, if not always unassailable wisdom.

How marvelous, how beautiful it is to pick up that sheepskin and head out. How gratifying it must be to know that on this moment, the hours, the weeks, the years, the collective effort of work and frustration and worry -- fed into the pinball machine of college -- suddenly pays off with bells and lights and the big jackpot. Let no one underrate the importance of this May day. You'll think back to it and dwell on it and it will provide sweet threads to the patterns of your memories for all the years to come.

But this admonishment -- and I suppose this has been said with a wagged forefinger since the beginning of time: Commencement means beginning. Those robes you now sweat under will soon be replaced by lab aprons, business suits, and whatever are the working uniforms of your chosen professions. And some of those professions will prove to be back-breaking impossibilities. For some of you the frustrations are only beginning. For all of you, the world society beyond this campus is going to prove tough, competitive, demanding, unforgiving of error, and full of rebuttals to the things you most earnestly believe.

So first -- and most important -- cherish what you believe. Don't job off one single value judgment because it swims upstream against what appears to be a majority. Respect your own logic, your own sense of morality. Death and taxes may be the only absolutes. It's for you to conjure up the modus operandi of how you live, act, react and hammer out a code of ethics. Certainly listen to arguments; certainly ponder and respect the opinions of your peers. But there's a point you compromise, and there's a point all human beings draw a line and say, "Beyond this point it's not right or just or honest, and beyond this point I don't move."

Acceptance, that's a big thing. To be loved, to be honored, to be invited in -- it's our nature to seek an embrace from the group. But there'll be moments -- too many of them -- when that membership costs, and the dues are enormous: Self respect, self belief, paid out in an agonizing currency so that we can achieve comfort and security. That comes from the desperation for acceptance.

Now what do we call this? How do we annotate that moment when you either sell out -- or pick up your ball and go home? God knows the myriad forms this moment takes. And God knows how you weigh it on the scales of your own beliefs. But good men, courageous men, committed and caring men throughout the ages have stopped at that line and said to the critics of their time: "No, ladies and gentlemen, You are more than I, you are louder than I, you are stronger than I, but I am more right than you, or so I believe."

I wish, profoundly, that in your young lifetimes you had witnessed and heard more of these men. I wish that on your television screens there might have been a Tom Paine, a Sacco and Vanzetti, an Abraham Lincoln, men who understood the moral imperative and spoke out not just in defense of the unpopular cause, but on the attack for what they believed. I don't believe you've been privy to much awareness of moral imperative. Your twenty brief years have exposed you to political expedience, to charisma, to the glib, the honeyed, the ancient fictions thrust at you as rhetoric. But rarely, if ever, have you been exposed to naked courage. Rarely, if ever, have you witnessed the selfless sacrifice of career and fortune because a giant must occasionally emerge from midgets. Your lot, and mine, has been an over-exposure to the midgets, the angry little men, the perpetual office-seekers, the posturing push-button products of politics built out of plastic and cigar smoke. The hatchet-wielders who generalize all villainy and indiscriminately tag all those in opposition as "subversive," or stupid, or somehow suspect.

You have, worse luck, lived through a time when all issues have been polarized; when positions are taken at either end of the spectrum, and no place in the center has been provided for a philosophy. And in truth, probably that's where more truth resides: Closer to the center. I wonder if after all there exists one issue, one disagreement, one major controversy, that doesn't have at least something to support and sustain on either end.

So it follows: All policemen are not pigs. Most are dedicated, brave men, doing a job that at best is underpaid, overexposed to danger, and too frequently unappreciated. All general officers are not fascists, most are loyal and brave men who wear a uniform that at most junctures of history have reflected honor to this nation and to its armed forces. But all bearded, marching, protesting students are not anarchistic hippies dedicated to destruction. The majority are caring, compassionate and courageous young people reminding us that conscience must have a voice and must be seen. And all draft card burners are not disloyal. My guess is that all but a few are a credit to man's sense of life value, and what must be a continuing quest for a society in which war must somehow be replaced by civilized discourse.

There is in this country unhappily and currently a strange, convoluted sense of morality, and a selective moral outrage that goes with it. We scream out in anger against school busing -- casting votes for self-seeking and simplistic demagogues, and conveniently showing no comparable concern for the fact that there are worse things than the inconvenience of busing. There are second-rate, shabby, ratty ghetto schools that we know exist, and have done nothing about for generations. And there are unwritten codes and laws of social attitude that consign our minorities to specific neighborhoods and perpetuate their poverty. We can send these minorities out to fight in questionable punitive adventures, and thank them profusely for dying for us, but we'll not allow them to put their garbage cans next to ours. Their deaths apparently are an obligation, but their realization of the dream of self-improvement is also obviously not a correlated right to that obligation. We can jail a Father Berrigan for the destruction of draft records, and pursue his punishment with a single-minded ferocity. He currently is in the Lewisburg Federal Penitentiary in the company of a cell block full of thieves, murderers, rapists and perverts. But a young infantry lieutenant named Calley, found guilty of complicity in the deaths of over a hundred innocents, women and children included, is moved to more comfortable quarters by presidential edict, and permitted daily visitations by his girl friend.

When you leave here today, if you agree with me, and others, give thought if you will to the inconsistencies of our national morality. That we can punish civil disobedience that finds expression in a revulsion against death -- and yet remain strangely unmoved by acts of murder against victims we are supposedly helping, and are ourselves dying for.

And even if you don't agree -- give thought to the whole adventure of war. It has been your father's lot, and mine, and his. There has not been even a spasmodic moment when young men have not fought and died. When the solons, and the aged heads of state have not in their infinite wisdom and consummate judgment, sent the young off to end their lives. An obscure poet named Arthur Davidson Ficke, wrote this in the 19th century: "Old men in impotence can beget new wars to kill the lusty young; Young men can sing, old men forget... That any song was every sung." Don't you forget that song, the words, the music, the symphony to living. Remember

that you can't necessarily sanctify a cause by virtue of the fact that men die for it. A death in a worthless or even questionable cause is a pointless, meaningless, tragically premature death. So when, in future times, men ask you to prove patriotism and loyalty and affection for your native land -- remember that these things are not always equated with a willingness to die or to kill.

There is an apocryphal story, that when the German philosopher Goethe lay dying, he was supposed to have opened his eyes, and said, "Light. Please, God. Let me have light. I must have light." And, a hundred years later, the Spanish philosopher Unomono, upon hearing what had been supposedly Goethe's final statement, is supposed to have responded: "No. Impossible. Goethe would not have asked for light. Not light. He would have asked for warmth. He would have said, 'Please, God, let me have warmth. I must have warmth. Men do not die of the darkness. They die of the cold. It is the frost that kills. And this warmth I talk of, this is the warmth of love.'"

And this, I submit to you, is the greatest thing you take away with you off this campus. It is that moment of thoughtful reflection that has to do with the person next door or down the street or across the tracks, or on the other side of the earth. Every man's death does diminish us. And it follows that every man's poverty, every man's indignity, every man's frustration and hopelessness -- they are a part of mankind.

This awareness of the mutuality of man, your generation seems to possess it far more than mine, or any other. So, along with your acquired knowledge, your sophistication, your new maturity, carry with you also this capacity to love.

Horace Mann said it: "Be ashamed to die, until you have won some victory for humanity." I think he may have been paraphrasing Justice Holmes, who spoke of "The deferred satisfaction of the man who knows that long after he is dead and gone, men who have never heard of him will be marching to a measure of his thought."

So long as you care, so long as you commit, so long as you concern yourself with the human condition, you have it in your power, perhaps twenty years from now, to be called to deliver a Commencement Address against a background of an infinitely finer world. A world graced and beautified by the monuments each of you may build. And the most endearing, the most rewarding, the most important, is that monument of love that I've talked of.

So God speed. Congratulations. The affection and good wishes of all of us, parents, teachers, family -- they go with you. Take your brains, your muscles, your courage, and let's hear from you on occasion, while you're out there building that much better world with what I'm sure is dedication and compassion.

Good luck and God bless you.