

Student Commencement Address

Carol Vernstrom

This year for the first time a student addressed the commencement audience at Scripps College. Selected by her classmates to be their spokesman was Carol Vernstrom, Class of 1968. Her address, which is printed below, expresses in a moderate and articulate way the thoughts and feelings of contemporary undergraduate students on college campuses in Claremont and across the country.

"Our youth today love luxury. They have bad manners, contempt for authority, disrespect for older people. Children nowadays are tyrants. They contradict their parents, gobble their food, and tyrannize their teachers."

So spoke Socrates in the 5th Century B.C. So speaks America today. It seems there has always been a generation gap; and in a positive sense this is true. The generation gap is an ongoing process. Older generations prefer the tried and true, the comfortably familiar. Yet new problems arise calling for new ideas, new efforts. Dialogue between parents and youth is natural and necessary, the hallmark of healthy change. But something is happening today. Bloody riots of youth in Watts and Detroit. Police violently battling students at Berkeley and Columbia. Is this the healthy dialogue between the young and the old? Why is it different now? Why has the generation gap suddenly widened and become an abyss? What is creating this atmosphere of escalated violence in which "dialogue" increasingly takes place through the barrel of a mail-order gun?

I am a member of the spoiled generation. I have not lived through a Depression. I have never been hungry. We have all lived our lives in at least modest comfort. George Orwell writes: "The belly comes before the soul, not in the scale of values but in point of time." The technological advances made within our lifetimes alone have all but guaranteed that we will not have to concern ourselves with our bellies. We are the privileged generation which has been given the time to reflect on our souls, on the higher human

values. So why does it seem that so many of us are kicking in the teeth that same society which produced us? How can hundreds of young men go to Canada or to jail to avoid the draft, and thousands of our generation march on the Pentagon in protest of a war that their country has asked them to fight — that same country which made possible their well being? How can they take LSD and "drop out" of the very society which has worked and sacrificed so that their children might have everything? What kind of an ungrateful revolution is this?

I am not ungrateful. I am both aware of and thankful for the fact that I have never had to worry where my next meal was coming from. I am grateful for the opportunity to have come to Scripps College. I cannot criticize a government that professes one of the most radical documents in the history of men: the United States Constitution. Government of the people, by the people, for the people. Men participating in the decision-making of their own destinies. All men free and equal. . . . It is a concept which is both beautiful and exciting. But there is a discrepancy. . . .

When men take up the challenge of the Constitution's claim to shape their own destiny, something happens. Martin Luther King said, "I have a dream. These rights are mine." He was then murdered in that same society which proclaimed his right to freedom and equality. And when an entire black people echo him: "We too have a dream. These rights are ours," we do little. And it takes violence, riots with senseless murder and the destruction of property, before we begin to feel the urgency of their dreams — or should I say *our* dreams — or before we go out and buy our own guns.

Thoreau reminds us: "Even voting for the right is doing nothing for it. It is only expressing feebly to men your desire that it should prevail. A wise man will not leave the right to the mercy of chance." Our nation professes democracy. But our democracy is impotent. It has become synonymous with the passive process of voting the responsibility of change to others instead of individual active involvement. The responsibility for change belongs to *each one of us*. This generation is frightened by the increasing passivity. We seek to reaffirm the individual, his integrity, his courage, his reason.

I have often been patted on the head and told that I have "youthful idealism," which is nice, but unworkable in the REAL WORLD. I am told that my generation's approach to this REAL WORLD is much too simplistic, that this world is too complicated to allow people actually to live their ideals. I CANNOT ACCEPT THAT. What is it that prevents us from acting on our belief in equality and freedom, of changing that from a declared ideal to a living reality? If it is affluence which emasculates sensitivity to human suffering, if comfort replaces moral courage, then there are many of us in my generation who say: "We will not pay that price." We are less impressed with the statistics showing the high average family income in America than with the live experiences with those whose bellies are not full. I am less impressed with the fact that the United States spends some 65% of its annual budget on military expenditures than I am with the fact that the little Mexican-American boy whom I have tutored this past year more often than not has no money for lunch. We are concerned with the day-to-day living. It is not enough to be told that the good will win out in the end, that the end justifies the means, that time will solve everything. The ends *are* the means. The time is *now*.

The radical vocal minority of today does not fit the easy labels of the Thirties. Dogma is unacceptable. We are unwilling to make out blank checks to any ideology or organization. Conservatism, liberalism, communism — these are bankrupt terms. We are not concerned with ideology. We are concerned with the *human* needs of men rather than the technical needs of society. If we of this generation have an ideology, it is one grounded in humanitarian pragmatism, We seek *both* purity and relevance. We reject the myth that any ideology will solve this sick world's problems automatically. We can pray for peace, but only hard work will achieve it. Social change is a fine promise, but action is the only way it will become a reality.

The liberal arts education is more than the accumulation of facts. There is too much information ever to absorb. Theoretically, its goal is to enable us to discover and pursue new questions, to develop a spirit of critical inquiry, to test accepted propositions rather than memorize them. But again we find a disparity between the theory and the practice. Scripps is *in the process* of making this theoretical definition a literal one.

Many changes have taken place in the past four years. *In loco parentis* is a dying concept; the college is no longer parent. The emphasis is now on individual responsibility and integrity. Hopefully, we are also moving away from the concept of the professor as some sort of absolute authority, and coming closer to the ideal of the college as a community of scholars. But more changes *must* come. Most have not yet been articulated. The emphasis on facts continues to obscure the more important, feelings. The Scripps education is still not relevant. There is far to go before the Scripps graduate after three years of Humanities is any more humane. Many Scripps students, as well as college students throughout the nation, continue to be apathetic and unconcerned. The often-made distinction between those over and under 30 has nothing to do with chronological age. Many in our graduating class are already over 30, polished reflections of a substantial part of the parent generation.

The terrifying events of the past few days, with the brutal assassination of Senator Robert Kennedy, serve only to re-emphasize the terrible urgency of opening up the dialogue. Violence occurs when communication stops. And violence will not end by calling for more police, more troops, more guns. The establishment *must* begin its education process again. We as graduates *must* not allow ours to stop. It is tempting at this point to give in to the sense of futility, the bitterness, the hatred of the times. But we cannot. We must maintain our hope, we must sense our responsibility. Senator Kennedy has expressed my "youthful idealism" far more eloquently than I:

"Our answer is the world's hope; it is to rely on youth — not a time of life but a state of mind, a temper of the will, a quality of the imagination, a predominance of courage over timidity, of the appetite for adventure over the love of ease. The cruelties and obstacles of this swiftly changing planet will not yield to obsolete dogmas and outworn slogans. It cannot be moved by those who cling to a present that is already dying, who prefer the illusion of security to the excitement and danger that comes with even the most peaceful progress. It is a revolutionary world we live in; and this generation, at home and around the world, has had thrust upon it a greater burden of responsibility than any generation that has ever lived."

Thank you.