

OPENING CEREMONY

1976

PRINCIPAL'S ADDRESS

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UNIVERSITY OF NATAL

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Every year the Principal of the University is charged with this duty, indeed a very pleasant duty and a privilege, namely that of welcoming new students to the University and in doing so saying something about the University, about your future lives in it and perhaps about your expectations in the years that follow,

Obviously, there are so many of you entering the University that it would be quite impossible for me to meet you all or, if I did, for me to remember your names or any other significant facts about you individually. You come from the four different Provinces, from South West Africa and from countries beyond the Republic's borders. You come from a variety of schools, family backgrounds, social classes, from homes with different political persuasions. Some of you come straight from school, some from military service, some from employment in commerce and industry. From this great variety of backgrounds and experience, you have all come to this great institution - the University of Natal - and I sincerely hope you have all come for one common purpose, namely to study.

Study is, after all, the primary purpose of the University, Universities were established originally in a very informal way, by groups of students collecting around groups of teachers on a voluntary basis. During the course of the last seven or eight centuries they have developed into more formal bodies, sometimes, though rarely, entirely independent through endowment and high fees, more frequently with substantial government support varying from about 70% of the total university income up to 100% as is found in State universities, These latter universities occur in many places in America and Australia and other countries, as well as in the five State universities in South Africa for the African, Indian and Coloured population groups. We, in Natal, fall into the middle group, obtaining approximately 75% of our income from Government sources, Whatever the method and extent of financial support, all universities have one basic aim, namely to seek after knowledge and having found it, to spread it as widely as possible so that it may be used through you, our students, for the good of the community.

Make no mistake about it - today's universities are no ivory towers, beautiful to contemplate, but isolated in their splendour., They are functioning institutions, supported by and working to serve the community in which they exist. This community includes you, our students, but also includes all the other people around you.

What should you study and how will you choose your courses? I sincerely hope that most of you come to the university with some kind of idea of what you want to do with your life, and that you will, therefore, plan your university courses accordingly. It can be said that the courses given at the university fall into two distinct groups - the vocational and the non-vocational ones. There are those that lead clearly to some kind of profession - medicine, law, teaching, engineering, architecture, quantity surveying, nursing, social work, and others, and there are those which provide for further education but which do not lead to a definitive career. Most courses leading to a Bachelor of Arts, Bachelor of Commerce or Bachelor of Social Science degree fall into this latter group. Do not misunderstand me, however, I am not trying to tell you which of the two groups you should follow, nor am I implying in any way that the non-vocational courses are no good or even second best. Far from it. Indeed, the University would not be the same and could scarcely exist in its present form without these non-vocational courses. I am merely saying that if you now have no motivation for a career, then no doubt you will follow one of the non-vocational courses. If you do this it can be very good and very useful, but do not expect it to lead you automatically to a career and do not expect a potential employer in the future to welcome you with open arms just because you have obtained a Bachelor of Arts or Bachelor of Commerce.

It is unfortunate that in recent years all over the world there has been a trend towards entry into non-vocational courses and especially towards those in the so-called social sciences.

In South Africa this is clearly seen in the results of recent research carried out under the auspices of the Committee of University Principals. I hope this trend will change and there is some evidence that it is doing so. There is no doubt that South Africa needs new graduates, but it needs them much more in the natural and biological sciences, studies which are more important and perhaps even more challenging,

One often hears from students that their studies in the University are not relevant to their future lives, You very rarely hear this from those who are pursuing vocational studies. It is a complaint voiced by the others. Whose fault is it if studies seem to be non-relevant? I think the fault lies on both sides but, primarily, it lies on the side of the student for choosing a course not leading to a specific end, Secondly, the fault lies with the university teachers, but not because of actual irrelevance but because the teacher may not have made clear precisely what the relevance is. Courses of the kind we are now talking about are taught for their own sake, to advance knowledge in a particular field, irrespective of where it leads. I have said on several occasions that when a student starts a course he is entitled to be told what is the objective of the course, what he will be expected to learn and why. If your lecturer doesn't tell you this, you should ask him to explain his objective, If he still doesn't tell you, you have every right to ask another lecturer or the head of department or the Student Adviser or, in the last resort, even the Vice-Principal of your centre or myself, If you do not know the objective of your course you will have the greatest difficulty in achieving success in it,

Now I want to talk about another aspect of your life in the university. South African White society is an affluent society and a very high proportion of White school boys go on to university. Indeed, save for a few special subjects, notably medicine, engineering and architecture and one or two others, any student who passes the matriculation examination or obtains exemption from it can go to the university, There are very few financial barriers, The fact that you have come here today to enter the university sets you apart from the rest. You are part of an elite group. Today elitism, particularly amongst the young, is not a popular idea. This may have started with the French revolution, or the American War of Independence, or even earlier, Unfortunately, those who shun elitism and seek equality often try to obtain it by levelling downwards, Basically, however, the whole idea of the equality of mankind is genetically untenable, Men are not created equal. There are so many possible variations in human genes and chromosomes that it is probable that with the exception of the rather uncommon identical twins, no two men since the beginning of human life on earth have been endowed with precisely the same genetic possibilities.

Revolutions have started with ideas of equality but the revolutionaries have soon found it to be impractical, If one remembers nothing else from that memorable book of George Orwell 'Animal Farm', everyone must remember that in the end the pigs had decided that "all animals were equal, but that some were more equal than others", and the rules of the commune were changed accordingly.

I am going to try and put this on a slightly different plane. Every country - even a socialist or communist country - needs leaders. Every army needs leaders and heroes, How is a leader found? Malvolio in Twelfth Night reading Maria's letter, read "Some are born great, some achieve greatness and some have greatness thrust upon them". While the letter was intended to mislead, there is much truth in this passage, The first category is very rare and members of this group stand out from the beginning. Sometimes, indeed, members of this group have a problem as children, for a teacher or a school may be quite unable to keep pace with the gifted child,

Of those who achieve greatness, and here I am thinking of positions of leadership, there are some who do so with the noblest of motives. There are others who achieve it because they set out to do so, and the quality of leadership which they show indicates that they have been motivated by self-interest and by a determination to obtain power over their fellows and hold it at all costs. Such people may be found in all walks of life although perhaps more in the political and quasi-political fields than others, Many of this group would like you to think that they belong to group one. Don't be deceived.

The third group are those who have greatness thrust upon them and these are the real leaders of society, the real elite, the real heroes, These are the people who, without seeking greatness or leadership, have throughout their lives done their work as well as it has been humanly possible to do. These are the people who have been recognised by their colleagues as being single-minded in their devotion to work; people who are manifestly honest and trustworthy; people who are sought out by their colleagues and invited to take positions of responsibility. These are the real heroes in the battle of life; people who without seeking fame, notoriety or publicity are always there instinctively doing the right thing because this is what they have trained them-

selves to do all their lives, These are the real elite - the people whom you should emulate - the people who will always be more equal than the others, You should have little difficulty in any field distinguishing between groups two and three,

You may well ask what has all this got to do with you today, with you entering the university, The University's task is to train the future leaders of society, to instil in you the real qualities of leadership., Which group will you be in? Will you achieve greatness or will you have it thrust upon you?

I want to draw your attention to another part of this ceremony, namely, the presentation of certificates of merit. This is a very important part of the ceremony, both to the recipients of these certificates, as well as for you, A certificate of merit is not given just for merit, although nothing less than a first-class pass would warrant this award., A first-class pass, however, is not enough and really outstanding merit must be shown. Occasionally more than one student may qualify in any course, but this is rare, If it does happen, more than one certificate may be awarded in the same subject,

I draw this particular part of the ceremony to your attention and suggest that you take note that certificates can be earned in all years of study, including the first, At the beginning of this first year you are seeking to adjust yourself to new surroundings, to familiarise yourself with the university, and there are many distractions - the various sports, the Rag activities, societies, and all manner of other things. You are going to find your life in the University one of relative freedom, You will have to make the choice yourself of what you will do, I hope you will take part in some of these other activities, as well as work, but I hope that you will not divert your attention too much from your main objective of study. If you are going to excel, or even do reasonably well in your first year, you are going to have to start working immediately. It is no good waiting until Rag, or Easter, or the first half of the first term is over, You have got to start now, It will be a difficult year, perhaps the most difficult in your university career. If you pass this year with flying colours you should have no difficulty with the rest of your career,

Finally, I want to say something to you about your position in the world. It is generally recognised that this is an imperfect world. Young people like yourselves see all its faults and often pour scorn on and reject the establishment or the system. Youth protests about wars, about nuclear armaments, about discrimination. The young are rarely the true liberals, tolerant of everything except intolerance in others, but are radicals, and this is right for if at your age you do not wish to put the world aright, who will do it?

Before we agree too wholeheartedly, however, with this sentiment, let us just remember that there is another side to the coin. Some years ago, Dr, Edward Hay, the President of the University of Pennsylvania, when addressing a graduating class, pointed to the parents and friends who were sitting in the auditorium, and said to the graduands he was addressing "I would like you to look around and see some of the most remarkable people ever to walk the earth. These, your parents and grandparents, are people who within just five decades have by their work increased your life expectancy by 50%, people who while cutting the working day by 1/3rd have more than doubled the per capita output., These are the people who have given you a healthier world than they found themselves and because of this you no longer have to fear the epidemic diseases which they knew in their youth",

He went on - "Let me remind you that these remarkable people lived through history's greatest depression. Many of them knew what it is to be poor, what it is to be cold and hungry, and because of this they were determined that it would not happen to you; that you would have a better life, you would have food to eat, milk to drink, a warm home, better schools and better opportunities to succeed than they had. Because they were materialistic, you will work fewer hours, will earn more, will have more leisure time, and will have more of a chance to follow your life's ambitions. These are the people who fought man's grisliest wars and who, when it was all over, had the compassion to send millions and millions of dollars to help former enemies rebuild their homelands".

Dr. Hay concluded - "These generations have made more progress by the sweat of their brow than in any previous era. If your generation can make such progress in so many areas as these two generations have, you should be able to solve many of the



world's remaining ills, but it will not be easy and you will not do it by tearing down or belittling. You may and can do it by hard work, humility, hope and faith in mankind. Try it".

Now this is a very remarkable message, as valid for you - our new undergraduates - as it is for graduates. The future lies in your hands, but you will achieve little or nothing by destruction of what has gone before. You must build on a sound foundation that has been laid, We have been passing through another depression; fortunately, not so severe as that of the 1930s, but we can remember that a depression lies between slopes and that there is always another side up which you can climb,

Today you start a new career, full of hope. In the University and, indeed, in your life later you will not always succeed, but you must not brood upon your failures. These are but stepping stones to future success. Make use of all the opportunities which are given to you here and elsewhere. We want you to succeed, we want to see you in a few years time receiving your degree on this platform; degrees which are the university's stamp of approval on those who succeed.

We want to see you becoming the leaders of your society, leading it into better times ahead. We want to see that leadership bestowed upon you, not because you have sought it to obtain power over your colleagues, but because you have deserved it and have had greatness thrust upon you. We wish you every success.

