

... OUTRAGED BY SILENCE

John A. Howard

Members of the Class of 1976:

A chronological quirk has given to you and me some unusual opportunities. You are privileged to launch a second century for this sturdy university, and a third century for our cherished and somewhat confused nation. From today henceforth, by your works you can prove that the era now beginning can be one of hope and dignity. You can prove that courage and virtue are once again equal to the task of rigorous pioneering.

For my part, I have my own small anniversary to observe. Twenty-five years ago this month I was named president of a college. My opportunity is to distill from that quarter-century of experience a message sufficiently striking to penetrate the emotions of your graduation, and sufficiently wise and explicit to serve as a proper culmination for your studies and a remembered challenge in the years ahead. May we both measure up to these tasks.

The pioneers who came to Utah to bring a righteous civilization to a wilderness, and to convert barren deserts into fruitful farms and thrifty towns had no illusions about the work they set out to accomplish. They were fortified in their hearts for the hazards and the cruel frustrations they were to encounter. Their triumph stands as a glorious testimonial to a people powered by faith and guided by piety.

The work that faces your generation is no less arduous. The deserts you must bring to blossom are no less arid, but your mission may demand even more of you, for unlike the early pioneers of this state, you are confronted by a wilderness that is subtle and fluid and elusive. Indeed the wilderness you must conquer is disguised as a civilization so that there is the double necessity to unmask the deceit, to distinguish between what is authentic and what is counterfeit, so that you may labor to support the one and oppose the other.

Commencement address to the graduates of Brigham Young University, April 1976.
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I speak, of course, of the wilderness of unprincipled behavior into which our nation has wandered. The moral wasteland stretches from coast to coast, with only a few oases of righteousness here and there. The noble promise of America, the dream of a nation under God, which brought the Pilgrims to Massachusetts and which was confirmed in the Declaration of Independence, has been obscured and distorted and negated. That dream is today mocked and degraded by many of the most powerful forces in our society.

It is not a small challenge which I pose to you, but then you are not without special qualifications to meet it. When the invitation to speak at this ceremony was conveyed to me by President Oaks, I was greatly honored. I was also greatly pleased, for I recognized that for a person who earnestly cares about the future of this country—and I do—there are few audiences of such beneficent potential for our nation as a graduating class of Brigham Young University. I believe there is no single large group of your generation in the United States as consistently trained in its religious obligations, as ready to work long hours and make sacrifices for its principles, and as well-versed in the dignity of self-reliance as you are. If that estimate is correct, you are greatly blessed and highly privileged.

I would not, however, want that flourish of admiration which is, I assure you, very genuine, to go to your heads. It must be remembered that "unto whomsoever much is given, of him shall be much required" (Luke 12:48). The special assets of character which you possess seem to be so scarce in our land that if morality, integrity, and piety are once again to become widely respected, the few people who do understand and cherish these fundamentals are going to have to work overtime, and with a rare degree of persistence, intelligence, and humility.

Hercules, when first setting eyes on the Augean stables, could not have been more appalled by the mess that confronted him than a conscientious American scrutinizing the contemporary scene. The moral depravity of what appears on television is rivalled by the moral tone of many campuses where cohabitation is a commonplace and where the use of illegal drugs does not even raise an eyebrow. The swelling tide of crime is matched by the deluge of dishonesty on the part of politicians who callously promise what they know they cannot deliver, and try to deceive the people into believing that projects can always be paid for out of someone else's pocket. The unscrupulousness of the press for whom nothing seems to be sacred or prohibited is scarcely more appalling than a legal profession which, as President Oaks has noted, often seems more concerned about technicalities of the

law than it does about the fact and the consequences of the crime. Wherever one looks, a narrow concern for self-advantage seems to prevail over any thought of the well-being of the society; principles seem to be overwhelmed by expediency.

The person who may wish to involve himself in reestablishing principle as the guide for public and private conduct, may benefit from some perspective on the events of the last decade during which a slow-moving decline of character in our country has developed into an avalanche. It may be difficult for your generation to conceive what our society was like a scant ten years ago. Gutter language was rare on public platforms and in plays and movies. Coeducational dormitories were unthinkable. Most people had little worry about being out on the city streets late at night. Salacious literature was not publicly available on the newsstands and in the bookstores, and marihuana was used by just a few people, mostly jazz musicians, migrant workers, and a handful of silly socialites.

The revolutionaries who launched their blitzkrieg against our nation from the Berkeley campus may not have known how fragile our society was or how shallow were the moral commitments of America, but they seemed to understand with devastating precision how to cleave our people into hostile factions internally and how to paralyze our will to defend our principles abroad. By appealing to the passions and the fears of the young, they were able to shred the fabric of self-restraint which alone binds a free civilization together. By glorifying the right to pleasure one's self, they swept away the respect for legitimate and responsible authority which is necessary for the cohesion and coordination of any group.

The radical quartet of seductive sirens—filthy speech, marihuana, sexual liberation, and defiance of the military draft—singing with soothing and self-righteous sophistry, lured young people onto the shoals of personal and public anarchy where no rules or laws were acknowledged other than their own whims and passions. Although only a small percentage of the nation's youth completely accepted the call, few there were who were altogether immune to its invitation. The do-your-own-thing philosophy has spread throughout the country. It has toppled such venerable institutions as the campus honor system. This group technique for maintaining integrity, which had operated on many campuses, called upon every student to take some of the responsibility for making sure that no student cheated on his examinations. The priority now placed upon permitting each person to make his own judgments without regard to group norms has turned

traditional values inside out, so that the act of "ratting" on another student is now regarded as more offensive than the act of cheating. In many places, the honor system which was once a manifestation of honorable people working together has been discarded. The old concept of honor based on integrity has yielded to a new code of honor based on dishonesty, also known as honor among thieves, which is, in fact, the source of the term "ratting."

The do-your-own-thing philosophy is, by definition, antisocial. Its partisans automatically disqualify themselves from effective membership in any formal group. If a person actually lives according to the belief that there are no restrictions upon his conduct other than what he chooses for himself, that person is in actuality a barbarian. The nightmare stories of the SLA and the Manson family make it clear that there are in America today genuine 24-karat barbarians, who have carried this depraved philosophy all the way to its ultimate degree of evil.

There is one particularly virulent aspect of this cancerous philosophy which needs to be recognized. The person who is only somewhat contaminated, who still has some moral sensitivities, is caught in a trap by his partial commitment. If he insists on the right to make his own decisions free of external authority, he is logically bound to champion the right of other people to do the same. Thus, he may find himself shielding and covering for other people in their commission of acts which he abhors. The phenomenon of multiplying vandalism clearly is dependent for some of its growth on the silence of many who know about the acts of destruction and deplore them, but say nothing. The malignancy feeds on itself. The deeds which are openly tolerated are becoming more and more bestial, and the limitations which once restrained barbarism are atrophying, while the so-called "liberation movements" are multiplying.

Well, what is to be done? Let us begin by reminding ourselves of a very simple moral fact. It was well-phrased by the Swiss author, Henri Frederic Amiel. "Truth," he said, "is violated by falsehood, but it is outraged by silence." The abandonment of principle has of course been hurried along by false prophets preaching erroneous doctrine, but that fateful trend has been accelerated at least as much by worthy citizens who know better and sit quietly on the sidelines. Shakespeare observed in *3 King Henry VI*, "A little fire is quickly trodden out which, being suffered, rivers cannot quench" (4.8.7).

Far too many religious people of our country, clergymen and laymen, mute and inactive, have suffered the arsonists of self-

indulgence to put the torch to one sacred principle after another until we now face a general conflagration. As already noted, the task is a large one, but that is no cause for dismay: the works of lasting importance are never easy.

In calling upon you to rise to this circumstance and carry an oversize share of the responsibility, I have noted the particularly fortunate environment you have here at Brigham Young University. This campus is truly one of the few oases of righteousness. I recognize, however, that that blessing may also pose for you certain barriers that may not loom so prominent for the general citizenry. The devout person, knowing all too well his own shortcomings, is called upon not to pass judgment on others. This altogether commendable trait is to some extent reenforced by the First Amendment of our Constitution, which asserts the right of each citizen to proclaim his own views, whatever they are. It may then appear that the conscientious citizen is barred from speaking out against the doctrines that to him seem evil and against the advocates of those doctrines who are misleading the people.

We need to remember that although Jesus admonished the scribes and Pharisees not to stone the adulteress unless they, themselves, were without sin, still he commanded the woman to sin no more. To be charitable about the weaknesses of another person does not require silence about misdeeds. Furthermore, the First Amendment was never intended to prevent public discussion, nor to silence the virtuous citizens.

We seem, however, to be caught in a circumstance where the spokesmen who are opposed to our traditional religious and civic virtues are either greater in number than their opposites, or else are given more opportunities to be heard and read. That situation will persist until enough worthy and intelligent people decide they will no longer permit truth to be outraged by their silence. The citizen who is offended by the literature displayed in the grocery store where he does his shopping has only himself to blame if he fails to communicate his distress to the proprietor, and if he fails to encourage his friends to do the same. The viewer who considers certain television programs beyond the reasonable limits of public acceptability is abetting the problem if he does not write the sponsor, particularly now that one can obtain a complete list of the addresses of national television advertisers. The parent who finds wholly inappropriate certain subject matter in his children's classes has an obligation to make known his concern to the school authorities.

To a very great extent, the degeneration of public standards of conduct, and the increasingly corruptive character of literary, artistic, and dramatic works are simply the result of what the citizens tolerate without voicing their strong objections. Like the small child who keeps going a little farther to see how much he can get away with, the pacesetters of the news and entertainment industries seem impelled to reach deeper and deeper into the cesspools of sensationalism, animalism, and degradation. Their success is only possible because of the tolerance of those who know better. We must bear in mind that in public matters, there is no such thing as moral neutrality. Those who do not stand up forthrightly in behalf of their convictions, by their inaction are supporting the opposite view. On any scale wherever a person perceives right and wrong, silence turns out to be a vote for wrong.

Let us turn the coin over. The mission which lies before us is two-fold. The recivilizing of America will not be accomplished merely by taking responsible action to discourage that which is vicious and decadent. We must proclaim the good news and make known to others that which is pure and worthy and wholesome and inspirational. Along with evangelism for one's religious beliefs, in which the Mormons need no advice and encouragement from outsiders, there must be a comparable evangelistic effort in secular matters. If a political officeholder takes a firm stand for some worthy cause in the face of contrary gusts of passion, write him and thank him and send a few copies of your letter off to other office-holders who need to recognize that courage and integrity are appreciated. If the publications you read are inclined to review only books of a sleazy and degrading character, write a letter to the editor with your own review of some book of hope and dignity, perhaps Corrie Ten Boom's *The Hiding Place*, or Ralph Moody's *Man of the Family*, or Russell Kirk's *The Roots of American Order*. If a teacher serves for your children as a model of upright and uplifting character, by all means express your appreciation to the teacher, but also make sure the school board understands how much it means to your family to have that kind of person in the classroom.

What I am suggesting here is that the guides to lead our nation out of the moral swamp do not all have to be generals in command of some nationwide movement. Repeated small acts by courageous and thoughtful people will often prime the pump, bringing forth a flow of similar acts by other citizens.

In undertaking to support that which is righteous and to express rational disapproval for that which is morally destructive, I think we need to understand as well as we can the paradox which governs human response to moral principle. For the religious person, the greatest freedom comes only with total commitment to God. Perhaps you are familiar with the poem by Francis Thompson, entitled "The Hound of Heaven." It is the story of one man's effort to seek pleasure and peace of mind apart from God. In his words:

For, though I knew His love Who followed,
Yet was I sore adread
Lest, having Him, I must have naught beside.

This fear of being stifled and hemmed in by religious commitment, so powerfully described by Francis Thompson, is banished only in the discovery that it is precisely within such a commitment that life is fulfilled. There is, I believe, an analogy in our secular activities. Each group, be it family or friendship, college or business firm, city or nation, exists to accomplish certain functions. Trial and error and common sense eventually identify certain things which the members must do and must not do if the group is to hold together and be effective. Living in a household would be impossible if some member persisted in flooding the place by leaving the faucets on with the stopper closed, so the prohibition of that act becomes a rule of the household. Thus it is that codes of conduct suitable to each kind of group are developed.

The person who refuses to abide by the ground rules runs afoul of his colleagues, generates animosities, and must waste time and effort and burden his conscience with furtive activities to cover up his wrongdoing. By contrast, the person who learns and abides by the rules of the group, if they are reasonable and legitimate, is free to be creative within those limits. He is a welcome member of the group and is more likely to be productive as a result of that welcomeness.

This "sentiment of submission" as Duncan Williams has called it, is one of the most fundamental aspects of human life and one of the least understood today. The physicist understands that he cannot defy the laws of physics and amount to anything as a physicist. The religious person knows that he cannot ignore the dictates of his church and maintain his own respect for himself as a churchman. So, too, with the human being operating as a member of society. To disregard the tenets of courtesy, morality, truthfulness, kindness and the other norms of

civilized living dehumanizes the individual; it makes him a social misfit and leads to loneliness and frustrations. Our failure to convey an understanding of this cause-and-effect has given rise to the tragedy of the counterculture in whose ranks are innumerable young people who, like the protagonist of "The Hound of Heaven," foolishly suppose they can find joy and fulfillment by running away from the only source of these blessings, the commitment to noble causes and the submission to the obligations they entail.

In closing, I want to go back to where we began. The task that faces your generation is no less difficult than the work which confronted the pioneers of this state, but much of what they had to accomplish was starkly obligatory. For them to fail to take action often meant to perish. Not so today. There is no comparable sense of urgency upon us. It is so easy, even for the righteous person, to busy himself with the many real claims upon his daily life that he defers until some future time his involvement in the effort to clean up our morally polluted atmosphere and to strive for the health-giving and joy-bearing environment of respect for truth and principle and piety. Let me, therefore, make one request of you. I invite you to take a little card and put it on your mirror or fix it with a magnet to the refrigerator door; display it in some prominent place where it can serve as a daily reminder for yourself and a lesson for your children. I suggest you inscribe on that card the phrase, "Truth is outraged by silence." I earnestly believe that it has been the silence of the good people much more than the yammering of fools or the persuasion of intentional evil which has converted this once predominantly lawful and beneficent nation into a moral wasteland. That process can be reversed if enough citizens of moral conviction will raise their voices. I call upon you to join that chorus and prove yourselves worthy of your proud heritage.

May God be with you throughout your lives, and may you always be with God.