

“PLAIN THINKING, HIGH LIVING”

To the Graduating Class, Blanco High School, May 23, 1961

by Thos. C. Ferguson

It was with a deep sense of pride that I accepted this invitation to speak extended me by this fine class of 31 wonderful young people who are being graduated by this High School tonight.

First, it is a great compliment to be asked by a group such as this to participate in one of their activities. Secondly, I know that this is one of the high points in their life and that while they may not long remember what I say here, this event, and those who participate in it will long remain in their memory. Further, the graduating class of this school some year or so ago asked me to speak at their graduation ceremonies and I had to refuse, unfortunately for me, because of my good doctor's advice. I am thrice happy to be asked again, that I might have a part in the work of this school.

And, so to the members of this admirable class now being now graduated, let me say a simple “thank you” for your kindness in inviting me to have a part in your program tonight.

Your class motto is a theme upon which much might be said. In fact it is worthy of an ability far beyond mine to speak upon it. It is significant in this day and age that a class such as yours selects it as representing the composite thought and aspiration of the class. Plain and straight thinking to a logical

conclusion is a wonderful accomplishment. To add to this the ideal of right living means that you have properly interpreted the usefulness of the rational kind for which this school and these instructors and leaders have been endeavoring to train you.

As you have already discovered upon many occasions, thinking is not an easy undertaking. In fact it's a hard job. It takes a great deal of energy, and demands that you give it undivided time and attention. It is because thinking is such a hard job that so few people really do think. It is so much easier to let some one else do it.

We are a great people for “packaged” items these days. We can buy biscuits packaged and ready for the pan. Instead of the old way of killing, picking and cleaning a chicken for Sunday dinner, we now can buy a chicken all cleaned, cut up, and ready to go into the frying pan in a neat plastic covered package. As Americans we spend millions every year on packaging. TV dinners come ready to

heat and serve. Clothing is ready made and all neatly packaged for sale. They're even now “packaging” insurance; that is writing policies which covered nearly all risks to property in one contract.

We accept our thinking from others in much the same manner. We are ready to accept a set of religious doctrines handed us by some one who has arrived at a faith satisfactory to himself. He concludes that his doctrine must be the last word in religious experience and he incorporates this into a statement of creedal thought and thus packages our religion and hands it to us on a platter. There are many who much prefer it this way than having to think for themselves the meaning of religious writ and experience.

Many people also find it much easier to simply be a member of a political party, and let its dogmas dictate our voting than to try to evaluate principles and men and to vote to preserve the ancient landmarks of liberty.

We learn a business or business system by rote, and expect that if we do everything as it was set up in the “packaged” learning we bought that our business should automatically succeed.

If you wish religion to mean anything to you then you must seek to learn and understand in your own heart the revelation and meaning of God. You must seek the vast extensions of your horizons when you experience a religious faith that lifts you to the true heights of life.

Governments by and for free people pre-suppose that the people will think for themselves, and seek to know the truth, and to use that truth to fashion freedom’s foundations.

Heritage is fine and as Americans we have a great heritage. As Christians we have a religious heritage that sweeps aside the mists of centuries that we may see our beginning in God and the final victory in Him. But possessing a heritage does not mean that we may lay down and take our ease. We must preserve it. We must treasure it. We must seek to improve it. If we do not we are unworthy of it and will lose it.

Therefore we can see that plain and straight thinking is an important ideal. It requires us to be absolutely honest with ourselves, something that few are today. We must be willing to look at ourselves and to see ourselves as we really are, not as we wish we were. Reason that is predicated on false premises always leads to false conclusions. This is as inescapable as using a wrong figure in a mathematical calculation leading to an incorrect result. It requires real courage to face things as they are and to use only premises that are truthful even when they are to our own discredit. You can’t think plain and straight without doing so.

When we have the courage and the honesty to face things as they are; to look at ourselves and events without coloring them to suit our wishes, and to reason from truth to truth, we arrive at true answers. Thus plain thinking will amaze those who try it if they are unfamiliar with it. It is a foundation upon which to build a meritorious life. I know of certain contractors who recently had to tear out]a large foundation and replace it because they had used faulty materials. The engineer did not believe that the large building that was contemplated could stand on that weak foundation. Neither can a high, true and noble life rest upon a weak foundation. Nor - fault because its reasoning is colored by lack of honest appraisals of the facts be the basis for a great life. So plain thinking, straight thinking, is one of the strengths which forms the foundation for a high and noble life.

High living, noble living, life that achieves – this is also a part of your motto. The life that seeks the heights wears the mantle of humility, is illuminated by ideals controlled by integrity, and is activated by courageous purpose.

In these days most of us are knee—deep in confusion and uncertainty. We are unsure of the right road to take. Perhaps this is because we put high values on the wrong things. Right living requires that we put correct values on the various aspects of life.

If we would find certainty out of confusion we must understand and believe that character is worth more than security. Ask any banker and he’ll tell you that is elementary in his circles. It can be extended, and should be, to include many walks of life. We have been concerned about our system pf education, and whether or not it is preparing our youth for the space age. But I believe we need character before science. Probably not many of you in this class will achieve a Doctor of Philosophy or other doctorate degree in the course of your education, but all 31 of you can achieve sound and excellent character. You have already committed yourselves to this in selecting your motto. Science without character can destroy the world. Science guided by character can build a better world. Character will prove more eternal than science. And so, without intending to lessen the regard we have for scientific achievement, or instruction

in science as a preparation for meeting the challenge of the new world frontiers of the space age, let us put greater value upon character which has conquered all that was evil on every frontier of man's history.

Our danger lies not so much in the danger of outside attack as in our own decadence within. Complaisance with evil and public tolerance of dishonest practices are more dangerous than Russia's rockets. When I was small, and for many years before that, it was a common practice in the schools to use phrases containing well-accepted truisms as the words to copy in writing practice. Thus we were instructed in character training and writing at the same time. You did not copy the words "honesty is the best policy" an hundred times in connection with learning to write and making the motions of writing a part of our being, without at the same time making the meaning the words a part of us also. Perhaps we need to return to some of those ideas.

There is the old virtue of integrity. It is a basic part of character and high living. Yet today's general attitude toward it is that it something for the simple, and that the "smart" man isn't restrained by it from getting everything he can for himself.

There is the old virtue of religious faith. But today the idea seems to be that our faith is in the practice of "what's in it for me?" We still want to share our sorrows and misfortunes, but we have lost our ideals and virtues and can no longer share them.

Incorruptible honor and service in public office was once the ideal of our free society. Now it seems to be the rule to get by with everything you can, and that anything you can get by with is alright, that it is only wrong to get caught.

Also there was the old virtue of self—reliance. No one wants to do that anymore. Thrift was considered sound for the individual and the public. Now the idea is spend what you' ye got because the government will take care of you any way.

Individual liberty was prized until it was found that it was so much easier to let some else do all of the hard work and the thinking that goes into governing a complex society while we sit back at our ease. They did this until Caesar took over as emperor and then they had neither freedom nor ease.

These virtues are still worthwhile. They are still vital to us and to all responsible people. Whatever may be the philosophy of the self—centered, these virtues are those necessary to high living.

I would also point out that high living must be put in its right relationship to others. It must have a setting like a fine gem. That setting is its place amongst others. In Austin, as you know, they have high towers upon which there are six powerful lamps and these together shed abroad bright light over several blocks serving many people. The same lamps on a stand 10 feet above the ground would light very brilliantly a small circle, but would serve very few. So it is with living. The life that is truly worthwhile must be high that it may shed its beams of light abroad to help others; to lend encouragement; to solace sorrow; to join in joy; and to strengthen the weak. One must have a basic and primary concern for one's fellows or the life of that one will not be upon the heights. One may have the intellect of Plato, the imagination of Hawthorne, the memory of Blind Tom, the strength of Hercules, and the millions of Rockefeller, but if in that ones heart there is no sympathy, love, remorse, shame, forgiveness, concern, and desire to share that one will be a poor apology for one created in the image of God.

Finally, high living requires vision, ideals, that seek to help shape the future for a better world, and to make better the paths of man for tomorrow. This may be dreaming, but it is the true frontier of life where every one of you can find a place and can attain achievements.

Cherish your visions; cherish your ideals; cherish the music that stirs in our hearts; the beauty that forms in your mind, the loveliness that drapes your purest thoughts, for out of them will grow high living. The visible world is sustained by the invisible. The dreamer is the one who can see the eternal as he lives in the midst of the transitory.

May these words encourage you to make of this motto a way of life. The education you have received was designed for this purpose. It is the prayer of every teacher you have had. Now it is yours to attain. May God be gracious unto you and endow you with His blessing.