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"Education and the World's Future" by Tom C. Clark, Spring Commencement: May 31, 1964

Tom C. Clark

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FOR RELEASE: 3 p. m., SUNDAY, MAY 31, 1964

University of North Dakota
Spring Commencement
Address

"EDUCATION AND THE WORLD'S FUTURE"

An address by U. S. Supreme Court
Associate Justice Tom C. Clark, delivered
at the University of North Dakota spring
Commencement Exercises, May 31, 1964.

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EDUCATION AND THE WORLD'S FUTURE

President Starcher, Dean Cushman, Ladies and Gentlemen -- and --
my Fellow Alumni:

A great Justice of the United States Supreme Court once referred to himself and his associates as: "The nine black beetles in the Temple of Karnak."

The words were spoken in friendly ridicule of the building, not the beetles. And I feel particularly friendly and, indeed, at home in this company, because you have been good enough to let me wear this costume, which bears a close, almost identical, resemblance to the black beetle garment common to my trade.

Moreover, it is a source of warmth and comfort to me to leave that massive institution in Washington and re-establish my kinship here in North Dakota with the very kind of people from whom I sprang, from whom I derive my great heritage, and among whom I grew up.

After all, if you draw a straight line north and south, you find a direct route between your ruggedly American State and the great State of Texas.

This oneness of our common heritage, this superbly organized and dignified hour in the life of this institution of higher learning, gives us a dramatic and satisfying moment in which to contemplate the usages of education in our time. For there has never been, in the history of man, anything like the change, the dynamics, the terrifying pressures that today confront us and will soon confront these representatives of American youth we have with us today. It was not easy for them to master the high standards of the University of North Dakota, nor will it be easy to master the enormous complexities of life that they will face upon attaining the coveted degrees awarded here today.

In these times education does not mean just science and literature and the arts. It does not mean a merely basic classroom knowledge of philosophy and chemistry, of geology and economics, of medicine and the law. Today, ladies and gentlemen, education means a projection of the human spirit beyond the confines of one's profession, beyond the confines of one's state, one's country, one's religion, to the uttermost limits of the planet on which we all dwell. Today we embrace in our practical and our ideological education, in our work-a-day and our spiritual lives, the whole of mankind in every nook and cranny of this earth.

And we exclude no one.

If we succeed as a people, we Americans, in the conflicts that are in the offing, it will be because we have the greatness to fulfill the edifying dictates of Holy Writ upon which we have all been nourished spiritually for a hundred generations. What the Bible recognized and proclaimed abstractly for the human race in the beginning, the oneness of man, has come to pass in our time so that we can see it before us in the concrete. However, the early tribal customs did not readily encompass the teaching that the whole human race is but one family. It was painful for the Teuton to understand that he was twin brother to the Eskimo. Today, this elemental fact is a matter of vivid immediacy. It is a great truth come to pass with an overwhelming and a stunning impact. There are differences, of course, but not basic ones.

In my early days in Texas I rode a horse because that was more or less the normal mode of travel, and the automobile was still unusual. They are talking now of a rocket-driven missile airship to be called "ICARUS" that within a decade may travel between Texas and, say, Italy in twenty minutes. We will then, from opposite ends of the earth, be able to shake hands with each other in an hour or less.

Education is an avenue to humility. And education, above all, is aware of its own limitations. The Bible I speak of is not a product of the elite membership of one of our more expensive country clubs. It came to us out of the teeming Hebraic masses of the Middle East in dim antiquity who were mightily motivated by profound moral and spiritual influences. Aristotle, who was perhaps the greatest intellectual of all time and the greatest teacher, never heard of a degree from a college of education. And Jesus Christ never went to Harvard -- hard as that is to believe.

What college boasts Shakespeare as an alumnus?

The greatest utterance delivered on American soil in all our history, the most literary, the most elevating, the most eloquent, and the briefest and most compact elucidation of the American heritage, came from the lips of a man with less than a year of formal schooling, in a funeral oration at Gettysburg. The Constitution of the United States derived its most potent interpretation from a Chief Justice in the early 19th century, who, like Lincoln, hardly went to school at all. Yet his influence on our lives intellectually and legally is profound and immense. But here, one must add, that genius is something touched by the finger of God, and that these exceptions help to prove that only by the highest form of general education for the most of us can democracy survive and succeed. Educated minds are the guiding genius of democracy and its best protector.

Education means the recognition of one's role in the worldwide mosaic of man. It means a universal tolerance beyond anything dreamt of even up to this hour. It means the abandonment definitely, wholeheartedly and enthusiastically of the obsolescent notion that still prevails in some quarters that any culture or skin may be of itself a symbol of superior status. Education

means not knowledge merely of a certain statistic but understanding in depth of its world-shaking significance. The statistic for instance that only one-fifth of the human race is white and that the other four-fifths is non-white and that sowing the seeds of racial hate may prove a desolating calamity for some future generation of our kith and kin. The role of leadership in the present and the future, in the executive, the legislative and the judicial spheres is the unification, not the separation of mankind, and the encouragement, precisely through education, of a variety of human cultures for the competitive betterment of them all. Education, too, means the recognition and the acceptance of what I am told is the scientifically proved truth, that the idea of racial superiority is pure humbug.

Once we understand the relationship of the moral and spiritual truths of our indispensable Bible, to the practical, the mundane and the realistic fact, that we can, from where we now sit, go to any part of this earth, and be back in less than forty-eight hours, we shall have mastered a basic gap in our education. All the world today is just one, rather small, neighborhood. South Viet Nam is where Antietam was yesterday, the Gobi desert is a bald patch in our own back yard, and the oil wells of Arabia move the machinery of the west.

Education means also our just appraisal of ourselves without bombast and without apology, for it may be indeed true that what we have created on this soil is the last great hope of mankind. It may be said ages hence, when a just estimate is made of our contribution to civilization, that the Constitution of the United States deserves to rank on a level with the greatest title deeds of human freedom of all time, including -- I say it reverently -- the works of the Holy Writ. For our Constitution which we live by and work by and rule by, and which is the documentary repository of our most precious dreams, represents in action the sublime tenets of our Biblical literature. The principle of equal justice under law, of the protection of the rights of all men including men of evil, the principle of justice to our enemies and to those we despise, has its roots in the sacred writing of the ancient Hebrews. What we, on this soil, have spelled out in the Constitution of the United States, sometimes awkwardly, sometimes brilliantly, is the injunction from Leviticus in the Old Testament (19:18) and from Mark in the New Testament (12:31): "and thou shalt love thy neighbor as thyself."

No government I know anything about has done more.

It is the part of education in our time to tell the world and to tell ourselves that in spite of any criticism that may be hurled at us -- some of it quite justly -- we have rendered on this continent a wholesouled justice to the individual beyond anything hitherto known to man. Whatever sad failures there may have been committed officially under this flag, the fact remains that here we govern by the consent of the governed. Here we practice -- not quite but almost to the point of perfection -- the principle of equality of opportunity. What is the

Declaration of Independence, the Constitution, the Bill of Rights, and the vast body of law and decision that continue to flow from them, but the meaningful practice, the de facto and the de jure demonstration, of our faith in the dignity of the individual? And the dignity of the individual, in this context, means the actual working out of democracy. So that what we have done here, and what is the very foundation of our education as Americans, is the enrichment of the great literature of decency from antiquity and the Holy Land, with the modern literature of decency which we call "AMERICAN SCRIPTURES" if you like, and which is an addendum in kind to the greatest moral and religious literature in the language of man.

It is this we seek to preserve.

It is this we seek to make even more effective.

It is this gift, this genius of the American people, we want to share with all men.

It is this upon which rests our right to the appreciation and the recognition of posterity.

It is this which represents the glory, the grandeur and the burden which those graduating today must carry with them into the world everywhere. Thus, mankind may dominate and overwhelm the threat of nuclear doom. And thus, life shall not become extinct because of our failure to master ourselves as well as our environment. This is the responsibility, largely of institutions of higher learning like the University of North Dakota.

For it is my thesis today that it is not enough merely to educate in the exact sciences. It is not enough merely to educate in the social sciences from the standpoint of limited parochial, communal application. But it is the role of education to raise the level of our civilization and make it mighty beyond the possibility of decay and destruction. And that involves teaching man to reach out for the highest aspirations of the human spirit.

Thus, finally, I preach to you the ardent and the exalted pursuit of what I call "THE JUDICIAL ATTITUDE." This is the most uplifting exercise of human conscience in its objective and unadulterated quest for the just solution to the agonizing and contradictory prongs of a question in dispute. It is the part of education in this connection to develop a capacity for reflection and study in depth, and a lofty sense of isolation from emotion, from prejudice, from pressures, from influences outside the truth. It involves also the dauntless and courageous capacity to confront those of less conscience and understanding but strong in convictions. Indeed, the judicial attitude is a quality often invested with a hunger for spiritual statesmanship. It is a quality that senses constantly a lonely groping for the truth and an uncertainty of its own position. But it strives mightily to be just and in that striving may achieve a remarkable record of success, and a minimum degree of failure.

We are the children of a Judaeo-Christian, a Greek, a Roman, an Anglo-Saxon culture, which has been now, on this soil, formed into something proudly and dominantly American. It is the job of the educated, of the young, of the enthusiastic lovers of our culture, to go forth into the world as missionaries and preach the word. For ours, the American expression of the culture of the West, is the noblest product yet offered to the mass of mankind. There is a great conflict in our midst and over the horizon that is engulfing the whole of this little planet. The back of the world may be broken on the brutality of this struggle. With it the atomic threat is always in the background. It will probably be fought out in the generations ahead on the economic and the cultural battlefields. It is my conviction that the West will emerge victorious. I say this because ours is a democracy operating under the rule of law and not of men. It has a built-in immortality, for it meets the deepest needs of man's soul. We do not seek to straitjacket other peoples in precisely our forms of government. Just as we have the roots of our expression of justice in the precepts of Holy Writ and yet differ in our implementation of it, so all we ask is that freedom and the dignity of the individual serve as the basic guide for all peoples. In a democracy like ours every citizen is born a Supreme Court Justice and enjoys the right of final and ultimate decision. That makes no less than 190 million justices judging themselves. It is government by the strength of the many and not government by the despotism of the few. It has marvelous ingredients of power and survival and it has, as of this moment, an immense majesty.

Education, as I see it today, is taking hold and doing its job. It must seize upon the needs of the hour and capitalize on the vast frontier now spreading out before mankind. If it does this there can only be victory in the years ahead. I mean victory in terms of peace and freedom for the whole world. But the responsibility of institutions like the University of North Dakota has never been greater. It will continue to become even more extraordinary. As graduates, with the background you have earned here and with the American tradition with its spiritual strength to inspire you, I venture to prophesy for all of you an era of liberty and its blessings, and a life of fulfillment beyond anything known to the past. I wish you Godspeed, for in you rests your proportionate share of the responsibility for the happiness of this earth. It is the performance of these individual responsibilities that has given us our strength and democracy its leadership. May God bless you in the undertaking.