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## "The Gap Between Knowledge and Wisdom" by Elmer Ellis, Spring Commencement: June 6, 1965

Elmer Ellis

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June 1965

COMMENCEMENT ADDRESS  
UNIVERSITY OF NORTH DAKOTA  
FIELDHOUSE      JUNE 6, 1965      2:00 P. M.  
by  
ELMER ELLIS

THE GAP BETWEEN KNOWLEDGE AND WISDOM

President Starcher, Honored Guests, You Who are Soon to be Alumni,  
Ladies and Gentlemen--

Forty-one years ago this week I received an A. B. degree at this University, and forty years ago at the end of the summer session I received a masters degree. Nineteen years ago I spoke here at the summer commencement and was awarded an honorary LL.D. degree. That degree, I might add, came as a complete surprise to me. While I have received several other honorary degrees since that time, this

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one was the first and will always be the most treasured.

As I look about and see the great changes that have come to this campus I, like all returning alumni, marvel at the growth and improvement over the old. I have to keep warning myself, as I do returning alumni at Missouri, not to overestimate these changes. No one knows better than President Starcher that in these days in higher education you have to run fast to keep even with other universities or still faster to satisfy the human need which our institutions endeavor to meet.

But my memories today are not about buildings, or programs, or even fellow students. They are, as I think the memories of most alumni are when on similiar "homecomings", on teachers, and in my case on my teachers of over forty years ago.

When I was here for the Commencement in 1946 most of my teachers were still here, although many were retired. Now Libby, Bek, Kennedy, Schmidt, Perkins, and Gillett are all gone. Claudius Johnson, who recently retired at Washington State, exchanges a letter with me occasionally, and George R. Davies still lives in Iowa City. As I look back I marvel that my undergraduate and graduate education was limited to as few teachers as it was, for these I have mentioned taught virtually all of the courses and seminars that I studied after

my freshman year. I am highly conscious still of the special influence each had upon me. Libby made a historian of me, with strong influences from Perkins and Gillett. Bek was the warmest personality, and, although our subject was always German, Bek was fundamentally a historian and he thus taught considerable history too. Kennedy had more influence than anyone upon my own philosophy of life and ways of thinking, and I am still amazed at his having been an unusual intellectual combination of a deeply religious Roman Catholic while at the same time he was fundamentally a pragmatist of the James and Dewey schools. I learned more about teaching from Schmidt, but also much from Bek, and any success I have had as a college teacher belongs primarily to these masters of that great art.

I realize that these reminiscences, which are quite personal and on the nostalgic side for me, are not of great interest for you. These names, I fear, are as remote from you as Socrates, Dante, or Ben Franklin. But I hope you will not be critical of my bringing them into this commencement address. If you have any difficulty in understanding why I wished to include them, let me suggest that you will appreciate the situation much more two or three decades from now, for many of you will then be coming back to this spot and will want to think about, and talk about, what in your days as a student has really meant something to you in your life. It would be most ungrateful of me to appear in this place and not acknowledge publicly my debt to these fine teachers of the past.

I should like to invite you now to consider with me the thesis that while modern man has made great progress in the acquisition of knowledge he has not done nearly so well in the acquisition of wisdom, at least in some vital areas of his operation. In other words, knowledge and wisdom are not synonyms; the possession of great knowledge does not necessarily imply the possession of a great degree of wisdom. I would even go so far as to say that considerable wisdom is sometimes exhibited by individuals who have not, in a formal sense, made an extensive pursuit of knowledge.

When I use the term "modern man" I am not thinking just of our country, but of the entire world as we find it in this sixty-fifth

year of the twentieth century. And I know that I can not speak for all men; so I am not thinking of every individual but am generalizing for what seems to be the majority. Let me cite a few illustrations of an apparent discrepancy between man's knowledge in certain areas and his lack of wisdom in making proper use of his knowledge.)

- a) Man has known enough to create a United Nations organization, but has not been wise enough to make it work well.
- b) Man now builds the greatest cities in history but leaves their air and water polluted with dangerous but preventable hazards.

- c) As long ago as 1776 we agreed that "All men are created equal" but we are just now painfully attempting to realize this ideal.
- d) Man knows how to send vehicles into outer space, but at present he has to evaluate such feats in terms of propaganda value and future military potential.
- e) Man has learned that certain consumable products are hazardous to human health and safety, but he keeps on using them.
- f) Man now knows how to build excellent automobiles and highways, but here in our country alone we are killing 120 people a day with them.

- g) Man knows the folly of immorality, crime, and violence, but a visitor from another planet might not suspect it.
- h) Man knows that international difficulties should be worked out around conference tables, but in many instances he resorts to war instead.

In summary, we are as a world population like the Missouri farmer who told his county agent not to send him more bulletins because, he said, "I am not now farming as well as I know how!"

I am not here to make a speech on "how to save the world", I did that in my student days, but I do want to point out some of the things at which I think mankind needs to work and some of the avenues through which the work might be done. And I will lay a

great deal of responsibility on the doorsteps of schools and colleges; I know you would suspect that I would do that.

Rapid communication, rapid transportation, and the mobility of people between countries make it more and more necessary for nations to understand each other and work together in many ways.

When the things one nation does are likely to have quick effects in other nations, it is important that a spirit of cooperation exist between all countries. When man has the scientific know-how to wipe all life off the face of the earth, he had better put the development of international good will as a prime order of business and keep it there.

The state of affairs around the world at the present time is not very encouraging. And in addition to the international difficulties, many new nations and several old ones are experiencing, within themselves, serious social, political and economic problems. Many of them have looked to the United States for leadership and assistance, and we have gone to great lengths to try to be helpful.

We have provided aid in the form of money, food, machinery, and the service of technicians. In some instances, where nations were threatened by aggressive neighbors, we have assisted with military personnel and equipment. While undoubtedly we have done much good, much remains to be done, and we have to face the realization

that in some cases the help we have given has been and will continue to be misunderstood.

Why have nations looked to America for assistance and leadership? The answer must be simply that they thought we could, and would, provide such help. But how does it happen that the United States, a much younger country than many of the others, is in a position to provide several kinds of aid, in such great quantities, to so many people?

Our nation was born out of hardships and out of circumstances which only brave men, imbued with a love for freedom and respect for their fellow men, dared to master. Our forebears have been motivated by a deep-seated interest in human welfare, not only their own

but of others also. They have been willing to work hard for what they wanted, and have worked together in the many ways in which cooperative action appeared to be beneficial. They saw clearly the value of education and have seen to it that educational opportunity at the elementary and secondary levels was made available to all and at the collegiate level to most of those who desired it.

And our people have been motivated by another interest which has played a fundamental role in making possible the great progress the nation has made. I refer to our basic belief in democratic processes, that people should determine their own kind of government, and choose their officials through elective processes which enable the public will to be freely expressed. This is true

not only of national, state, and local governments but of many social, civic, and special purpose organizations and activities as well.

Of course this is not all of the story, because destiny gave us one of the finest areas, in which people might develop and grow, that exists on earth. Its natural resources of soil, climate, water and minerals were favorable for our development beyond even the active imaginations of our ancestors.

One of the most urgent needs in the world today is for leadership in the improvement of relationships between people and between nations. But leadership is not likely to be developed for something the people generally do not want. So our first task is to



try to develop leadership which in time can make us want friendly relationships between people and countries.

I am reminded of the story of an able young woman who had just completed her masters degree in Social Work and had taken a community service job in one of our most poverty-stricken areas. On the train, as she was enroute to her new position, she was talking with a man who happened to be familiar with the particular place where the young social worker was going, and he, somewhat facetiously, said, "Well, I suppose the first thing you will do will be to try to get those people to paint their houses." She quickly replied, "Oh no, that wouldn't be first. Before I try to get them to paint their houses I would try to get them to want painted houses."

I believe we can assume that if mankind really wants to develop world wide peace and friendship it would be possible, in time, to achieve it. Is there any reason why we can't be as successful in the invention of social and political advancements as we have been in those of a scientific nature? I believe the answer will depend upon whether or not man can produce, throughout the world, now and in the future, men and women who have the necessary leadership capacity and who are deeply motivated to improve human welfare.

Obviously social advancements and the lessening of inter-group and international tension should take place on a wide scale, that is in many or all parts of the world, if we are to move into a better day.

As I see it, man is now in the position of looking for the right leadership. But in addition to leaders we must also have an idea or a theory which can be translated into workable policies and procedures that people can understand and which they can support or at least not oppose in any serious way.

What will be the nature of the idea, goal, or commitment which men generally can accept and toward the accomplishment of which they can focus their efforts in anything like a concerted fashion? As I see it, there is only one answer, and that is the physical, cultural, and moral welfare of all nations. If there is any objective which might reasonably be expected to enlist the support and cooperation

of all peoples it is their own well being. And certainly we know that thus far we have not found the way to world peace and to the betterment of life for all, and it is therefore high time that we try a more determined, or even a new, approach to this No. 1 problem.

One of the fundamental facts I think we have to face up to is the vast discrepancy in the standards of living available to people around the world. Certainly these are not going to be changed very rapidly, but change they must, and if we and the other industrialized nations do not help bring up the living standards in the less advanced regions, no peaceful or stable world will be possible.

The University of Missouri has been operating a federal AID contract for several years trying to improve the food supply in India by improving agriculture and veterinary education in its four eastern states. I visited these four states and the nine colleges we were working with in 1960 and while I saw nothing in India I had not read or heard about I realized later that I did not really believe much of it until I actually saw it. When I returned to New Delhi for a final conference with national officials regarding our programs, one of them I had been in correspondence with but had never seen before met me with this question, "Do we have enough time?" What he was referring to of course was the enormous difficulty

of increasing production at a rate that will outrun the great increase in population. All of the obstacles of ignorance in the ~~great mass of the citizens~~, of relatively primitive technical processes in agriculture, industry, and transportation, and of the handicaps of religious practices that are unsuited to modern living, must be overcome through expanding internal resources that now exist, if India and similar regions are to solve their own problems. Our outside aid must be directed not at our solving their problems but in equipping them so that they can do it, and it must be done in terms of their culture and society. Among the nations it certainly has been true relatively that "the rich get richer and the poor get

poorer" and we must change the direction of this last and change it more rapidly than we have been able to do in the past. All of our technical aid, all of our Peace Corps operations, all of our education of students from abroad, is, without exception, commendable but it is not enough and, in my judgment, we are not now moving fast enough to keep up with the problems. In terms of the Indians officials question, we are using too much time!

I believe that education must occupy a central role in any program or combination of programs designed to solve this problem both at home and abroad. It must be a comprehensive scheme of education, one which does justice to all peoples and all subject matter areas in

terms of man's needs. And since the needs are extremely urgent now in the area of human relationships and international affairs it would seem to be highly important that we not neglect in any degree those studies which are related to these needed improvements -- such subjects as philosophy, sociology, ethics, and international relations.

I have great respect for the philosophy which has been followed here in our own country in respect to education. Let me cite a few expressions of this philosophy. Our Ordinance of 1787 stated: "Religion, morality, and knowledge, being necessary to good government and the happiness of mankind, schools and the means of education shall forever be encouraged."

George Washington - "Promote, then, as an object of primary importance, institutions for the general diffusion of knowledge."

Thomas Jefferson - "If the condition of man is to be progressively ameliorated, as we fondly hope and believe, education is to be the chief instrument in effecting it."

Benjamin Franklin - "The good education of youth has been esteemed by wise men in all ages as the surest foundation of the happiness both of private families and of commonwealths."

Abraham Lincoln - "I view education as the most important subject we as a people can be engaged in."

Dwight Eisenhower - "...In education there is more hope for our country and the world than in any other single thing."

Lyndon B. Johnson - "Evidence over the years has made one fact clear: You pay for a proper system of higher education in one way or another. Either you pay for it positively by considering funds for this purpose as an investment in the future, or you fail to provide enough funds and you pay negatively in lost payrolls, lost taxes, and the worst of all, lost opportunities for our young citizens..."

Lest there be some misunderstanding, I wish to make it clear that I am not critical of the great emphasis which American

universities and research agencies have put on the sciences in recent years, particularly those sciences which, in one way or another, have, or might have, some relationship to national defense. Indeed I think it has been necessary that we do this. My regret is that we have not been able, as far as I can discern, in our country or in others, to come up with equally significant research and discoveries in the social sciences having to do with the development of mutual respect, friendliness, and cooperation between peoples and nations.

A few years ago Walter Lippman expressed a point of view which I think is applicable today on a world-wide basis. He said, "We have to do in the educational system what we have done in the military establishment during the past fifteen years. We have to

make a breakthrough to a radically higher and broader conception of what is needed and of what can be done."

I realize full well that the objectives to which I have pointed are somewhat utopian, but I think it would be grossly unwise of us to assume that they can never be accomplished. I realize also that while I have suggested considerable responsibility on the part of educational institutions there are many other agencies and organizations which can and should make significant contributions.

And let me remind you again that we are talking about the need for dynamic and dedicated leadership, about the role of educational institutions and other social agencies, and about a new and more

vigorous emphasis on social, humanistic, and philosophical studies, not just here in our country but in all countries.

If man could discover some way to dispel or drastically reduce distrust, fear, and antagonism between peoples and nations, and thereby make it possible to devote his mentality, his inventiveness, and his time and effort to the improvement of life, it is possible and even probable, that the results would, in time, be far better than we dare now hope. So much could be done in the areas of education, health, standard of living, comforts and conveniences, sanitation, recreation, and landscape beautification.

Obviously the need in respect to these various concomitants of life vary in different parts of the world, but the point I am trying

to make is that tremendous improvements could be made if and when man decides he would rather do these things than to quarrel and conduct cold or hot wars. And I think this decision eventually will be made when enough of the right leadership comes along. Our hope today is that you graduates will play your part in providing that leadership.

I am of the opinion too that the leadership I am talking about will come, not entirely but very largely, through men and women who are products of the colleges and universities around the world. I do not wish to be understood as assuming that the higher education institutions alone can produce the needed leaders, for

undoubtedly other institutions and programs will also make contributions.

You who are members of this graduating class look to the future with aspirations for a good life, and I am sure you realize that you will have responsibilities for doing whatever you can to make the world a better place in which to live. I congratulate you on your educational accomplishments. My best wishes go with you for a useful and successful future, and I am confident that the world of tomorrow will be better because you are a part of it.