

SHEPHERD COMMENCEMENT ADDRESS

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by: Ray Johnston

WHAT I HAVE LEARNED SINCE I LEFT COLLEGE

President Dunlop
Distinguished Faculty
Honored Graduates
Parents & Friends of Shepherd University

When President Dunlop invited me to join you some weeks ago, he requested that I keep my remarks brief. In doing so, he reminded me of a dinner I organized many years ago for which I asked Vice President Hubert Humphrey to be the principal speaker. Humphrey said he would speak if we gave him sufficient time to prepare. I asked how much time he required and he responded, "If you want a 5 or 10 minute speech give me two or three weeks. If you want a 20 or 30 minute speech, give me a couple of days. If you want an hour lecture, tell me the subject and I'm ready to begin." Having tried to compress meaningful remarks into a short address, I understand Humphrey's request.

I recently celebrated my biblical three score and tenth birthday. About the only good thing age is supposed to bring is wisdom. I'm not old enough to claim that yet, so I'll just share a few important lessons I've learned, most since graduating from a school very similar to Shepherd - then Iowa State Teachers College - now the University of Northern Iowa.

First Lesson: How Do You Go About Getting Ahead in Life?

Thomas Edison had it about right when he said: Genius is 10% inspiration, 90% perspiration. The only realistic limits on what you accomplish in life are those that are self imposed. People who work hard are a lot luckier and accomplish a lot more than do couch potatoes. We didn't have couch potatoes when I was your age, we called them vidiots.

Second Lesson: If you want to get rich, the most commonly traveled pathway to wealth is very clear.

Pennsylvania's Wharton School of Business surveyed Americans who achieved a net worth of a million dollars or more. The survey found the most common characteristic of millionaires is that they worked 60 hours a week for 30 years. That is a very high price to pay for a seven figure net worth. You may want to pursue happiness instead. Money can't buy happiness, but it is very

useful to happy people who want to have a good time.

Third Lesson: If you want to pursue happiness where do you look?

As an undergraduate I was strongly influenced by a book entitled: **A Preface to Morals** by Walter Lippmann, perhaps the 20th century's most prominent journalist. In philosophizing about happiness Lippmann observed:

“Happiness comes from learning to want what you can reasonably expect to have - not by trying to get what you want.”

He reasoned:

“Resources are finite, desires are not. Pursuing what you want is like chasing a mirage down the highway. Your wants change endlessly and when you get what you want, it often doesn't seem that important.”

Then again, you might not want to choose Lippmann as your personal philosopher. When I read his biography many years later I learned that he wanted his best friend's wife more than his own. He broke up two marriages and lost his best friend to get her. I never learned if his second marriage led to greater happiness than his first.

It is worth taking time to consider what really leads to happiness. I've always been amazed to observe how much planning we put into unimportant aspects of our lives, and how frequently the important decisions that affect us most are unplanned or accidental.

My own conclusion about what leads to happiness is that experiences produce more happiness than possessions. 9 of the 20 most rewarding days of my life were spent running marathons - the hardest work I ever performed.

If happiness is your goal:

- Choose a spouse who will be your best friend.
- Find a job you would do for free.
- Take time when you are young to properly raise a good family.
- Take up interesting leisure activities. Learn to golf or fish or fly an airplane, or sail a boat or scuba dive on a tropical reef or camp in the wilderness.
- Contribute to society. You will find more happiness in doing for others than from what others do for you.

Fourth Lesson: Travel to observe how the human experience differs from place to place.

Travel will not only help you appreciate the good things about where you live, it will suggest ways to make your own neighborhood better and clearly demonstrate practices that ought to be avoided.

No one who has traveled in Latin America and observed the widespread poverty there will ever wish to establish a two class aristocracy in the United States. Our country has avoided the sharpest distinctions between the **very rich few** and the **very poor many** so far, but the jury is still out on our ability to preserve the sense of economic justice and representative self government that has prevailed since we became independent.

No one who traveled to Russia during the cold war would ever want to see a socialist economic system or a dictatorial political system established here. What Winston Churchill said about democracy - *“that it has lots of faults, but all the other systems are worse”* - also applies to free enterprise. With all its faults private enterprise is far more productive than all the alternative economic systems.

I think we could have ended the cold war by 1970 if we had diverted a little money spent on arms to providing free vacations to Russian and Chinese leaders from top to bottom to visit an American supermarket or walk through the annual exposition of building materials staged by the National Homebuilders Assoc.

Travel in Ireland or the Middle East makes clear that theocracy - government by the priesthood - is still the worst form of government. We all appreciate this is true of **other countries and other religions**. Our generation witnessed what the Taliban did to Afghanistan and what the Ayatollah did to Iran.

Our founding fathers learned from the religious travails of Europe and from the stifling influence the church exercised on learning during the Dark Ages. They very wisely built a high wall separating church and state.

In our own country lots of well intentioned people are knocking chinks out of that wall. We all ought to be concerned that religious influence over government sooner or later leads to intolerance. For leaders certain they are doing God's work, it is impossible to make the necessary compromises that enable a diverse population to live together in harmony.

Do we really want our religious leaders to determine what science is taught

in our public schools? Has history not shown that using government funds to promote “faith based initiatives” is destructive of both church and state?

In recent decades religious leaders have plunged ever more deeply into politics. If the Catholic bishop who last week said sacraments should be denied to parishioners who vote for candidates opposing church positions had made the same speech in 1960, John Kennedy would never have been elected President and America would be much more deeply divided than it is today.

Fifth Lesson: Progress

Lastly I’d like to briefly consider the idea of progress - the belief that most things in most ways are getting better and better. For my generation who grew up with a keen appreciation of the difference between unheated outhouses and modern bathrooms - a belief in progress came easily.

But progress is neither inevitable, nor universal. The Dark Ages proved humankind can go a long way down a blind alley before rediscovering what the Greeks, Romans, and Persians knew more than a thousand years earlier.

I recently wrote in my family letter that your generation is the first American generation that can’t take it for granted you are going to live better than your parents.

- You **can** live better and more productive lives than we did.
- You **can** build a fairer, more just society than the one we leave you.
- You **can** protect the environment better than we did.
- You **can** reduce the influence of money in politics that threatens the future of self government.
- You **can** build better communities than those you have lived in.

But you can’t do these things without getting involved as independently thinking citizens, being governed by your own perception of what is best for your country, not by mindlessly following the path dictated by inherited religious or party leaders. ***You can’t do these things if only 29% of you think it is worth the trouble to vote.***

At your age, I dreamed of building a new town - the city on a hill philosophers have dreamed of for 3,000 years. Regretfully, I learned that privately built new towns are impractical and had to be satisfied with building a resort community - with lots of help from my wife, my family and others.

While studying new town building I joined a traveling seminar for

developers and land planners. We visited new towns in England, Sweden, Finland, Russia and France. The high point of our tour was three days spent studying Stockholm and its suburbs under the direction of its city architect - an expatriate black American.

While we in the Eastern Panhandle were debating whether or not rapid growth required us to adopt planning and zoning codes or install central utilities, Stockholm was purchasing and renovating run down areas in the old city - keeping the inner city a highly desirable place for people to live.

Stockholm provided for growth by building new towns. We visited two - Skarholmen and Farsta. These new towns were built by the city complete with schools, public transit, parks, shopping and community facilities, and housing for virtually all income groups, ***all without impact fees***. We were truly amazed.

At the wrap up session with the city architect I asked where the social cohesion came from to grant government the taxing and regulatory powers necessary to undertake such far sighted enterprises. He thought for a moment, then responded:

***“Sweden has been a civilization for a thousand years.
You only recently tamed the wild west.”***

He was too much the gentleman to have intended that as a put down, so I’ve pondered his meaning ever since. Now I think it means:

America’s best years are still ahead of us.

So, today, we turn you loose on an unsuspecting world with the hope that you will go forth from this wonderful university determined to dream large and to make your nation, state, town, and neighborhood better than those you inherited.

Congratulations to each of you on the degrees you have earned today.