

Earlham College
Baccalaureate Address
Sunday, June 8, 1980
“Acting on the World”
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I want to thank the Class of 1980 at this, Earlham’s 133rd Baccalaureate service for selecting me to address you here this morning. In April, I was visiting at Wesleyan University in Connecticut where I was conferring with former colleagues about some research ideas on the study of Black Life in a Midwestern Community. In the midst of this I had reason to call Earlham. Upon reaching the switchboard I was informed by Wanda Harvey that Lavona Godsey wanted to talk to me. After taking care of the business that precipitated my call to Earlham, I spoke to Lavona and she informed me that I was among the four finalists selected by the Class of 1980 to give the Baccalaureate service message. Now, discovering that I might be invited to speak to you came at a particularly bad time because my former colleagues and I had just taken a break from discussing the theoretical underpinnings of a study of Black Life and we were mired deep in muddy consideration of what the current college generation was like. What were you like? Could we confidently see you off into the real world? Were you prepared to engage the endless questions about the nature of human beings? Questions of oppression? Questions of injustice... the list goes on. Finally, consensus was beginning to emerge. Yes. The current generation is unprepared. It is narcissistic. It is selfish. It is intent on attaining material success, entering safe careers and, interested in only knowing the “right answer” for making it in the real world.

Now you understand that, in our discussion, my former colleagues and I were exercising one of the real privileges of the academy. That privilege is the ability to make some of the rules that help govern society. Let me relay a simple but interesting illustration that might shed light on this privilege. This illustration comes from Peter Berger, in his book, *Invitation to Sociology*. Quoting Burger,

“Let us assume that in a primitive society some needed foodstuff can be obtained only by traveling to where it grows through treacherous, shark-infested waters. Twice every year the men of the tribe set out in their precarious canoes to get this food. Now, let us assume that the religious beliefs of this society contain an article of faith that says that every man who fails to go on this voyage will lose his virility, except for the priests, whose virility is sustained by their daily sacrifices to the gods. This belief provides a motivation for those who expose themselves to the dangerous journey and simultaneously a legitimation for all the priests who regularly stay at home. Needless to add, we will suspect in this example that it was the priests who cooked up this theory in the first place.”¹

This metaphor of the academy has long been useful to me because I have always been uncomfortable suspecting what I may have “cooked up” might be serving a priestly self-interest.

So, you see, when I heard Lavona’s words... “Steve, you have been selected as one of the possible speakers at Baccalaureate...” I had to quickly reassess my views of your generation. Was it remotely possible that my former colleagues and I were wrong? Could we, as “priests” be wrong in assessing you — our flock? A terrible thought indeed. This was a great problem for me... reassessment was clearly I order. O.K. I considered a second view — perhaps you were none of these things because my Earlham colleagues and I, the priests, had, in fact, done an excellent job in preparing our flock to meet and engage the future. Hope does spring eternal.... But, you see, this alternative view was not without it’s problems. Surely, it would be immodest to claim that just because I might be selected as your Baccalaureate speaker that you were somehow different from what we had just decreed in the temple of rational thought and reason. Surely, it would be immodest to claim on that basis alone that we had done an excellent job in preparing you to meet the future. Surely, it would be immodest to see my possible selection as the speaker here today as proof of your excellent collective judgment and foresight....fright these priestly interpretations, Stephen.

In any event, I decided to make the maximum effort. Reflect. Be objective and impartial. Reappraise the situation. Think. Two days later when Lavona informed me that I had been selected as the speaker, then I knew my second view was correct. Clearly the Class of 1980 was prepared, altruistic, unselfish, intent on helping others and able to exercise excellent judgment. Previously incompetent seniors had proved their competence by choosing me. I thought again at the shared opinion arrived at with my former colleagues. Well, “priests” also make mistakes, although you have to be very clever to uncover them...and then, of course, respectfully diplomatic if you choose to point them out. Unfortunately, I forgot this momentarily, and when I informed my former colleagues of my new insight they shook their heads and concluded that living in the Midwest had hopelessly clouded my judgment. Proof positive they said: You can only trust Eastern intellectuals. They gave us six hours to get out of town, such was their tolerance for ideas that differed from their own. Thus, unceremoniously defrocked from the Eastern Academy, and armed with the truth, we headed West—toward the “frontier” so to speak. It was on this long journey that I rediscovered something I often forgot—priests can differ—or rather, should be able to differ, on their views about how the world works. It is not necessary that we all agree. I’ll send them a nasty letter....

One thing is clear...and this is...on the day of your physical departure from Earlham, most probably the last time all of you will be together, you acted on the world... and this is your day.

So, these remarks have been prepared for you, the Class of 1980. Having reached that decision I was confronted with at least three other questions—

1. What should I say to you?
2. How should I say it?
3. What context in which this talk will be delivered?

1. WHAT SHOULD I SAY TO YOU?

I spoke to a number of you and your view was nearly the same — “We think we are ready and we are willing to engage the world. Give us your views, Stephen.” So, I thought, I would address something you had already done — namely, influencing your own destiny by acting on the world.

2. HOW SHOULD I SAY IT?

Let’s see, staid academic fashion, constrained, serious. Reinforce the message by your style of presentation. Be professional — it’s what everyone expects. This presents a problem for me as you no doubt have witnessed. Briefly, a word about my biography.... I come from a tradition of orators, of Southern Black Preachers. For those of you who don’t know that genre, it is an active style, a flamboyant style — it is an emotive style. Now people who are unfamiliar with it might misinterpret this style as being merely entertaining, or worse yet, devoid of serious intellectual content. In fact, the black intellectuals, W.E.B. Dubois and Monroe Trotter, for example, had to repeatedly cut through this spurious interpretation of their own styles while at Harvard University in the late 19th century — despite the fact that they were honor students. In any event, one cannot in good conscience and without much inner turmoil or misunderstanding deny one’s social heritage. So, if I start or, in their views of some, continue to preach....if I get emotive, remember....it is a different style, not an inferior style. Anyway, a preacher is, or often becomes a priest.

3. THE CONTEXT

What is the nature of your audience? How do you consider all views? How do you not offend? Consult...that’s the Earlham way.

FROM SOME JUNIOR FACULTY — Remember Steve, the audience that really counts is behind you. Be careful, don’t take any risks — be passive, say only what it is safe to say. Above all, don’t say anything that might give people question to doubt your long term suitability for

Earlham. Be clear...demonstrate quality of mind...and, from others — be active, say what you think.

FROM SOME PARENTS — We want to see what our children have been exposed to over the past four years. Help my child respect the wisdom represented by my generation. Let us see what now costs \$6,800.00 a year

FROM SOME SENIOR FACULTY — Oh, anything you say will be O.K., but remember you are a priest...the important audience *may* really be behind you, but never mind that, be active and say what you think.

FROM SOME GRADUATING SENIORS — Do your thing — but don't take too long.

And finally —

FROM MY PARENTS AND ANCESTORS — This above all: to thine own self be true...we won't have it any other way, and, just how far are you from Fort Wayne anyway? Consulting widely clearly gets one into trouble.

Now, if I look to history and specifically at the social heritage of blacks in America, this situation is structurally parallel to the situation confronted by Booker T. Washington in his 1895 Atlanta Exposition address in which he attempted to set forth a plan for racial cooperation in the 20th century. Before this major address, an astute white farmer told him: "...in Atlanta...you will have before you Northern whites, Southern whites, and the Negroes altogether. I'm afraid that you got yourself into a tight place."²

Using metaphors and analogies, Washington carefully crafted a speech that allowed each constituency to hear what it wanted to hear. Washington acted, safely to be sure, on the world as he perceived it. I'm not Booker T. Washington, nor do I share his view of dealing with the social world. However, make no mistake about it, this is a tight place up here. My audience is you, the Class of 1980. It is to you that these remarks are addressed – hence, I will not be offended if others of you daydream during the final 1-1/2 hours of my talk.

One final word about the context. The Baccalaureate is a religious service. I have introduced the notions of the priests. We are easily recognizable by our position on stage *and* our ceremonial regalia. I have introduced the notion of the flock (which I shall now quickly discard), those of you in the Class of 1980. This is a religious service and all religions have festive occasions...in a word— CELEBRATIONS. I regard this, the 133rd Baccalaureate from Earlham to follow your calling...one that heralds your engagement with the real world. I approach this calibration with the spirit embodied in the words from one of the gospel songs I heard the Revelations sing:

...I came too far from where I started from,
Nobody told me the road would be easy,

I don't believe he brought me this far to leave me...

NOW FOR THE MESSAGE: At different times in your lives, the world will present different faces and different challenges to you. For example, let us consider a 22-year old Earlham graduate in the Class of 1930...a graduate who today is celebrating the 50th reunion of the class.

During the 1930's: The Great Depression, the beginning of social welfare;

1940's: Age 32 — World War II, the Beginning of the cold war;

1950's: Age 42 — McCarthy, Korean War

Age 46 — Brown vs. Board of Education which said segregation in the public schools was unconstitutional, Sputnik;

1960's: Age 52 — Civil Rights Movement is in full bloom! Hippies, flower children, the counter-culture, man on the moon, the assassination of a President, a Senator, and a Nobel Prize winner, the anti-war movement, drugs. Will the world ever be safe and secure?

1970's: Age 62 — Energy crisis, Watergate - even the President! Is nothing sacred?

1980's: Age 72 — Retirement, Recession. What is our society's responsibility towards the elderly anyway? *WHY HASN'T THIS QUESTION BEEN RAISED BEFORE?*

The Classes of 1930 and 1980: Can you learn anything from each other? I am approaching the middle of my journey, hoping like the devil that you will act on the world and make it better so that I can enjoy my golden years...so that my children can grow up and inherit a better world. Can I learn from both classes or offer anything to either? To all of you my message is the same – be active – engage the world, act on it.

When I look at the Class of 1980, I see the years 1990, 2000, 2010, 2020 at which time many of you will be facing the approaching sunset of your lives. I hope all of you live happily through these several decades, although we know

misfortune will strike some of you. This is not a pleasant thought – its silver lining is simply that you must be active rather than passive while you are here.

From this platform today the problematic nature of the world rests uncomfortably among us – the new evident unknowing misuse of the environment at Love Canal and its terrible after effects, the promise and the uncertainties of nuclear power, the tragedy of the hostages, the racial oppression in South Africa, the causes of radical unrest in Miami, Florida, and, will détente help lessen the threat of war. These are but some of the issues of today. We are not handing you a bed of roses...perhaps we have done our best and it is not good enough, or perhaps we have not been active enough in our time, in our encounter with the world.

Now it may come as no surprise that I don't know, in the end analysis, what faces and challenges the world will present to you over the next few decades. I can only say that if Captain Kangaroo is on television in 2010, things won't be all that bad. I don't have a "right" answer for you. The best advice I can offer you is to take charge of your destiny if you want a better world. Actively and aggressively engage life – *ACT ON THE WORLD BEFORE IT ACTS ON YOU. It will, you know...whether you want it to or not.* It is fun and immensely satisfying to take control an act on your own destiny! Many of you have wrestled with the question of Freedom vs. Determinism while at Earlham. Now this is a heavy question. But let's look at the issue this way – even if humans are determined (and I'm not willing to concede this point), - even if humans are determined by some biological, theological, psychological, economic, sociological or historical imperatives, what have you got to lose by being active...by acting on the world? Besides, it is not only fun, but it is probably much healthier to *believe* you have control over your destiny. George Herbert Mead in his work, *Mind, Self, and Society* is instructive on the question of being active. To quote Mead:

As a rule we assume that the general voice of the community is identical with the larger community of the past and the future: it is identical with the larger community of the past and the future: we assume that an organized custom represents what we call morality. The things one cannot do are those which everyone would condemn. If we take the attitude of the community over and against our own responses, that is a true statement but we must not forget this other capacity, that of *replying to the community and insisting on the gesture of the community changing. We can reform the order of things: we can insist on making community standards better standards. We are not simply bound by the community.* We are engaged in a conversation in which what we say is listened to by the community and its response is one which is affected by what we have to say...*the process of conversation is one in which the individual has not only the right, but the duty of talking to the community of which he is a part, and bringing about those changes which take place through the*

*interaction of individuals...we are continually changing our social system
In some respects and we are able to do that intelligently because we can
think.*³

Communities are gathered by a common fate, administered and defined often by priests. You will encounter priests in every occupation. They may wear business suits, white coats, or carry clipboards. *PRIESTS ARE NEITHER ALL BAD NOR ALL GOOD.* Today's rebel can become tomorrow's priest. Each generation's liberators will become a priestly caste, if they are not careful. And make no mistake about it, *some priests* will guard the past with all its values and ideas with a vengeance. Your task is to temper an appreciation of the past with the relevance of the present...to forge a future that accepts some of the old while inventing the new. Some priests won't take kindly to this idea and some will. In any event, act on the priests while they act on you... Now, I can't tell you how to do this. However, I can expose some of the worldly traps that lie in your paths...traps that imprison your thinking, traps that cloud your minds, traps that bear bitter fruit from the sweet garden of human possibility.

All of these traps are related....indeed, in the words of a wise old sage, everything does depend on everything else.

TRAP 1: Being afraid of risk and difference.

TRAP 2: Accepting the ideas of the past uncritically, because the priests have handed them down.

TRAP 3: Confusing acceptance of the status quo with being mature, or confusing passivity with maturity

TRAP 4: Describing people by what they are not.

TRAP 5: Imposing your vision of the world on others.

TRAP 6: Believing oneself the indispensable leader or priest from whom the younger generation must learn.

TRAP #1 – BEING AFRAID OF RISK AND OF DIFFERENCE.

Let me quote George Bernard Shaw:

“The reasonable man adapts himself to the world: the unreasonable one persists in trying to adapt the world to himself. Therefore, all progress depends on the unreasonable man.”⁴ ... (and woman, I might add)

Notice: Shaw describes a dialogue as man and the world adapt to one another. He describes a man “replying to the community and insisting on the gesture of the community changing.” Now, I would be truly remiss if I did not tell you what there is

always a degree of personal, family, and career risk in challenging cherished notions about the world held by various groups of priests. Let me use an illustration that includes the notion of risk and difference. Let us assume a person has been raised in a society that is well ordered, unproblematic and characterized by circles. That is, if you can imagine it, everything in that society – from its architecture to its thought can be described by a circle. We will call these people “Circlonians.” Let us now assume our Circlonian meets a person who has grown up in a society that is in the same way characterized by straight lines – no circles anywhere in sight. WE will call these people “Straightists.” Let us assume that one representative from each of these societies meet. Now one thing is clear – unless these individuals are willing to take a risk and creatively attempt dialogue with the alien unknown, that is, with each other, they will never discover weather they have anything in common. More likely, each will turn to the great books and ideas of their respective societies in an attempt to reassure themselves of the rightness of their society and/or to discredit the other society. All things being equal, we have a stand off.. We recognize that the situation changes dramatically when 20 other Circlonians join the encounter. While nothing has changed, everything has changed. In fact, our Straightist may now be seen as an immature circle. Said one Circlonian to another referring to our now beleaguered Straightists, “He only has a radius.” “Why he’s straight...” “Where is his arch?”... “Show me 360 degrees!” After a chorus of such statements, the final judgment will be rendered.

The line is immature, rigid, defensive and without inner resources. Advice will be given – “Become mature, make yourself into a circle.” Now as long as the Straightist stays among the Circlonians a risk is involved. He might forget who he is. He might break trying to bend. He might forget that he stretches to infinity! Why would he stay? Well, it is possible the Circlonians might change – they might see that Straightists have new ideas that stems from a different perspective and that both can live together, as equals. The risk might be worth taking. If the Circlonians resist and continue to insist that our Straightist is a deformed circle we have an oppressive situation. On the other hand, what is right may be revealed through and emerge from the interaction between the Circlonians and the Straightitsts.

TRAP #2 – ACCEPTING IDEAS OF THE PAST UNCRITICALLY BECAUSE THE PRIESTS HAVE HANDED THEM DOWN.

The anthropologist Weston LaBaire recognizes this trap when he notes:

...Societies of men hold to the out-moded beliefs of the past – which are more profoundly and inextricably entrenched in time, more comfortably integrated with the rest of culture, and long since skillfully flavored for the emotional appetites of men – when other and better explanations are long since available.⁵

Do not accept the ideas of the past uncritically, merely because the “priests” of society have handed them to you. Remember the act of “replying to the community and insisting on the gesture of the community changing.”

Appreciate the past and the present but don't accept it uncritically as “the way things were or have to be.” Reach for the frontier of ideas because that's what the action is! Let me briefly indicate how blind acceptance of ideas can get a society into deep trouble.

1. In his work, *The Philosophy of History*,⁶ Hegel comments on Africans and we are told that “In Negro life the characteristic point is the fact that consciousness has not yet attained to the realization of any substantial objective existence – as for example, God, or law – in which the interest of man's volition is involved and in which he realizes his own being.” We are told the Negro “exhibits the natural man in his completely wild and untamed state” “...that moral sentiments are quite weak or non-existent.” Africa is summarily dismissed in eight pages of a 457 page book.
2. The famous psychologist, John B. Watson, gave the Powell lecture in psychological theory at Clark University in 1925. In his talk, entitled “Experimental Studies on the Growth of Emotions” he notes:

The Negro down South whines and trembles at the darkness which comes with a total eclipse of the sun, often falling on his knees and crying out, begging the deity to forgive him for his sins. These same Negroes show fear in passing through graveyards at night. They show “awe” and “reverence” for charms and relics. They will not burn down wood which has been struck by lightning. In rural communities adults and children collect around the home as soon as dusk begins to fall. They often rationalize it by saying that they will get “misery” from the night air. Situations of the most ordinary kinds judged from our more sophisticated standpoint arouse the strongest kinds of emotional reactions in them.⁷

3. Sociologist Howard Odum, in his early work *Social and Mental Traits of the Negro*⁸ in 1910, notes that Negroes are “A mass of physiological reactions and reflexes....volatile, without continuous or stable form, easily disturbed and easily quieted.” He further states that, “Educated young Negroes are not a force for good in the community but for evil. They feel that manual labor is beneath their dignity; they are fitted to do no other...it is clear that their moral natures are miserably perverted.” (While Odum later changed his views, one would expect more of a Sociologist.) I could go on and take the priests in biology and other disciplines to task as I have just done with philosophers, psychologists and sociologists, but I think the point has been made. Priests can make mistakes. Now, from amid these views arose the Anthropologist Franze Boas who in 1911 began to challenge deeply held

notions about race...and began to help eradicate racist notions in social and natural sciences. He did this by not being afraid of risk and of difference, he did this by going out among the “alien unknown,” by living with those who were different from himself. He did this by caring enough to live and listen to them. He did this by respecting them and learning from them. When acting on the world watch-out for those ill-conceived priestly notions, and capture those well-conceived notions.

TRAP #3 – CONFUSING ACCEPTANCE OF THE STATUS QUO WITH BEING MATURE: CONFUSING PASSIVITY WITH MATURITY

Peter Berger notes:

Maturity is the state of a mind that has settled down, come to terms with the status quo, and given up the wilder dreams of adventure and fulfillment.⁹

What Berger means is that some people identify maturity with settling down. With dousing the fires of youthful exuberance and adventurousness with the cold water of business-as-usual. I would hasten to point out that the white heat of youthful rebellion is equally as problematic. What is needed, what constitutes true maturity, is neither the burnt-out pursuit of business-as-usual nor the raging bonfire of unthinking rebellion or adventure-seeking; but rather the small blue flame of lasting commitment, the pilot light of openness to the new and concern for justice and equality.

TRAP #4 - DESCRIBING PEOPLE BY WHAT THEY ARE NOT

Do not describe people by what they are not. (Repeat) Remember our chorus of Circlonians. Describing people by what they are not only reinforces your own habit of thought — your own culture — your own world view, it denies the legitimacy of others who may be different. We can learn a lot about ourselves from those who are different, those who think differently. Remember the positive aspects of the risk taken by the Straightist.

TRAP #5 - IMPOSING YOUR VISION ON THE WORLD OF OTHERS

Don't become a self-appointed expert changing the world. Dialogue and dissent are one thing — simply attempting to take over the temple and establishing *yourselves* as the priests is another! You must remember that a critical element of a free society is positive and creative dissatisfaction. Remember that while you have the right and the duty of “replying to the community and insisting on the gesture of the community changing,” you also have the *responsibility* to listen to the community.... *you are engaged in an ongoing dialogue from whence the truth will emerge.*

AND NOW, THE FINAL TRAP... BELIEVING ONESELF THE INDISPENSABLE LEADER OR PRIESTS FROM WHOM THE YOUNGER GENERATION MUST

LEARN.

One which my colleagues and I also face. When your time comes, when you begin to see the sunset of your careers on the horizon, step gracefully aside and be willing to pass on the torch of change and progress...don't be afraid of the new, the different. Some of us will prove formidable enemies in our desire to hold onto our time, our past, but your present and future. But if we have done our job well, you will prevail. Don't settle into a "mature" business as usual approach to the world. Don't browse nihilistically in the library of non-involvement...act on the world and make it better.

And, do come back to Earlham. But tell us not only of how well we have helped prepare you to meet life, but, more importantly, tell us where we have failed you so that we *may* have the chance to grow wiser in our declining years. Act on us, act on the world. To the Class of 1980... I WISH YOU WELL.

¹ Peter Berger. *Invitation to Sociology*. New York: Anchor Books, 1963, p. 111.

² Booker T. Washington. *Up From Slavery*. New York: Dell Publishing Company, 1975, pp. 151-152.

³ George Herbert Mead. *Mind, Self, and Society*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1967, p. 168.

⁴ George Bernard Shaw.

⁵ Weston LaBaire. *The Human Animal*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1954, P. 302.

⁶ Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel. *The Philosophy of History*. New York: Dover Publications, 1956, p. 93

⁷ John Watson. "Experimental Studies on the Growth of the Emotions". In Peter Newbauer, *The Process of Child Development*. New York: The New Anerucab Library inc, 1976, p. 55-56. (Powell Lecture in Psychological Theory at Clark University, January 17, 1925)

⁸ Howard Odum. *Social and Mental Traits of the Negro*. New York: Columbia University Press, 1910, p. 37-50

⁹ Berger, p. 55