

## Item Details

**Volume:** 18

**Issue:** 4

**Month:** July

**Year:** 1970

Education as Style

the commencement address delivered by Dr. John W. Nason

Commencement, 1970

The distance between St. Olaf and Carleton is much shorter than it once was, and for that we can all be grateful. My presence here this afternoon is proof enough. Forty-four years ago I received my first degree from Carleton. No one then would have believed, and least of all myself, that I would today be receiving a degree from St. Olaf College. I am as proud of the one as of the other. I count my friends in equal numbers on both sides of the Cannon River.

The act of generosity and friendship which has just taken place symbolizes the close cooperation which now exists between St. Olaf and Carleton. These two colleges have existed side by side for almost 100 years, and the relations between their members have not always been entirely amicable. Mr. Skoglund and I can testify from the undergraduate years we shared in Northfield.

And yet there were times of great closeness as in the last year of your great President Boe. During that period when Boe's health was failing, Dr. Cowling, the chief builder of Carleton College, ordained minister, and a man not accustomed to missing Sunday service, came regularly at church time to read and talk with President Boe.

Whatever student rivalry has been and it once was fierce cooperation and understanding have characterized the administrations of the two colleges. I have had the good fortune to work with both Clemens Granskou and Sidney Rand, two of the most generous spirited men I have ever known.

The last few years have seen much progress. More students are taking courses on the other campus. The two chemistry departments share an expensive piece of equipment, and before our respective computer centers reached their present size we once owned a computer in common. It commuted back and forth across the Cannon more regularly than I regret to admit the goat does now-a-days. Our classics departments have explored the possibilities of sharing some of each other's loads. The colleges have shared instructors. Our librarians are talking about maintaining duplicate card catalogs of shelf lists so that students and faculty at one college will readily know what is available at the other. Our students have shown imagination in jointly supporting certain big name events. They have experimented with joint issues of The Manitou Messenger and The Carletonian and now talk of consolidation of the two newspapers next year.

I am convinced that cooperation is the wave of the future. Of the 12 Associated Colleges of the Midwest St. Olaf and Carleton are the two geographically closest. We have the best and easiest opportunity to work together. Financial pressures on private colleges are requiring economies. What better economies than by combining instruction especially at the upper level, jointly purchasing expensive equipment, avoiding unnecessary duplication of expensive or little used library books, cooperating on summer programs? The advantages are not entirely financial; the results would mean the enrichment of the educational programs on both campuses. If students can do it, why not we? I'm not prepared to go so far as to advocate a single administration, but there is much to be said on our side of town for a single football team.

There are problems to cooperation differences in institutional philosophy (which are gradually disappearing), sometimes differences in standards (which exist between departments in the same institutions), differences in calendar. In many ways the calendar epitomizes the problems. Cooperation in classes is virtually impossible so long as one college operates on 4-1-4 and the other on 3-3. In one sense it would be so easy for one or both colleges to change; in other respects the calendar reflects all the vested interests, academic convictions and local jealousies of the two communities.

The time will come, however, when buses will regularly transport students back and forth to classes and laboratories on the two campuses, when specialized staff will be employed in common, when more decisions will be joint decisions. I shall be happy if my actions and attitude will have contributed to that new era. Perhaps I shall then have earned my St. Olaf degree.

What I am predicting will affect the future of St. Olaf College, and that future is a direct concern to you who are graduating today. This is your graduation from your college, and I want to talk about what you can do to support St. Olaf.

The most obvious is to provide financial support. Without it St. Olaf will not survive. Those who came here before you made your education possible. You have a responsibility to do the same for future generations. Do not discount your gift because it must be small; the College won't. And do not try to buy yourself moral credit with a small gift which would and should be larger. You will cheat yourselves of one of life's real pleasures.

More difficult is support for the changing policies and patterns of the College. As we grow older, we all tend to look back on the good old

days and resent the changes of a later generation. Perhaps some of you students have detected this kind of resistance from alumni to your proposals for reforming the College. There but for the grace of your degree go you. Not all changes are good; not all should be supported. But circumstances and conditions change, and this college must change with them.

One mark of an educated man is his capacity to recognize the necessity for change and to know that he does not have all the answers. So be generous in spirit as well as with purse to your alma mater.

The most important support you can give to St. Olaf is in your style of living, and this in turn results or ought to result from the education you have received here. There are many definitions of liberal education, and I shall not weary you by recounting them. For my purpose this afternoon I want to emphasize one aspect: Liberal education is the learning of style.

Indeed, it is not merely the learning of style; it is itself a style of living. What distinguishes the liberally educated man is his attitude. Like Socrates he refuses to live the unexamined life. He insists on questioning assumptions and premises. He demands that conclusions follow from their premises. He recognizes that people live by different value systems from his, and instead of condemning those who differ as knaves or fools or foreigners he is prepared to weigh the similarities and differences in their cultural outlooks. He is skeptical of absolute judgments, critical of arbitrary assertions, allergic to prejudice ("a wayward opinion without visible means of support" according to Ambrose Bierce in *The Devil's Dictionary*), sensitive to people.

Do I paint an impossible ideal? Of course I do. No one is perfect, as the liberally educated man would be the first to admit. But I hope I paint, however inadequately, a type which you will recognize as the essence of what intelligent and sensitive men from Socrates to Martin Luther King have embodied. Whitehead once defined style as the ultimate morality of mind. In this sense liberal education is a style of life.

A few years ago I would not have thought it necessary to say these things at a college commencement. They would have been too obvious. Today I say them because so many students are marching to the beat of a quite different drum. Let me make myself clear. This is a very difficult time in which to be young. Television has magnified our awareness of the corrosive evils of our world, and they are not a pretty sight.

As sensitive human beings, students demand that an establishment, which obviously could do something about those evils if it really set its collective mind and energy to work, should do something to improve the human condition both at home and abroad. Frustration resulting from the inability to accomplish anything breeds anger and hostility and they in turn result all too often in violence. I applaud the moral passion of young people today even when I deplore and oppose the violence in which it sometimes erupts.

What worries me is the deliberate denial of a rational approach to the solution of problems. One extreme is the escape into the immediate experience of sex and drugs and pseudo-mysticism. The illusion of a simple life based on love and guided by the occult is the evasion of those too weak to face reality. The other extreme is the destructive rage that seeks to destroy civilization on the foolish assumption that out of its ashes without any prior planning a new and better society will rise.

Along with the cop-out and the anarchist there are advocates of less radical forms of irrationality. We have witnessed the whole range during the past four weeks in campus responses to the war in Indochina. We have seen violence which was the explosion of emotionalism, violence which resulted in the senseless destruction of property, violence which ultimately led to the destruction of life. We have also seen responses, powered by passionate convictions and directed by a rational calculation of ends and means. Here in North-field and on hundreds of other campuses across the country students have committed themselves to political activity. They are working within the system to bring about changes in national policy.

I do not condemn those who engage in civil disobedience as a way of dramatizing the evil being protested, though I would point out that civil disobedience needs to be invoked sparingly and with due realization that it can lead to a breakdown of law and order as well as to the improvement of our civil system. One test, of course, is the willingness of those engaged in civil disobedience to accept the full consequences of breaking the law. Here the example set by Socrates, to whom I have already referred with approval, is highly relevant.

Anything more than this reflects a degree of moral arrogance that is frightening. "I feel this is morally wrong," so runs the defense, "and I must act on my feeling even though others feel differently." How does this differ from Hitler? And how does the violence of burning down an ROTC barracks or a Bank of America branch differ from the doctrine that might makes right? "Because of my moral conviction I propose to force my will on you." With that attitude the possibility of a rational and ordered society disappears.

What I have been describing is obviously the antithesis of the behavior of a liberally educated individual. The test for such an individual is whether he can keep his cool under extreme provocation. Courage, in the Hemingway phrase President Kennedy liked to quote, is grace under pressure. Style is the result of discipline whether in playing the violin or tennis or in the quality of one's life. It has been the purpose of St. Olaf College to help you develop your style of living—one that will make you useful to society and at peace with yourself.

Justice Oliver Wendell Holmes once summed up in a Memorial Day speech his reactions to his participation in the Civil War. "All life is action and passion," he said, "and one must share in the passion and action of his time at peril of being judged not to have lived." Holmes was a man of consummate style. No one doubts your willingness to share the passion and action of these troubled days. The issue is how you express your passion and action, your style of response. Your ultimate contribution to St. Olaf is to live in such a way that every man will know where you were educated.

Photo: St. Olaf Commencement speaker John W. Nason is the retired president of Carleton College. St. Olaf conferred upon Dr. Nason the honorary degree of Doctor of Humane Letters prior to his commencement address (top).

The honorary degree of Doctor of Music was conferred upon Paid }. Christiansen (bottom), chairman of the department of music at Concordia College in Moorhead, Minn., "teacher, conductor, composer, and outstanding musician."

St. Olaf College, 1520 St. Olaf Avenue, Northfield, Minnesota 55057

© 2003-2010 St. Olaf College. All rights reserved. [About this site.](#)

Contact us at [webmaster@stolaf.edu](mailto:webmaster@stolaf.edu) or 507-786-2222.