

“WOMEN AND EDUCATION”

Commencement Address
College of Health Sciences

by

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President Nickens, members of the Board of Directors, faculty, distinguished alumni, parents, friends, and soon-to-be graduates:

Good afternoon. I am honored to share in your celebration today and to recognize the accomplishments of the graduating class and of the College. Under Dr. Nickens' skillful leadership, the College of Health Sciences fulfills its commitment to make a real difference in the lives of the many communities within Southwestern Virginia. Your expanding academic programs and your growth in student body reflect the high demand for graduates from your programs. I commend you, Dr. Nickens, and the entire College community, for your accomplishments.

I also thank you for the invitation to speak this afternoon. I have been to many a commencement exercise over the years, although only occasionally as speaker. The joy, pride, and promise of the ceremony never fail to stir my soul.

We gather today to celebrate a gift that you, the members of the graduating class, have earned. It may sound odd to speak of earning a gift, for is not a gift almost by definition something that is freely given? And yet, both concepts—something freely given and something earned—apply in this instance. Both matter if we are to honor fully your substantial attainments and also place your attainments within the wider context of our society.

Education is a gift—one that each generation offers to its offspring. We see in the education of the young the only gift we have that properly expresses our unconditional love. But education is not a gift that can be passively received. Each one of you has worked hard to earn the diploma you are about to receive and to acquire the knowledge and expertise in your chosen profession that the diploma represents. We recognize and honor your diligence and the excellence of your accomplishments and we share your pride in them.

The gift of education that you have earned—indeed that you have created—goes far beyond the important development of your expertise as health professionals. Your education has aided in the development not only of skill and intellect, but also of your soul. To succeed as a health care professional, you know how critical it is for you to have a high degree of technical expertise in order to diagnose, treat, and help to prevent injury to and disease of the body. But the technical expertise, while necessary, is not sufficient, is it? You know that the best health care professionals also attend to the spirit. You respect and care for the essential humanity of the patients you serve. And, you cannot deliver that level of care-giving unless you have first attended to the growth and care-taking of your own soul. Happily, a college education is one of the most fertile mediums we have for growing souls.

I want to spend a short time this afternoon talking about one particular aspect of this business of developing human beings, which has been much on my mind of late—namely, women and education.

A sea change with regard to women's participation in higher education has taken place within the lifetime of many who are here today. This change may be less conspicuous at your institution, where women have long constituted a significant portion of the student body. Between 1970 and 1990, the number of women attending college nation-wide more than doubled. In 1996, there were 8.4 million women and 6.7 million men enrolled in colleges and universities across the nation; thus, women now account for 56 percent of the enrollments. The percentage within Virginia is even slightly higher—at 57 percent. In my prior office, Dean at James Madison College in Michigan, I worked feverishly to attract males into our college of public affairs, for our ratio was two to one. Over six years I could make but marginal progress, for I was fighting against a national tide and not merely a local phenomenon. This disparity exists despite the fact that within the 18-24 year old age group, men slightly outnumber women. The U.S. Department of Education projects that by the year 2007, the gender gap will widen, with 6.9 million men and 9.2 million women attending college.

An article in the *New York Times* last December pointed out that, "Women outnumber men in every category of higher education: public, private, religiously affiliated, four-year, two-year. And among part-time students, older students, and African-Americans, the skew is much larger." The article speculates about some of the reasons for this gender gap, concluding that "it is probably a confluence of factors, from girls' greater success in high school to a strong economy that may give boys a sense that they can make their way without higher education, whether in computer work or the military."¹

The focus of the *Times* article is on why men are not attending college in greater numbers. I'd like to consider, instead, why it is that women are doing so. The social, economic, and psychological factors that lead increasing numbers of women to obtain undergraduate and post-graduate degrees cluster under two broad headings—the pull of opportunity and the push of necessity.

We have come so far as a society that it is hard to remember how limited the opportunities for women were—even so recently as twenty years ago. To be sure, long before these recent years women have demonstrated their capacities in education and in the professions. Until recently, however, few of them have been takers in the pathways of higher advancement. They had reasons, good reasons, and they had obstacles, bad obstacles. In just the last few decades the exertions of feminists, and still more importantly, the appeal of opportunities, opened the entranceways to profession after profession. Responsible positions are more open to women, or at least more widely ajar, than they were before. And this progress is a good thing.

At the same time that a new social order has unlatched the doors of opportunity, a new economic order has unleashed the push of necessity. Few families today feel they can afford to rely on the income of a single breadwinner, although many single-parent families do so—not entirely by choice. The economic prosperity we enjoy today may cloud our recollection of the recession of the early 1990s, when, even two-paycheck families found it hard to make ends meet. Further, the booming stock market of today has not obviated the need, in most households, for both partners to work if they are to achieve the level of financial security they desire.

We know well the sacrifices made in families in which both parents must—or choose to—work; at minimum it becomes more difficult to provide the nurturing that children need. We could even debate whether the "fifty-hours-plus" work week that has become the norm in so many professions allows one sufficient time to nurture one's own soul, let alone to be a loving, giving partner or parent. We could also inquire whether the economic, social, and psychological factors that fuel such long work schedules have

¹ "Women Increasingly Outnumber Men at Colleges and Universities," *New York Times* (December 6, 1998): Section I, 1-3.

contributed to an overall decline in our communities. How can we manage, when giving so much time to the office, also to make time for church, neighborhood, and civic responsibilities? Some now ponder the relationships between these questions and the tragedy at Columbine High School.

If we were to debate these questions, we would surely hear compelling arguments both pro and con. I think there is, however, one question where we might readily reach consensus. Can we not agree that between the pull of opportunity and the push of necessity, women who pursue careers and raise families risk being pulled asunder? Have we, in creating this push/pull nexus, failed to allow a just estimation of the human demands that are placed on all of us, but especially on women? Have we, moreover, unwittingly created a society in which we lead divided lives, and perhaps even exist as divided selves, parceling out our time, energy, and emotion among the compartments in a fashion that leaves us feeling we must rob Peter to pay Paul and ending up by short-changing everyone, including ourselves?

We live in a divided world—one that tends to see either black or white, ignoring all the other colors and shades in between. A world that sees either man or woman. A world that insists on “either/or” rather than “both/and.” One that sees reason and emotion, or care and justice, as opposites. Perhaps surprisingly to some but not unexpectedly to me, feminist thinkers have led the way most recently in articulating the underlying tensions involved in a push/pull world.

Alison Jaggar writes in *Gender/Body/Knowledge: Feminist Reconstructions of Being and Knowing*, “Typically, although again not invariably, the rational has been contrasted with the emotional, and this contrasted pair then has often been linked with other dichotomies. Not only has reason been contrasted with emotion, but it has also been associated with the mental, the cultural, the universal, the public, and the male, whereas emotion has been associated with the irrational, the physical, the natural, the particular, the private, and, of course, the female.”² But do we not find that these divisions are contrary to our fundamental human nature?

These are somber thoughts to introduce on this joyful occasion. I raise them because a commencement ceremony marks not only the close of one phase of your education but also the initiation of the next. As you embark upon the next stage of your career and personal lives, you would do well to consider the age-old question of “How am I to realize well all that I might be?” Equally important, “How am I to help others do so as well.”

It may be that we can find answers to these questions by insisting on integrating—rather than compartmentalizing—our lives. Elizabeth Kamarck Minnich suggests that “We need not choose between the life of the mind, the spirit, and the body.”³ She, and other teachers, scholars, writers, philosophers, and theologians are exploring ways to integrate our lives. Minnich offers this thought in her essay, “Can Virtue Be Taught: A Feminist Reconsiders:”

A picture, a collage, a weave of many strands old and new begins to emerge, suggesting a way of thinking that is resistant, respectful, reflexive, and critical. It refuses dualistic and/or invidiously hierarchical divisions that cannot be breached in favor of distinctions within wholeness. It emphasizes transactional mutuality over oppositional relations. It explores connection, complementarity, relationality within the matrix of experience where we are called to practice both care and justice. And it struggles to retrieve and revalue all aspects of the meaning of being human, from

² Alison M. Jaggar, “Love and Knowledge: Emotion in Feminist Epistemology,” in Alison M. Jaggar and Susan R. Bordo, eds., *Gender/Body/Knowledge: Feminist Reconstructions of Being and Knowing* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1989), 145.

³ Elizabeth Kamarck Minnich, “Can Virtue Be Taught? A Feminist Reconsiders,” in Barbara Darling-Smith, ed., *Can Virtue Be Taught?* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1993), 79.

the bodily to the rational to the transcendent, in the name of our fullest unique and common potential.⁴

M. Scott Peck, in his book, *In Search of Stones*, describes it this way:

I don't know who originally coined the term, but a few of us theologians are increasingly exalting "the Holy Conjunction." The Holy Conjunction is the word and. Instead of an either/or style of mentation, we are pushing for both/and thinking. We are not trying to get rid of reason but promote "Reason plus." Reason and mystery. Reason and emotion. Reason and intuition. Reason and revelation. Reason and wisdom. Reason and love.

So we are envisioning a world where a business can make a profit and be ethical. Where a government can promote political order and social justice. Where medicine can be practiced with technological proficiency and compassion. Where children can be taught science and religion. Our vision is one of integration. By integration we do not mean squashing two or more things together into a colorless, unisex blob. When we talk of integrating science and faith we are not speaking of returning to an age of primitive faith, where science is discounted, any more than we are arguing for the status quo where a limited science is idolized while faith is relegated to an hour on Sunday. The Holy Conjunction is the conjunction of integrity.⁵

If our goal then is to seek more integration within our lives, how can we best pursue that goal? I think we can look to women and to education for answers.

In an earlier age, women primarily bore the responsibility for ministering our human needs, while men tended to the worlds of work and scientific and economic progress. While that unnatural division is no longer so rigidly maintained, its prevalence heretofore seems to have imbued women with a sense of the preponderating importance of daily human needs and an insistence that they be met. Thus it is that Barbara Ehrenreich and Deidre English could insist in their book, *For Her Own Good*, "that the human values that women were assigned to preserve expand out of the confines of private life and become the organizing principles of society." Our goal is to create "a society that is organized around human needs: a society in which . . . the nurturance and well-being of all children is a transcendent public priority . . . a society in which healing is not a commodity distributed according to the dictates of profit but is integral to the network of community life . . . [a society in which] the womanly values of community and caring must rise to the center as the only human principles."⁶

This is not a "both/and" argument. It is not "reason plus." Depreciating the transcendent values of humanity does not ennoble the daily human needs. It rather deprives humankind of worthy ambitions, ambitions to which women no less than men must be open. This opens a world of questions about our familiar conceptions of the differences between men and women. I do not pretend to answer those questions today. This brief epitome of expression aims only to invoke your earnest labors toward the goal of making the answering of these questions the work of worthy lives. I am not hesitant to challenge you so, for I am ever mindful of those powerful, heroic influences that shaped my expectations of humanity. They were more often than not women. You would expect me to cite my mother at this point, the familiar rhetorical trope. Nor would it be amiss in my case. In fact, though, I am thinking of Mary McCleod Bethune who most visibly symbolized for me in my boyhood the value of education. I am thinking also of my cousin, Emma Delaney, who at the opening of the twentieth century journeyed into Africa a missionary, with a far greater ambition than the tending of daily needs. She who gave her life there in a great

⁴ *Ibid.*, 81.

⁵ M. Scott Peck, *In Search of Stones: A Pilgrimage of Faith, Reason, and Discovery* (New York: Hyperion, 1995), 369.

⁶ Barbara Ehrenreich and Deidre English, *For Her Own Good: 150 Years of the Experts' Advice to Women* (Garden City, NY: Anchor Press/Doubleday, 1978), 292.

enterprise which was, after all, the building of a school whose influence was sustained until very recently, when civil wars engulfed the academy in the flames of discord. Cousin Emma was a hero to my mother and a hero to me. We have long known that women can be heroes, and it is not amiss to ask them to answer the big questions that haunt us.

We can also look to education for answers. As you reflect today on your study at the College of Health Sciences, I am sure that you can each recall a course, a teacher, a book, or a conversation that radically altered your own understanding of what it is to be a human being and that offered you an entirely new insight on the question of “How am I to become all that I might be?” Cherish that insight and use it as a touchstone to return to when you feel pulled asunder by the divisions of daily life. Still more important, acknowledge today that your education about what it means to be a human being has really only just begun. Commit to the work and the joy of continuing—throughout your life—to explore that question, to learn new and deeper answers, and to put those reflections into action in your life at work, at home, and in your community.

In closing, I do not apologize for speaking of women as though they were men. For my words apply no less fitly to men than to women. Together, men and women can build lives and communities that are whole and undivided. I want to leave you with these words of a great educator, Anna Julia Cooper, who wrote in 1892:

. . . ‘tis woman’s strongest vindication for speaking that the world needs to hear her voice [original emphasis] . . . The world has had to limp along with the wobbling gait and the one-sided hesitancy of a man with one eye. Suddenly the bandage is removed from the other eye and the whole body is filled with light. It sees a circle where before it saw a segment. The darkened eye restored, every member rejoices with it.”⁷

Let us rejoice too.

⁷ Julia Ann Cooper, *A Voice From the South* (New York: Negro Universities Press, 1969), 121-23. Quoted in Minnich, 83-84.