

William Winter
Commencement
Millsaps College
May 8, 2010

An old friend stopped me on the street the other day. He said, "I see where you are going to speak at the Millsaps commencement." Before I could express my appreciation for his noting that, he added these remarks: "It is too bad that those young men and women are graduating from college in a terrible time like this."

I found myself stunned by his pessimism, and then I remembered that it was like some of the things I had heard when I graduated from college in 1943 in the desperate years of World War II when the future of civilization hung in the balance. I heard a very wise man say then: "This time like all other times is a good one if we know what to do with it."

Unlike my old friend, I do not feel sorry for any of you in this Class of 2010. In fact, I am very envious of you. With academic and life experiences that I could not have dreamed about seventy years ago, you now have the good fortune to begin your respective careers ready to take advantage of what may prove to be the most opportune time in our history.

Let us agree that there are many daunting problems that confront us. But that is what makes the present so challenging. It is in times like these that we have the greatest opportunity to make a difference and to make corrections and improvements in the way we do things and live our lives. We now have good reason to set aside some of the old worn-out, wasteful and selfish ways which have limited our achievements in the past.

We have let too much of our recent political and business decision-making be driven solely by a search for private advantage without sufficient concern for the common good. We have let greed and cynicism overwhelm the generous spirit which has inspired much of our progress in the past. We must remind ourselves once again that in this country we live under a social contract that was originally expressed in the Declaration of Independence, when our forebears pledged to each other "their lives, their fortunes and their sacred honor."

Those were not intended to be idle words. They bind us today just as surely as they bound the people who wrote them. And, if anything, their significance is greater now than they were then because the world is smaller and more dangerous now, the issues are more complex and the stakes are higher. We ignore the obligations of that contract at the risk of losing our country and our souls.

All of this simply means that we cannot live in isolation from each other. We must find ways to give renewed meaning to that contract that we have with each other. Here is how I think we need to do it.

Of all the qualities that I believe are essential for the sustaining of our free society, the most necessary are integrity, optimism and persistence. They must be accompanied, of course,

by competence and compassion. Only by relying on those qualities can we overcome the cynicism and apathy that have been the downfall of so many societies.

That is a lesson for all of us. We can either let the naysayers and cynics cloud our vision and close our minds to the choices we have, or we can work to make our society more productive and livable for everyone. This should be a challenge that all of you should welcome. To feel that one is a participant in building up one's community and country, especially in times of trial and uncertainty, can lead to a more fulfilling life. Instead of fantasizing about glories that never were or brooding over past mistakes, let us concentrate on the here-and-now and the what-can-be.

At a time when so many narrowly focused special-interest groups abound, more of us should consider ourselves as lobbyists for the public interest. We need to be involved in creating constituencies for quality education, for adequate health care, for the preservation of a livable environment, for racial reconciliation, and for the formation of more responsive structures of government.

We must bring together diverse elements and serve as a bridge between people and groups representing different interests but who have more in common than they may know. We must help communities identify their local strengths and resources. That is primarily a matter of stimulating vision where none has existed—of creating, educating, informing, and building community leadership.

Helping to establish models of programs that work—sharing successes, transmitting a spark of know-how—these must be our tasks. All of this calls for a continuing process of self-education and civic education. This must be true education—not in sound bites and slogans but in a serious understanding of public issues and of our responsibilities in the preservation and perpetuation of our free society.

In spite of the great strides we have made, many stubborn barriers remain. These are barriers fashioned of suspicion and distrust, of poverty and ignorance, of drug abuse, of family structures that are falling apart. These are the problems that tear at the very fabric of civilized society.

In the long and eventful history of our country, individual entrepreneurship and responsibility have been the mainstays of our stability as a nation. This is the continuing source of our strength.

I have had the privilege of serving in various public offices, including being governor of Mississippi. I considered that a high calling—the highest elected position in our state. It was a post of great responsibility. But it was not the highest political position in our democratic scheme of things. That position is one that is often overlooked. I would remind myself and the rest of us that the most important office in our political system is the office of private citizen. It is this

position from which all political power flows. If we neglect the duties of that office, we weaken our democracy and lessen our capacity to sustain good and wise government.

In recent years, we have developed an unfortunate tendency in our country to denounce the very government that we say we want to uphold. We have heard candidates for public office assert that government is our enemy and that if we weaken it sufficiently, we will thereby solve most of our political problems. Many citizens have been swept up in this seductive but self-destructive appeal.

Now when there is a special need for our government to assert its authority to strengthen our educational institutions and our public infrastructure, to prevent abuses in the marketplace and in the environment and to provide relief to citizens who through no fault of their own are in dire need, we recognize that there are many critical problems that only our government has the power and resources to solve. We cannot preserve our political system by weakening that government and the faith of the people in it.

In my lifetime, which now spans almost nine decades, I find myself reflecting on how fortunate I have been to have lived through the most exciting, challenging, and possibly most dangerous period in recorded history. After thousands of years of living in relative isolation, we are now living in a world where we can be in instantaneous contact with our fellow human beings in the remotest corners of the earth. There is no place to hide, even if we wanted to, from the realities of our existence together here on this planet. We are now literally all in this together, and all of us must play a responsible part.

Having seen over the last fifty years the incredible changes in race relations that have occurred in this once totally segregated state and region, I am convinced that it is not unduly idealistic or unrealistic to believe that we can achieve similar progress in challenging other elements that divide us and diminish our ability to live together.

That does not suggest that any of us have to relinquish all of our long-held cultural, spiritual, or political beliefs, but it must involve a willingness to accord respect to those who hold different opinions or who come from different backgrounds and life experiences. In other words, we must strive to achieve a society where all can feel that they are valued and included. A society or a community built of different and diverse individuals can actually be stronger and more vibrant by virtue of the combining and harmonizing of its different elements. The determined pursuit of that goal must now be the task for our future.

The time has come for all of us to join together in embracing the full measure of our common existence and the recognition and appreciation of our common humanity.

One of Mississippi's wisest and most respected business, religious and civic leaders for many years was the late Owen Cooper of Yazoo City. He was a role model for many of us. I would like to leave you with these thoughtful words, which he wrote shortly before his death:

If I had my life to live over

I would be much more unconventional.

Where custom acknowledges peers as best with whom to have fellowship,

I would want some non-peer friends.

Where tradition stratifies people because of economics, education, race or religion,

I would want to fellowship with friends in all strata.

I would choose to go where the crowd doesn't go,

Where the road is not paved, where the weather is bitter,

Where friends are few, where the need is great,

And where God is most likely to be found.