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The Golden Age*

Charles E. Dunlap, M.D.†

Good friends and fellow students, let me thank you for asking me to speak to you today. Ivy Day, to me, is the happiest day of all the year, the day your families, your parents and your teachers gather to celebrate your graduation and bid you Godspeed on your way.

To the class of 1962, let me speak for all the faculty to tell you we are sad to see you go but proud of you as well. We hope you will remember us with the same affection we have gained for you during the time that we have acted, in a measure, as your foster-parents. As the years pass you will forget the rigors of your schooling and all the hardships that we laid upon you. Even in the nine days since your last examination, the process has begun. Many of you already feel the stirring of a sentimental fondness for Tulane that was not there or was not quite as strong a month or two ago. Sentimentality is unearned emotion but, earned or not, it is a laudable emotion and it is natural for a man to feel ever-increasing fondness for his old school. All things take on a rosier appearance as they retreat into the past.

This is the reason, I suppose, that men of all degrees, in the most diverse societies and periods of history have shown a startling unanimity of sentiment about one aspect of the past. Without regard to differences of race, of station,

† Professor and Chairman, Department of Pathology, Tulane University School of Medicine, New Orleans, Louisiana.
ancestors were committed like the Roman Church to a firm belief in the essential rottenness of man. All of his past was black and only through some supernatural grace could he aspire to anything but evil. The Golden Age came only after death.

Thus it appears our minds grope for perfection at the two ends of time, seeking it either in the half-forgotten past or in the half-imagined future. In many ways these opposite approaches reflect the two contending stamps of mind, so-called conservative and liberal, that through their interplay, have formed and governed our society since its beginning. The Whig historian of England, Lord McCaulay, has never been excelled in his analysis of these two forces. Here is how he puts it:

"Everywhere there is a class of men who cling with fondness to whatever is ancient, and who, even when convinced by overpowering reasons that innovation would be beneficial, consent to it with many misgivings and forebodings. We find also everywhere another class of men, sanguine in hope, bold in speculation, always pressing forward, quick to discern the imperfections of whatever exists, disposed to think lightly of the risks and inconveniences which attend improvements, and disposed to give every change credit for being an improvement. In the sentiments of both classes there is something to approve. But of both, the best specimens will be found not far from the common frontier. The extreme section of one class consists of bigoted dotards; the extreme section of the other consists of shallow and reckless empirics."

As Lord McCaulay has proposed, we might profitably apply the lesson of the Golden Mean in seeking for our Golden Age. The mean between the past and future is the present. Being so close at hand and so familiar, the imperfections of the present obtrude themselves among its many virtues. Time mellows past experience in our memories. Anticipation softens the shape of things to come. The present, seen in a sharper focus, displays its blemishes more clearly.

Young people like yourselves, and some old people too, look to the future with high expectation, sustained in hope by striving towards a goal such as the one that you have reached today. It is good to set a goal before you. However, it is also good to keep in mind that each day's living is just as much a part of life as any other day after the goal is reached. Never overlook the things that make a life worth living day by day — your wives and children, if you have them, your parents and the company of friends, the little deeds of kindness that some do by second nature and others fail to do, appreciation of a well turned phrase, or ankle, the sudden lift of spirit given by a song, a sunset or a kiss, a word of praise or gratitude received or given, an unkind word withheld, a pleasure shared, and perhaps best of all, learning to find in each day's work some present joy, not as a step towards a desired goal, but for itself alone.

I speak of joy advisedly because this word, so rich in meaning, has strangely passed from ordinary use. Joy can be set apart from happiness or pleasure. Joy can even find a place in a brave heart along with pain and tribulation. Joy is built in part of faith and courage and of self-respect. "Comfort and joy," the Christmas carol sings. What more could any man desire on earth?

You all must know the medieval student song "Gaudeamus igitur, juvenes dum sumus." Let us be joyful now while we are young. These words as you
of culture, of tradition or of worship, all people that we know have shared the strange belief that in some former time there was a "Golden Age"; a time when all men lived as brothers, when there was no sin, no labor, no decay or strife. Each day dawned cloudless and each night fell in peace. Men were immune to illness, sorrow, pain and grief. The Greek and Roman poets looked for their Golden Age to old King Cronus’ mythical regime — Cronus, whose happy subjects shared an idyllic state quite similar in climate, government and economics to that enjoyed by Adam in the Garden before the fall of man. Ever since Adam, societies and nations, cities and towns, and even families, drawn by what seems to be a universal urge, have picked some period from the past, to cherish with a fond nostalgia as their Golden Age or, as we put it now, "the good old days."

Our good old days need not be perfect like the reign of Cronus, but they must embody some attribute of grandeur, peace, or bold adventure, some pinnacle of sentiment or virtue, some proud estate or station in the world that is no longer ours. Our memories hold fast to former pleasures while, for the most part, former hardships are forgotten or remembered pleasurably. This trick of memory exalts the virtues of the past and helps to build the image of a Golden Age. It also makes us all, to some extent, conservatives. But, like most formulations of our minds, this sentiment evokes its opposite. Over against the veneration of antiquity that seems so natural to mankind, there also stands an almost universal trust in progress towards a future world, peopled by better, nobler, men and women living in greater comfort, kindness, harmony and trust.* In the extreme extension of this view all of the past is primitive and base, empty of anything that one might call a Golden Age. Man’s history, beginning in the pit, is pictured as a long, slow, plodding, upward climb, cycle on cycle, towards a golden future whether it be in heaven or nirvana. This is the view the communists embrace, discarding as they do the hard-learned lessons of the past, uprooting ancient forms of worship, pulling apart the social structure and the ties of family, not for the pleasure of destruction, but in the expectation of quickly setting up a new society which they believe will be more nearly perfect than the old.

If we exclude the first two chapters in the book of Genesis, the Christian view of human history includes no Golden Age. My own Scotch Presbyterian

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* The possibility of human progress is a fairly recent concept as compared to the more ancient notion of a Golden Age. The idea of progress in its modern meaning is not found in the writings of the ancient Greeks. Progress is change measured along a scale of time, and the Greeks lacked a historical sense of time. Roman civilization was dominated by men of action and made few notable contributions to philosophy. Throughout the middle ages the Christian emphasis on the unalterable depravity of earthly existence was not calculated to stimulate serious speculations about progress. In the twelfth century the abbott Joachim of Flora advanced a doctrine of the perfectibility of man on earth. His doctrine, soon declared heretical, was an exercise in speculative theology, and while it presupposes progress of a sort, it provides little that is relevant to daily conduct.

Bury, in his book on progress, (Bury, J. B., The Idea of Progress: An Inquiry into Its Origin and Growth, London: McMillan and Company, Ltd., 1921), does not mention Joachim. He traces the first definite formulation of the idea of human progress to Jean Bodin, the French historian writing in 1566. By the early part of the seventeenth century, the idea of progress must have gained some general acceptance since Francis Bacon considered the notion worthy of rebuttal. Bacon pointed out that what we call antiquity was, in reality, the youthful period of the world. His own time, therefore, was the world’s old age and he himself one of the ancients. Indefinite progress in the future was clearly incompatible with the automatic senescence of society. Thus, the general belief in progress upon which we base so much of our daily behavior and many of our value judgments cannot be traced much further back than the late renaissance.
parents generous so that they gladly helped you with your education. When you selected medicine as a career, you were admitted to an excellent school and weathered four demanding years of training. Among the lucky millions living in this great land, you stand a favored few among the favored many. At last you are prepared to enter a profession, respected in all corners of the world as learned, merciful, generous and kind; a calling that commands respect, but in its turn demands devotion, charity and sacrifice. If you live worthy of the name of doctor, you will never need to look with longing to the past or to the future, for you can find in your own time the joy and satisfaction other men have dreamed of and embodied in the recurrent fable of the Golden Age.
may also know, come from the Bible. "Rejoice, O young man in the days of thy youth." Throughout the Bible this recurrent theme of joy and exultation runs so strong that it is hard for me to understand how a religion based on such a book could show itself as anything but joyful. The Book commands us to rejoice. "Eat thy bread with joy." "Live joyfully with the wife whom thou lovest." It also singles out the quiet joy that comes from work well done. "My heart rejoiced in all my labor." "Whatsoever thy hand findest to do, do it with thy might."

What a shame it is that we are quick to view all labor as a penance and therefore not to be enjoyed. Even our laws support this fallacy, and criminals, for punishment, are sentenced to "hard labor." Is twenty years hard labor half as hard as twenty years of vacant idleness? Work is a pleasure, though few of us are willing to admit it. In case you doubt it, look at the work we do in what we call our leisure. To any man who loves his calling, his daily work becomes a solid source of satisfaction and a well of joy.

It is a rare man who has learned to savour the full excellence of his own time and place on earth. We are prone to view our personal lives as hard; our burdens burdensome; our insecurity unique; our virtues unrewarded, and our times corrupt. Correct as this appraisal well may be in all its bleakness, could you in honesty select from all of history a time or place or station more to be desired than the one you now enjoy? Even the kings and sultans of a former day lived in a state we might describe, for all its panoply, as squalor. They suffered much from lice, bathed seldom, and shivered in drafty castles. Though they were feared by others, they themselves feared witch-craft, evil spirits and intrigue. They were bled by their physicians and governed by their stars; their lives were turbulent and insecure and on the average, brief. In their own time, only the fortunate lived half as well as they. Certainly, theirs was not the Golden Age.

Turn to the present and assess the lot of people in the world of 1962. We know that the majority, by far, are poorly fed and housed, lack liberty to speak their minds or choose their occupations; millions pay out the labor of a lifetime in order to subsist; millions live in fear of arbitrary laws, have no secure appeal and no redress when wronged. Millions more endure a withering mortality among their families and friends from illnesses that we no longer fear. Most of the present population of the earth would count as unbelievable luxury the things we take for granted in our land. To name only a few, we have free schools, abundant food, the forty-hour week, freedom of worship, speech and enterprise and above all the general dignity accorded to each man both by our laws and by our way of life. Admitting all the imperfections that blemish our society, let me ask if you can single out some other country or some other time on earth more favored than our favored land or richer than our own rich age?

Now looking to yourselves as individuals, with whom would you change places if you could? Add up your blessings one by one. First, nature furnished you with excellent minds. You had the further fortune to select as parents people from whose example you acquired a love of learning, a sense of human decency and a desire to help your fellow man. Good fortune also made your