

COMMENCEMENT ADDRESS
BRIDGEWATER STATE COLLEGE
Bridgewater, MA.
February 14, 1990

President Tinsley, trustees, faculty, staff, guests, friends, and most importantly to the graduates of Bridgewater State College, you do me great honor in allowing me to share this occasion with you and your families. To the graduates, you have given of your intellect, energy, and treasure in arriving at this important milestone in your lives. The trauma of exams is behind you, and you have every right to be festive and to revel in your achievement.

I have no illusion as to the staying power of my remarks. I have sat where you now sit, and I know the greatest contribution that I can make to your evening is brevity, so I intend to be brief.

I am reminded of a similar occasion some years ago when I attended the inauguration of a colleague that was held in conjunction with his university's commencement ceremonies. The president gave an inspiring and visionary address, the graduates marched across the stage and received their diplomas and the applause of their families, and everything was going fine until the very end of the ceremony. The university had honored a long-serving but retiring trustee with an honorary degree and allowed this trustee the honor of delivering the charge to the graduates - a charge that was supposed to be no longer than five minutes in length. Unfortunately, this

gentleman became so inspired by the occasion that he droned on and on for about 45 minutes. The crowd made a good faith effort to be attentive, but after about 30 minutes the experience went from the painful to the ridiculous. Corks began to pop from concealed champagne bottles, and every time this gentleman would pause to collect his thoughts the audience would erupt in spontaneous applause in hopes that his monologue was ending. Finally the gentlemen finished, and the audience gave him a thunderous standing ovation in relief that he'd finally shut-up.

I thought about it afterwards, and I just know that this fellow left the auditorium thinking that he had given a brilliant address interrupted seven times by applause, with a standing ovation at the end. So, though I may linger for a moment because I have something important to share with you, take comfort in the assurance that neither of us want to go through that again.

My remarks this evening are informed by two recent events. The theme of New Jersey Governor Florio's inaugural address "New Ideas for Old Ideals," and the recent public broadcasting series "Eyes on the Prize."

Let me give you some social vital signs you should know about. In 1986 the dropout rate in the Philadelphia public schools was reported at 38%. In Boston the same year it was 43%. In 1984 less than half of Chicago's public high school

students graduated. Of those who did, only one-third could read at the 12th grade level. Three years ago in the Cleveland public schools not one student qualified in the semi-finals of the National Merit Scholarship Program. Boston and Detroit each had only one high school with semi-finalists. In 1970, 16% of the children in this country lived in poverty. Twenty years later, 24% of the children in this country live in poverty. That's a 50% increase, and every day 40 teenage girls give birth to their third child.

There are certain old ideals that are central to the character of this nation's collective social, economic, and political fabric - notions about opportunity, achievement, personal initiative, and individual accountability. These elementary socio-politic values have been shared by various racial, ethnic, and religious groups since the beginning of the American experiment. If one looks over the cultural quilt that is this country, that the commitment to freedom of opportunity is the only value that such broad and diverse people had in common around which to build a nation.

What I would like to suggest to you this evening is that for the first time in the history of this country there is the emergence of two Americas. Let me quickly add that the notion of social bifurcation is not new. Indeed some 20 years ago the Kerner Commission warned of an America divided along racial lines - one white and affluent; the other black and impoverished. I am persuaded, however, that were the Kerner Commission to replicate its work today, it would describe a schism not based on the historic fences of race, religion, culture, or language, but rather a division counterpointed on the fundamental assumptions on which our social order is based.

I would like to acquaint you with Canton, Mississippi, a small town 20 miles north of Jackson on interstate 55. Some of you may recall a series of articles written about Canton in the Atlantic Monthly several years ago describing the character of the emerging American underclass. I had the opportunity to be a participant observer of this small community, for tho' I grew up in Chicago, I was born in Canton, Mississippi, and whenever school was not in session, my brother, cousins, and I spent many long weeks sweltering in the heat of this sleepy little town.

Canton, for many years, had an effective and thriving African-American community, although burdened by the pervasive cloud of fear and racism that has characterized Mississippi until the rather recent past. Black Cantonians had families, they worked, they worshiped, they went to school, they struggled to feed and educate their families, and they aspired to a time when people of color could participate in the opportunity promised in the American experience. And lo and behold, through strife and sweat and, yes even bloodshed, a time came when many of the shackles were removed, and opportunity began to avail itself to the citizens of this small Mississippi community. And guess what. They took advantage of it! Cantonians sought opportunity for education and economic advancement, they left town, and they didn't come back. Over a period of years Canton, Mississippi completely lost its black middle class.

It is important that you understand that class definition of African-American communities in the period before 1970 was never a function of personal wealth. Economic opportunity was sufficiently limited that there were few vehicles for black people, regardless of talent, to accumulate wealth. But while the middle class didn't keep the treasure of the community, they were, as in all communities, the guardians of the values of

the community. And when the middle class left town, so also did those fundamental community values. The hopeful left to test their dreams and talent, while the hopeless were left behind to flounder in their despair.

Today, Canton has a significant portion of its community in which the traditional social fabric has completely and utterly disintegrated. The family unit as commonly understood has not existed for decades --- generations of children that have never known anything but welfare, poverty, drugs, violence, and despair --- a caldron spawning every kind of social pathology confronting our culture.

The people I grieve for in Canton are black, as are they in Newark, in Camden, in Detroit, in Chicago, and Boston. But there are also places like Canton throughout the southeast, in Tennessee, in Georgia, in West Virginia, and Alabama, where the populations are white --- and in Texas, and Oklahoma, and New Mexico, and Arizona where the colors are brown and red.

I mentioned earlier the wonderful public broadcast series "Eye on the Prize." As I watched an episode recounting the last year of Martin Luther King's life, I was struck by the fact that Dr. King recognized earlier than most of us that while the civil rights struggle was important, it was a means

to an end, not an end to itself. Indeed the civil rights movement in this country has been and continues to be successful. Yet, at the same time, much of the social environment which will ultimately determine the quality of our experiences has rapidly deteriorated and is getting worse.

Governor Florio was right. We need new ideas for old ideals. While the ideals are old, the problems are new. You and I must be challenged to create new solutions and new approaches.

The problem definition provided by our leadership has been locked in a 20 year time warp. The test before us now is not so much the pursuit of civil rights as it is social participation and personal empowerment.

Martin Luther King did not go to Memphis in April of 1968 in furtherance of a civil rights initiative; for you see, he had come to understand that rights and opportunities are entitlements only for those sufficiently empowered to exploit them. The Memphis garbage workers understood this too, for it was on their behalf that Martin Luther King was standing on the balcony of the Lorraine Hotel on April 4, 1968.

Our psychologists have given us a useful model in understanding the problem and suggesting strategies for the solution. It is in the dynamic called "internal versus external locus of control." Individuals with an internal locus of control have a view that they are fundamentally responsible for those aspects of their conduct that will determine the kind of lives they will lead. They view that they have an opportunity to create a destiny that they fundamentally control --- people who take responsibility for and accountability for the lives they lead, for the things they do, and the consequences thereunto appertaining.

It is this fundamental assumption about personal and collective self-determination that our nation's founders and wave upon wave of immigrants brought to this nation. It was an important selecting factor in the behavior of immigrants everywhere. It was as true for the Irish who fled the potato famine as it was the blacks who fled the south, and colonized the urban north.

On the other side of the beam you have those individuals who fundamentally view the locus of control external to themselves - people who believe that what happens to them is more a function of their circumstances and external factors

than personal action or behavior. People with an external locus of control are characterized by a general sense of futility, helplessness, and most importantly, lack of control and sense of consequences for personal action.

We must understand that people who view themselves as in control of their future behave fundamentally differently than people who don't.

Several years ago I saw a campaign ad during a mayoralty race in a major urban community. The commercial showed a woman who had 8 children and no place to stay. She was expressing her gratitude to the mayor who had found, through a city housing program, a place for this woman and her 8 children to live. She indicated her gratitude and said that she didn't know what she would have done were it not for the mayor and the city housing program. I saw a woman who clearly understood that she was miserable. She just as clearly conveyed that she had no understanding as to how she got to be miserable nor saw any connection between decisions in her life and the consequences that resulted in her current condition. Nor did she have any idea whatsoever as to what to do to improve her circumstances. She was like a twig floating in a river, waiting for some current to direct her life and that of her children.

The people caught in this condition, more white than black, more white than brown or red, but held together in a common bond of despair have found themselves as objects of a public policy debate for the last 20 years where both sides have been wrong because it has been a debate over the wrong question.

One group would write these people off as expendable. The policy these people would advocate is to dismantle welfare, dismantle social services. In short, they would blame them for being victims --- not a new idea.

The other side in this argument has constructed a huge social service bureaucracy and a booming poverty industry whose principle effect has been to promote and sustain the poverty industry. This has been done with insidious effect, for the consequences of much of our social policy has been to reinforce the impotence of the individual and dependency on the system.

You may recall several years ago hearing about an irate student who took a pistol into the financial aid office of a college in New York and began shooting people - not a recommended form of conflict resolution I might add. In the news reports that followed there was a television interview with a woman who escaped shaken but unharmed from the ordeal.

The television reporter identified this young woman as a work-study student who was in the financial aid office at the time. Several days later it was reported that this woman was receiving public assistance, and her case worker had seen the interview on television. The story went on to say that the case worker was instituting disciplinary action against this woman because, by attending college, she was violating the conditions of her public assistance.

It seems that welfare recipients are not allowed to attend college because the assumption is that if you are on welfare you should be available for employment and, therefore, you're not allowed to go to school.

There was no suggestion that this woman had in any way falsified her information given to the college or that she was in any other way not entitled to the financial aid she was receiving. So what you have is a single parent mother attending a technical college to acquire skills to enter the work force, to get off welfare, to support her child, caught in a system that instead of encouraging her attempts at self-sufficiency, used her public assistance to pummel her into submission and dependency.

That is not a system designed to empower its clients; it is a system designed to enslave its clients. It is fundamentally corrupt in its basic premise, and needs to be radically overhauled. These people cannot and should not be written off, nor should they be held in hostage to a social services apparatus so obviously self-serving at the expense of the very people they are supposed to assist. The strategy for the '90's must go beyond rights and opportunity; we must somehow develop participation and empowerment, if we fail, we do so at our peril.

I have taken great pains to reinforce the notion that this is not necessarily a racial problem, but I wish to quickly add that African Americans, Hispanic Americans, and native Americans are grossly overrepresented within the American underclass, and unless we develop effective strategies for rebonding this nation, Abraham Lincoln's declaration that "a house divided against itself cannot stand" will take on an urgent and contemporary context.

In 1988 the Commission on Minority Preparation in Education and American Life published a report entitled "One-Third of a Nation." The basic premise of this report is that we live in an America that is one-third minority and where many of our communities are majority minority and that we must understand both the importance and consequences of this fact. I commend it for your reading.

In New Jersey as well as Massachusetts, we are experiencing an increasing labor shortage and increasing unemployment at the same time. The quality of our life at home and the security of our nation in a world community is no longer dependent on our national resources or military might. Certainly these things are important, but the future strength of the American community will rest on the quality of its human capital. We cannot survive as a society if one-third of our population is left on the sidelines --- nonproductive and noncontributing. Aside from economic and geo-political considerations, the social dislocation created by such a phenomena portends consequences that are dreadful to contemplate.

We can no longer move away from this problem or keep it encapsulated in our inner-cities. We should address this issue because we are a caring people committed to social justice. We must address this problem if for no other reason than that it is in our own self-interest to do so.

While I hope I have gotten your attention, I don't want you to despair. It's certainly not my intention to spread clouds at such a joyous occasion. It is indeed because of this day that I remain absolutely hopeful and optimistic that the challenges of our future will be well met. I feel this way because of my unbridled faith in you and thousands like you --- my belief in this hallowed institution and others like it.

The situation I have described has been called a crisis, yet it is our experience that a dynamic society is constantly in crisis. This one happens to be yours. Other generations have had others. But we are an enormously responsive and creative people. We have an uncommon capacity for collective action when aroused to a noble purpose. It is this tradition and legacy of activism that you have earned the right to participate in by those things celebrated this evening.

So, for tonight celebrate. Be joyous. Be happy. Share this moment with your loved ones, for you deserve the glow of this moment. Tomorrow will come, and all those things I described will await you. You're ready for it, and you are up to it. But for tonight think not of tomorrow, think of tonight. and thank you for sharing it with me. Good luck.