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## Recognition Banquet Speech 1971

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RECOGNITION BANQUET SPEECH

May 15, 1971

by

Frederick J. Rogers, English Department

Colleagues and Friends:

I feel like the valedictorian of the retirement class of 1971. In high school the valedictorian was the senior graduating with the highest grades. In the present circumstances it is the first member of the class that the banquet committee could find answering the phone. I understand that our class can be very proud. We are the largest retirement class in Western's history. We are also the youngest - though I have been informed that 1969 runs a close second: that's the year when the general average was brought down by Otto Yntema retiring at thirty-nine. In our case we are all thirty-nine. We have, it is true, taken our time about reaching that age; we simply feel we are an unusually mature thirty-nine.

Retirement is, of course, one of the major changes in a person's life; and we are grateful to have ours recognized by our community in this joyful rite of passage. I hope you won't find it too grim a thought if I call it the penultimate rite of passage. I like that word penultimate; I haven't had much of a chance to use it since Eunice Kraft taught it to me in ninth grade Latin. Incidentally - when I tell people I had Eunice Kraft for ninth grade Latin, they usually say, "She must have been a wonderful student!" Anyway we are engaged in this penultimate rite of passage! we are on one of these watersheds of a lifetime. And in a partial way I would like to take a backward look and a forward look.

I shall look ahead first. We in the retirement class are standing on this great divide looking into the new country. Like Cortes' men in Keats'

lines about the discovery of the Pacific we

Look at each other with a wild surmise

Silent upon a peak in Darien.

Actually we are not exactly silent; but we do have a few wild surmises. And the greatest of these is an anticipation of freedom. We can make choices with much greater freedom than we've been recently accustomed to. Consider this: President Miller and Sam Clark were obligated by their positions to speak tonight. Otto and I in our freedom have chosen to speak.

Some retirees choose to go on teaching. And when this has been done by such grand people as Marion Tamin and Robert Friedmann and Gerald Osborn and Hermann Rothfuss, you know it can't be wrong. It has been right for them. Other people choose to enter entirely new careers, not excluding marriage. And there are the hundreds of hobbies awaiting new enthusiasts: photography, travel, gardening, cooking, and all the rest. We are entering, in other words, into a momentary intensification of the lifelong identity crisis. I have been told recently by Leonard Gernant, who is an amateur gerontologist, you know - that is, he specializes in codgers - Leonard told me that a new watchword in the retirement game is disengagement. Disengagement is regarded as a good thing. This makes me feel very good. I have recently made a certain alphabetical accounting of my own commitments, and my accounting is probably typical of the whole retirement class. I find that I am losing a part in WMU, AAUP, MLA, NCTE, CEA, MMLA, MCTE, MCEA, and CCCC. My only gain is AARP, which for the under-39's present means American Association of Retired Persons. It was such a bargain. When in the last ten years have you been able to join an organization for only two dollars? It might be a mistake, but I can disengage next year.



I used to ask people on the point of retirement what they were going to do. I know now how irrelevant that question is. We don't have to do a blessed thing. A month ago the English Department gave me a nice retirement gift. It had a splendid quotation from Charles Lamb inscribed upon it. "A man can never have too much time to himself, or too little to do." So that is what we have to look forward to: a certain independence and peace, you might say. I would like now to take a backward look into less tranquil and more strenuous times.

My acquaintance with Western goes back a long way - back to what might be called the heroic age of our institution. My earliest heroes were the athletes. My father took me to Western's football and basketball games. The earliest heroes I remember are Oley Olson and Sam Dunlap. The club that can go that far back is getting smaller and smaller. The principal cheer was the locomotive, which went RAH RAH RAH RAH W S N S. Among later great athletes of my youth's heroic age were Charlie Maher, a wonderful catcher and peerless leader; John Gill, who had a marvelous versatility and was skillful in all sports; and Towner Smith, who, when he ran the 440 with his great spring and stride was just about the prettiest runner I ever saw.

I came to be an athletic hero of sorts too - or a kind of anti-hero, perhaps. I went to Normal High, as it was known then before it passed through its several name changes into extinction. And I played on the football team. In my junior year I was a substitute guard, and I remember the first game I ever played in. Juddy Hyames, who I certainly count among the heroes, was our coach, and we were playing South Haven. In the third quarter Juddy called me over to sit by him on the bench. I was not a very good football player, but I studied hard and got good grades and had acquired an unjustified reputation as

a brain. So Juddy spent five minutes giving me messages to carry in to the team. There was no platooning then, of course; and a substitution was quite an affair. A substitute could not talk with the other players until one play had been executed. So I kept ostentatiously silent through one play, then told the captain to call time out. The fellows all crowded around me in a huddle to get the instructions from the coach. And at that moment, with twenty eyes boring into me, it occurred to me for the first time that I could not recollect one single word of all those Juddy had poured into my ear. There was no hole to hide in. I struck my fist and said, "Juddy wants you to get in there and fight."

The next year, when I was a senior, our new coach introduced the innovation of the guards pulling out of the line to lead the interference on end sweeps. I tried hard, but I was too slow. The ball-carrier would always be ahead of me, and I followed him at my top speed shouting encouragement. Still, for a while I wore shoulder pads and a helmet; and sometimes I felt that I looked like a hero.

I think in those old days there was more than ordinary heroism in the teaching. It amazes to think of the stamina of some of the faculty heroes of the twenties and thirties. I remember in my first year of teaching attending a so-called County Institute at Bangor; that is, a one day assemblage of all the teachers in Van Buren County for the purpose of professional stimulation. The program for that day was Smith Burnham of Western's history department. In the morning Smith Burnham gave the keynote address to get the conference started; at noon Smith Burnham gave the luncheon speech to keep people in good humor; in the afternoon Smith Burnham attended in turn the four or five small group sessions so that at the close of the day Smith Burnham could give to a general meeting a



concluding speech summarizing the main points and the progress that had been achieved. Throughout the day, between jobs, Smith Burnham was very much in evidence in lively conversation with individuals and groups. It was obvious that he was enjoying the whole day. If any of you have ever detected a certain energy and stamina and gusto in Margaret Burnham Macmillan, there are old-timers who can tell you she came by those qualities honestly.

A heroic case I know quite well is one William Brown. In the twenties and thirties Dr. Brown regularly taught five classes, sometimes all different courses; he often taught an extension class, at one time riding the interurban up to Grand Rapids and back; and he and Mrs. Brown more often than not had a gathering of students in their home during the weekend, to hear an opera or to read a play.

I have ambivalent feelings as I talk about these tremendous loads I have spent a fair amount of time and energy in an effort to get high school and university teaching loads reduced. I have believed a reduction would lead to better teaching, and I still believe it. That heavy loads and good teaching went together in those days can be explained, I think, only by the fact of heroism. There were giants in the earth in those days.

When a hero stumbles, it can sometimes be fun. My wife reports an incident from a class of Dr. Brown's that she once attended. He was returning test papers which were on the whole quite unsatisfactory, and he delivered a verbal spanking to the whole class. Some of the students apparently had read Silas Marner, if at all, with minimal attention; they couldn't even keep the characters straight. He wanted to absolve himself from any responsibility for their ignorance. He specified several silly errors and then he came to the climactic one. "And finally,"

he said, "I want you to know if Eppie was the daughter of Nancy Cass, I had nothing whatever to do with it." There was a moment of shocked silence; then Dr. Brown blushed and the class broke up in hilarity.

Actually the heroic age of Western is still going on. I wonder if there has ever been a time in the history of our university that called for more pure physical courage than those occasions when President Miller, accompanied only by two or three of his staff, has confronted a hostile and volatile crowd of students and has tried, sometimes successfully, to reduce a shouting match to a reasonable discussion. You wonder that a president could survive; you wonder even more that through such trials President Miller has flourished. This is not the whole story of course. There are the other students, and there are the trees and the flowers.

But the future will certainly go on demanding heroes. It will probably demand them extravagantly. Our society is in a process of transforming itself in radical ways. Universities are themselves in the throes of arduous self-criticism and self-transformation. The times call for hard work, dedication, courage, and spirit. We members of the retirement class of 1971 thank you for your recognition tonight. And we wish to you, Sam, and to President Miller and to all your colleagues good luck and great success in the challenging and stirring times ahead.