

THE RENAISSANCE OF ADULT LEARNING

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I am honored and pleased to be the 1979 recipient of the Delbert Clark Award. The creation of a special award for work in adult education is a tribute to the foresight and vision of West Georgia College. When the award was established at this college in 1954, adult education was an honorable and respected field of study, but it was hardly a household word in professional circles, and many educators considered adult education an activity that was peripheral to the central business of educating young people.

Today, however, adult education is the fastest growing segment of American higher education, and there are now two to three times as many adults participating in adult learning activities as there are students enrolled in all colleges and universities combined. Adult learning has moved to center stage, not only in the United States, but in industrialized nations throughout the world. And so I salute you, for calling attention to the importance of adult education 25 years before it captured the imagination of the rest of the world. There is only one way, after all, to present the oldest award in Adult Education and that is to be the first to recognize its significance.

I suppose that if we were to go back in the history of commencement addresses at West Georgia College, we would find the usual number of speakers

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playing on the word "commencement" to suggest to the graduates that the commencement ceremony signaled the completion of their formal schooling and the "commencement" of adult responsibilities.

But that particular message doesn't seem especially appropriate for today's graduating classes. If this class is typical of those across the nation this spring, most of you have already entered upon your adult responsibilities. Many of you are already in the labor market, some with full-time, others with part-time jobs. Some of you are married; some are parents; a few may even be grandparents. Most of you have probably exercised your voting rights; many of you are financially independent; some are already active in the affairs of your community.

Nationwide, over a third of all college students today are 25 years of age or older and the average age of college students is continuing to rise. Over the past decade, part-time student enrollments have been growing much faster than full-time enrollments, and employed students now constitute the new majority on college campuses. The stereotype of college students as a group of semi-mature youngsters having their last fling on the college campus before embarking upon serious adult responsibilities does not present a very accurate picture, and the latest nostalgic movie and television craze for showing the highjinks of fraternity life in the 1950s is just that--nostalgia which, according to the dictionary, is a longing for something far away or long ago.

Thus as today's commencement speaker, I cannot really suggest that you bid a fond farewell to the carefree days of your youth and commence upon the challenge of adult responsibilities. Most of you have already done that.

Perhaps then I could play upon the other commencement theme of the past which is to express the hope that your study at West Georgia College has given you the education that you need to live a happy and productive life. The trouble with that message is that regardless of the quality of your education here, it is highly unlikely that it will last you the rest of your life.

For the first time in human history the speed of social change has overtaken the length of the average lifespan. As recently as 1900, the average person in the United States lived only 47 years; today the life expectancy is 72.

But it is not only the extended lifespan that makes it impossible for your college to offer a lifetime guarantee with your degree. We are living in an era in which knowledge is expanding and changing so rapidly that in some career fields, knowledge is obsolete within 5 to 10 years. Knowledge and our use of it is likely now to turn over within a decade rather than at the more leisurely former pace of a century.

Margaret Mead once said that the world we were born in is not the world in which we will live nor is that the world in which we will die. In the world in which I was born, for example, the average citizen had never heard of, let alone experienced, television, commercial airplane travel, computers, credit cards, or frozen foods. And the speed of social change has been just as great. Within easy memory of most of the people in this audience, the United States has moved from small town to metropolitan living, from homes in which a majority of mothers were home most of the day to homes in which most mothers are employed, from an average national educational attainment of a

little over 8 years of formal education for the average citizen over the age of 25 to more than a high school education today. Social and technological change has been enormous in my lifetime. Lest you conclude that I am unusually well-preserved and spry for what must be an advanced age, let me hasten to assure you that I have enough years remaining in my life to witness changes even greater than those that make my world so different from the world of my parents.

If your education at West Georgia College has been a good one, it will not last you a lifetime. Rather it will make you acutely aware of the need for continuous lifelong learning. Ironically, the more education you have and the better it is, the less likely it is to last you a lifetime. Research shows clearly that college graduates are considerably more likely than high school graduates to be active in adult learning, and each additional year of schooling adds to the probability that you will participate in classes, workshops, and discussion groups as an adult. Thus I suppose it is fair to say that today's commencement is more likely to launch you into new kinds of learning activities than to conclude your formal education.

Last year approximately one in every three college-educated adults participated in some form of adult education, most of them to improve their job performance or their opportunities for advancement. Researchers tell us that there are approximately 40 million Americans who are currently either in the process of changing jobs or careers or who are thinking seriously about such a change. A majority of these mid-life career changers say they will need additional education in order to make the change. Other people enter into adult learning activities because they enjoy the activity of learning or

because they want to know how to do something better--sail a boat, cook a gourmet meal, make their own wine, invest their money, fix the back porch, raise their children, appreciate art, understand human history. We are surrounded with opportunities for learning--so much so that I call our times the renaissance of adult learning.

Centuries ago, Aristotle, Jesus, Socrates, and the other great teachers of ancient times taught adults, not children. Their methods would be considered formal education in today's jargon, consisting largely of lectures or sermons, teacher-student dialogues, and adult discussion groups. Their curriculum, too, was one that we would associate with formal education, emphasizing not so much how to do things as how to think about things. The lessons of the ancient teachers were heavy with the abstractions of ideas and values and the life of the mind.

For a relatively short span of history--actually only a couple hundred years--civilization advanced through concentrating on formal schooling for the young, and adults were pretty much forgotten by educators. And so I call our times the renaissance of education for adults because it represents a rebirth of attention to the life of the mind that is as significant to our times as the original intellectual renaissance was to the 17th century.

The signs of the learning renaissance are all around us. Researchers estimate that between 80 and 90 percent of the adult population carry out at least one self-directed learning project each year and that the typical adult spends about 500 hours per year learning new things from a variety of sources. In city after city, record breaking crowds are standing in line to obtain tickets to the King Tut exhibits. Last month America's Number One magazine

for the masses, The Reader's Digest, selected for its book section a book by the director of the Metropolitan Museum of Art. In the year and months just passed, millions remained glued to their television sets to try to understand human history as revealed in documentaries such as Roots and Holocaust. An estimated one-third of the huge and ever-expanding paperback book industry is devoted to teaching people how to do everything from fixing the plumbing to fixing their marriage.

Learning and new opportunities for learning are moving American society from a linear to a blended lifeplan. In the linear lifeplan, which we once thought was the way to live, education was for the young, work for the middle aged, and enforced leisure for the elderly; in a blended lifeplan education, work, and leisure go on concurrently throughout the lifespan. Social scientists are observing what they call the rise of "rights consciousness" or the "psychology of entitlement." Today almost everyone feels entitled to a job. At the same time, almost everyone feels entitled to education and to full enjoyment of their leisure hours. Older people have insisted upon their right to work if they want to, and Congress has endorsed that right through a rollback of mandatory retirement. Young people are showing increasing dissatisfaction with long years of uninterrupted schooling, and there has been a steady increase in the number of students exercising their right to a job. There is nothing very exceptional anymore about the individual who attends college, holds a job, and takes off for what once would have been considered extravagant leisure weekends of skiing or surfing. And so we find more and more people opting for the blended lifeplan. The good life today consists not of all school or all work but of a blend of work, education, and leisure.

Now that I have told you why I am not going to use this commencement ceremony as an opportunity to welcome you to the world of adult responsibilities nor to suggest that you bid a fond farewell to your learning days, perhaps I can spend the remaining few minutes talking about what I think this commencement should mean to you today.

I suggest that upon this occasion you are commencing upon your life as a self-directed learner. So far you have had a lot of help with your learning activities. As a society we have suggested what you should study through designing college curricula that seem appropriate to the wide diversity of learning interests these days. We have told you where to study through developing the most complete network of colleges and universities the world has ever known. We have suggested how you should learn and from whom through providing well trained college faculties who have exposed you to both ancient and modern methods of teaching and learning. While the clear preference of most of your teachers is that you should learn because you want to know, we have, in our collective wisdom, provided plenty of support through a system of rewards and threats that suggest that if you don't learn because you want to know, then perhaps you should learn because you want to pass the course or get an A or get a college degree.

Those of you who made it as far as the commencement ceremony today have demonstrated your ability to participate in directed learning. The challenge that awaits you is to demonstrate your capacity to take on more responsibility for self-direction. The better your education, the more able you are to "commence" your lives as lifelong learners. There are occasions, to be sure, when your employer or your profession will require continued learning on your

part. By and large, however, you are on your own. It will be up to you to make informed decisions about what, where, when, and how to learn. In these days of the learning renaissance, you can learn almost anything you want to learn in almost any way you want to learn it.

Ultimately, the quality of your learning at West Georgia Collège will be judged not so much by what you have learned as by what you are prepared to learn.