

**Commencement Address  
at The Roosevelt School**

Stamford, Connecticut

June 3, 1970

by

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It is a double act of friendship which brings me here this afternoon—friendship for the Director Emeritus of the Roosevelt School, Dan Trotzky and his beloved wife Rhoda, to whom I wish many years of health and creativity on behalf of the community and the various charities to which he has dedicated his life; and profound and affectionate devotion to my friend Martin Schwarzschild, to whom I wish good luck and undiminished success on this new stage in his career as he takes over the reins of the Roosevelt School. He will, I am confident, make it the most eminent school of its kind in the country.

There is always an inherent danger in commencement addresses—that of excessive solemnity. A graduation speaker sometimes feels that he has to distill all the world's wisdom into the short time allotted to him, lest the poor graduates go into life uninstructed.

Every time I feel that I am about to succumb to this sin of solemnity, I remember the gist of the commencement address given several years ago at a Western University by a distinguished citizen of this country, Bob Hope. The famous humorist told the assembled graduates and guests, "I am supposed to give you advice about how to go out into the world. So let me give it to you: Don't! Last week I was there, and it is a mess."

I have the same report to bring you. I have been out there in the world quite recently, and it is an unholy mess. Part of that messiness is the profound suspicion that separates youth from the adult "establishment," and it is that which I wish to discuss with you.

I suppose that a certain amount of tension between the settled generation and the emerging one is endemic to human society. It has always been so, and always will. But never before in human history, to my knowledge, has the hostility, the lack of communication, been as deep and as perilous as it is in our times.

Now, I have not come here this afternoon to pass judgment on what is known, quite correctly, as the "youth revolution." It is an empirical fact. It exists, and therefore it is useless debate whether it ought to exist or not. Unquestionably, an objective study of the situation will reveal that it has some good features, some bad ones. The big question that we must face is: What now? Where do we go from here?

That is an especially important question for you who are now graduating from the high schools of this country, and about to enter the campuses as the class of 1974. What are you going to do with the youth revolution, into which you have already been initiated, these next four years or, possibly, seven to eight, if you go on to graduate or professional school?

The youth revolution has unleashed new passions, it has presented new visions, it has posited new ideals, and some old ones in a new light, and all of this has been powered by a great forward momentum. But the problem is: What now?

I feel that we are at present at a crossroads, and that we can make one of two fateful choices. Either we can continue on a straight line of development, and then discover that ideals which began as noble ones and liberating ones, ultimately devour both us and themselves and end up in total chaos and confusion of benefit to no one. Or, we can take another road that I prefer to call that of "dialectical maturity." The word "dialectics" is one which, if you have not already heard it, you probably will be hearing a great deal about in the next year, in your classes in philosophy and history and economics and religion. Briefly, dialectics is the study of the clash of opposing ideas, how they modify each other, and combine to form new ideas. Now, my belief is that many of these great ideals which the youth revolution has emphasized or reintroduced into Western society, can only themselves survive, and help the rest of us to creative survival, if they mature dialectically—that is, by meeting up with their opposite ideals and being transformed into something slightly different, but much more productive.

Let me give you several illustrations of what I mean.

The first idea is that of liberty. The youth revolution began with a generation that found itself caught in a paradoxical situation. In one way, society seemed to be becoming more oppressive. Young people were plucked out of their families, colleges, and careers, and sent off to fight a foreign war with which they were totally out of sympathy and for which the country as such never gave its consent. Personal freedom was found to be curtailed in many serious ways. Yet, together with this, there was developing the idea of a permissive society, allowing everything and anything provided it did not hurt someone else. And so, the youth revolution adopted the idea of liberty and freedom, of "doing your own thing," as the major ethic of young people. Now, that may be all to the good. But where do we go from here? There are two possibilities.

First, if the idea of liberty, of personal freedom, continues to its logical conclusion along a straight line of development, it must end up with the twin perils of libertinism and anarchy. Personally, it means that we become morally corrupt, we make ideals of self-indulgence and instant gratification—attitudes which are perfectly normal and valid for an infant who has not yet learned that he is not the center of the world, but which are destructive when performed by adults. Unrestrained liberty, taken to its bitter end, leads inexorably to the dogma of the sanctity of the primal urge—as if any feeling, any passion, any emotion, any idea, must be immediately expressed in practice regardless of the consequences. Socially, this road leads to chaos. Obviously, there can be no viable society in which all members have absolute, unrestrained liberty. Demanding it can only lead to a desperate fight by all individuals to maximize their own freedom at the expense of everyone else. This is the way of anarchy—and not, most decidedly not, the kind of anarchy that is somehow, sometime, in some manner, sup-



posed to lead magically to the creation of a new society without any forethought and planning attached to it.

The alternative road is that of more freedom and more liberty, but dialectically joined to its opposite: responsibility. To feel responsible, to feel that you must answer or respond for the use of your freedom, means the willingness to renounce some of your own liberty in order to help others gain theirs. Responsibility means to have the right to do things, but not necessarily to exercise that right—in order to see to it that other human beings get their fair share of the pie of society and wealth.

Without responsibility, with unrestrained freedom, there can be no marriage, no home, no family; there can be no tradition, no religion, no human continuity—and so, no human community.

Responsibility should not be taken lightly. As the surrender of freedom for the sake of a higher goal, it is a risky business, and it represents, in truth, a profound act of faith. Permit me to illustrate that from ancient Hebrew law. The word for responsibility in Hebrew is *acharayut*. But that word, in Jewish law, has another meaning: mortgageable property. If A borrows money from B and B wants security, then A will offer some of his property to B as a lien; he mortgages it to B for payment. Now, not all kinds of property can, according to law, be mortgaged or made "responsible" for the loan. Mortgageable property is called property which has *acharayut*, or responsibility; that which cannot be mortgaged is non-responsible property—property which has no *acharayut*. A great Jewish jurist and Hebrew lexicographer who lived about 900 years ago, Rabbi Nathan of Rome, explained the etymology of *acharayut* by referring it to another Hebrew word, *acharit*, which means endurance, survivability, permanence. Only that property has *acharayut*, responsibility or mortgageability, which lasts, which endures, which has *acharit*, and which therefore can be collected from upon default of the loan. Therefore, for instance, a garment or a piece of furniture cannot be mortgaged, because there is no fair expectation that it will survive for any considerable period of time. However, real estate, a plot of land, can be mortgaged, it can serve for *acharayut*, because it has *acharit*, it lasts and lasts indefinitely.

That is what I am trying to say about the kind of *acharayut* for which it is worth renouncing some of your liberty. When you give up some of your freedom as an act of responsibility, it is in the first instance an act of faith. When you surrender many of your personal freedoms in order to take on the responsibility of a wife, it is because you have faith in her and the life you will lead with her. When you have children and build a family, you give up your freedom for responsibility as an act of faith in the future or *acharit* of your family. There is no such thing as complete liberty, total freedom, which ends creatively. It must be joined dialectically to responsibility, the great act of faith in survival, in permanence, in the future.

The same is true with the striving for rights. It is important to get



and secure rights for all individuals and groups in all segments of society. But rights alone will never do. Judaism has taught the world that in addition to rights there must be—duties. Each man and each woman must feel an inner sense of obligation. Thus, for instance, children begin their careers by saying to the adult world, in effect, "please help me." As they reach their 'teens, they assert their independence and cry out, "I can take care of myself." Much of adolescence is a defiant attempt to prove that assertion. Now must come the last step, the most creative one, when a young person turns to the world and his peers and says, "please—let me help you."

So when you get on to the campuses, by all means continue in that great liberating tradition which your youthful forebears began for you. Don't let anyone usurp your rights or your freedom. But—recognize maturely that you must make a free will decision to give up part of your freedoms for a responsible reason, with faith in the future and endurance of someone, some person, some group, some ideal.

The second illustration is that of emotions and personal feelings. This is an age when young people have reintroduced to American society the legitimacy of personal feelings, the validity of individual emotion. Unquestionably, this new romanticism is a welcome note in this harshly technological, rigidly materialistic society which their elders have bequeathed to them. Young people have taught the rest of us that we can unburden ourselves, we ought to loosen up, we must not be embarrassed at being sentient beings and "having a heart." However, here too we are at a cross-roads and must face a choice between one of two roads.

The first is a straight development of this primacy of emotion, and that can lead only to mass hysteria, to the rule of passion, to mobocracy, and to an enormous intolerance for anyone who disagrees with us. When emotion reigns, then the dissenters demand their rights, but refuse the right of dissent to those with whom they disagree. There is no arguing with pure emotions; there is only fighting, the pitting of "my" feelings against "theirs."

However, this youthful romanticism, this new emphasis on feelings and sentiment, can become highly creative if it is dialectically tempered by the values of reason and intellect and academic achievement. When we have both head and heart, both emotion and reason, both sentiment and intellect, then we will each of us have succeeded in forming a balanced human being with harmony amongst all his facilities—the great Platonic ideal of the perfect man.

That there is a need for this new romanticism goes without saying. The severe intellectualism of the campus has transformed our universities into impersonal education machines. The teacher-student relationship has degenerated into a branch of technology. The sense of suspicion, nourished by widespread depersonalization, is even more noticeable on campus than it is in other segments of society.

This sense of alienation, so characteristic of our contemporary world, was heralded some ten or fifteen years ago by one of the great dramatists of our times, Eugene Ionesco, in his "The Bald Soprano." In a marvelous vignette, we see a man and a woman meeting on Fifth Avenue in Manhattan and striking up a conversation. They learn that they both, coincidentally, came to New York on the same 10 A.M. train from Connecticut. Further discussion reveals that they indeed live in the same apartment house. They later learn, to their delight, that they live on the same floor. More conversation yields the information that each has a ten-year old daughter by the same name. They then discover, in utter amazement, that they share the same apartment; indeed, they have the same daughter. Husband and wife introduce themselves to each other . . .

Our society is one in which husband and wife do not really know each other. Parents and children are strangers to each other. Teachers and students have a commercial and official and professional relationship to each other, not a human and personal one.

So that the new emphasis on feeling and personalism certainly is an important and urgent one.

But in order to survive, in order for this new element of the value of personality and feeling to make a real impact on the future of society and the academy, it must be joined to the values of reason. We must remember that the main business of the school is not to give us an outlet for our excess passion, not to pamper our emotions, but that schools were made to exchange ideas, to entertain the clash of thoughts and ideologies, to hone our acute sense of criticism, to advance our learning and understanding, and perhaps—hopefully, some day—to lead us on to wisdom. It is simply not enough to emote, either personally or politically. All the protest movements and demonstrations in the world will not make us wise if our feelings are not joined to common sense, to intellect, to critical understanding. Without reason and scholarship, all our demonstrating and our emoting will just confuse us more than ever before.

I commend to your attention, in this regard, a cartoon which appeared not too long ago in *The Saturday Review*. It showed an elderly, well-dressed matron in a flowery hat marching in a procession and holding aloft a sign that read, "Will someone please tell me what's going on here?"

I feel that the romanticism of the youth revolution, untempered by reason and understanding, will lead ineluctably to the kind of chaos which will be frightfully unenlightening, which will make all of us wonder what's going on here or anywhere.

The third example of what I mean by the importance of dialectical motion of the youth revolution is that of doubt, the importance of asking questions.

Your generation and the one immediately preceding it is one that has raised doubt from a technique to an ideal to a way of life to a stance against



society. You have made your doubt of the Establishment, your questioning of your parents and their wisdom, one of the characteristic features of the new generation.

Now, that is not a bad thing at all. Modern culture, much of Western civilization, received its greatest momentum from the teaching of Descartes that "Everything must be doubted." Indeed, there is a whole school of philosophy, the neo-Kantian, which maintained that wisdom lies in formulating the proper question rather than in providing the correct answer. And it is not only true of the Western philosophical tradition. In Hebrew, the term for an advanced academy of learning is *Beth Ha-Midrash*, which ought to be translated as, "The House of Asking." From the Hebrew it went over into the Arabic, where the word for a higher school is *midrasatun*, similarly, a place of asking.

But doubting can lead down one of two roads, either that of destructive cynicism or that of skeptical creativity.

If you simply doubt for the sake of doubting, with no other end in mind, if you begin to make doubting your only reaction to all of society and all of life, it will lead to a cynical nihilism, to a denial of any values, any purposes, any meaning, to a life in which nothing is of importance or significance. This is the way of personal and social destruction.

But there is another road, and that is one in which doubt is dialectically joined to commitment. Here lies the way of the healthy skepticism of the Establishment, of all accepted wisdom, of all prejudices. Doubt them by all means, but be ready to make a leap of commitment, whether moral or historical, religious or intellectual or political. If you really want to doubt—then learn to doubt your own doubts as well, and go on to affirm something, to believe in something, to care deeply and be concerned about something, to the highest achievement of doubt: faith!

Youth today has learned, by means of its doubting, not to take the adult world too seriously. When I was your age, I was all too prone to accept what was given to me by adults merely by virtue of their "experience." You have learned to do differently, and I think that you are largely right. You have looked at the adult society and have discovered that it is full of pomposity, full of phony patriotism, and full of hypocrisy. You are right. Of course, I am willing to bet that twenty years from today your children will accuse *you* of—pomposity, phony patriotism, and hypocrisy. I assure you that you will not escape these moral blemishes. That is the way of life, that is the way it must be with us morally imperfect humans. But that does not detract from the rightness of your charge and duty. You must expose the phoniness of the previous generation, and try to correct it—and though you will never completely succeed, the effort is both noble and necessary. So, continue not to take the adult world too seriously.

However, take one further step and you will succeed even better: don't take yourselves too seriously. Retain your sense of humor. When you



get into your universities, remember that what goes for "campus opinion" does not necessarily have a monopoly on truth. Be critical of your older professors, and terribly suspicious of the younger ones. They have no monopoly on maturity, and my own experience has led me to believe that too many of them are terribly immature. The majority opinion on campus tends to sweep people along uncritically. But in the university, the least one can expect is that individual students will think for themselves. Remember that the "BMOC," the Big Man on Campus, is very often a very little guy underneath it all; objectively speaking, he is not at all that great. Don't be overimpressed by him—or by yourselves. Doubt your doubts, and find your way to an ennobling faith.

However, none of the above examples of dialectical maturity — the joining of liberty to responsibility, of emotion to reason, of doubt to commitment—can be achieved without one particular element: work. Now it is regarded as *passe* in many circles; work is supposedly an obsolete relic of the Protestant ethic. We are told that in an affluent society, work is no longer a moral good. That is utter nonsense. Maybe some of you are wealthy enough so that you do not have to work for a living. That is just fine and I envy you. But having enough material goods is not really the most important, or even one of the most important, goals of life. What is more important is education, knowledge, wisdom. But do you think that you can get an education without work? Or knowledge? Or, certainly, wisdom?

I am sure you have learned it on your own, but it does not hurt to have it reaffirmed by an outsider: there are no short-cuts. Try the short-cuts, and you will be swept along unthinkingly in the mindless tides of your peers, whether on the universities, or in the mines, or on the battlefields. You will never know the secret of maturing, the gift of wisdom.

One of the greatest Jews of our generation, whose name is undoubtedly unknown to the majority of you (Rabbi Abraham Isaiah Karelitz, the *Chazon Ish*), once said in a letter he wrote some twenty years ago to a student who complained that despite his efforts he was not seeing much success in his studies, the following, which I translate into English: "Everything is hard, everything is tough; I have rarely come across anything that is easy." Thus spoke a man who was in the genius range in intellect and a genuine saint in character and piety.

So, I wish you good luck as you work hard in an effort to mature as full human beings. May God grant that you work very, very hard; that you have very little spare time for leisure in the accepted sense; that you think hard and live fully; that the experiences and affiliations and loyalties you gained and made at Roosevelt School will give you the wherewithal to mature dialectically, fully, in a lifelong endeavor to bring fulfillment to your own lives, pride to your parents and families, and credit to your Alma Mater.

