

# What Harvard Neglected in 1982

Going through some old, family documents this week, I stumbled upon a clipping from *Harvard Magazine* that included an address given by Reverend Peter J. Gomes of Harvard University to the school's graduating seniors in 1982.

It's a heart-felt and lively address, which is reproduced below.

What stands out most is that Rev. Gomes recognized that his school was failing to educate students on a certain topic. As he stated, "...let me speak to an aspect of your education here at Harvard that I suspect has been sadly neglected: virtue. "

Here we are thirty-three years later and many Americans would argue that we have a deficit in character in the nation's leaders, both political and business. Harvard's graduating classes of that era, as well as those of other Ivy League schools, now make up a large portion of our country's leadership.

Should we care that Rev. Gomes, a distinguished gentlemen in his time, worried that the Harvard at which many of our current leaders attended neglected to promote virtue? I think so.

If very smart people have been given the skills to be great, but not the moral compass to use those skills justly and wisely, there is a danger to society. What will be their fruit and who do they serve? Rev. Gomes hints at this problem:

"Tempting though it may be to wait to perform virtuously at a cosmic moment in world affairs, more often than not the test of our character will come, not in the context of some nuclear holocaust or profound moral dilemma, but rather in the ordinary circumstances of living, being, and doing, where the tests are daily, and the results inexorable in

their accumulation. The 'good life' has meant for so long for so many the means to indulge one's wants. The 'good life' of the text, on the other hand, has to do not with the quality of your possessions but with the quality of your person."

Of course, it is not fair to say that every student who graduated from an Ivy League during the period lacks virtue simply because that part of his or her education may have been neglected. But it is telling that a man representing one of our elite institutions recognized the need for greater education in virtue and the ramifications for not providing it. That should give us pause when considering our current leaders as well as the educations we're providing the next generations of Americans.

While one could go on about the topic, here it is probably best to let Rev. Gomes' speak for himself:

*An address by the Reverend Peter J. Gomes to graduating seniors, Memorial Church, 8:45 a.m., Commencement Day, June 10, 1982*

**Title: Some of you are perhaps surprised to find yourselves here this morning...**

"'Who is wise and understanding among you? By his good life let him show his works in the meekness of wisdom' – James 3:13

Some of you are perhaps surprised to find yourselves here this morning. Well, so am I. It must be a measure of the seriousness of the times that you, who have spent your term here in library and laboratory and in the happy pursuit of pleasure, should within an hour of your departure from this place be assembled in chapel and exposed to the force-feeding of a preacher. Some of you may well be beyond the assistance of prayer, but that is no reason not to try. Besides, chapel, like the glass flowers, should be seen at least once.

But it is not an ordinary occasion that brings you here. Not every day are you treated to cornflakes and champagne, a quick march to the Yard, and the sight of your tutors and professors outfitted in hired academic drag. And it is not every day that you contemplate the fearful and long-postponed reality of life after Harvard. But this is, after all, Commencement Day, and within a few hours, having been admitted to the company of learned men and women, you will no longer be 'one of us,' but rather 'one of them.' You will have become with the turn of a tassel 'an alumnus,' with the inevitable prospect of turning fat and forty, and returning on five-year pilgrimages to the scene of the crime: *sic transit Gloria Harvardiana*. College has been for most of you a good thing, and as Mae West said: 'Too much of a good thing is terrific.' It is no wonder, therefore, with such a prospect before you, some of you are willing to take the advice George Plimpton offered in two words to the Class of 1977 on Class Day: 'Don't go!'

But you can't stay. Tenure is not for you, it is for us; and that is simply to prove to you that life is unfair. So go you must, but before you do, before you open that big red envelope with either its diploma or your unpaid library fines inside, let me speak to an aspect of your education here at Harvard that I suspect has been sadly neglected: virtue.

It is abundantly clear that you are all clever, bright, and able. Those qualities got you in and kept you here. But those qualities alone will no longer be sufficient for the most responsible conduct of your life upon leaving this little hothouse. We know what you know. What neither you nor I know is what you will do with what you know. If wisdom is what a man knows after he has forgotten all he has learned, virtue is what he does with that wisdom. The question is put in the lesson read for us by Tom Cooke: 'Who is wise and understanding among you? *By his good life let him show his works in the meekness of wisdom.*'

Virtue has to do with the quality of life – not just life in general, but your life in particular. It has to do not only

with what you do, but why you do it, and more often than not, it is demonstrated in the ordinary, unexciting, and unsexy side of life. 'The main of life,' as Dr. Johnson tells us, 'is composed of small incidents and petty occurrences.' Tempting though it may be to wait to perform virtuously at a cosmic moment in world affairs, more often than not the test of our character will come, not in the context of some nuclear holocaust or profound moral dilemma, but rather in the ordinary circumstances of living, being, and doing, where the tests are daily, and the results inexorable in their accumulation. The 'good life' has meant for so long for so many the means to indulge one's wants. The 'good life' of the text, on the other hand, has to do not with the quality of your possessions but with the quality of your person. And that is obtained not by a warranty from the Coop, but by modesty, vision, and hard work. In some sense it is a lesson that college cannot teach but that life requires. It therefore remains for you to enterprise virtue not as a luxury or a moral elective, but as an essential ingredient for a civil, gracious, and humane life and world. And you cannot do it alone. That is why you are here in church before the altar of God, where generations before you have acknowledged their needs and prayed to God for strength and courage to meet them.

Harvard has given you much and you much to her, but the one gift we most need to exchange, for the welfare of your future and ours, is what the poet Theodore Morrison calls 'virtue of soul.' You are too proud, and so are we, to acknowledge our needs to the waiting world; but in the privacy of this service and in the presence of God, in these last moments together, we dare to do so, in the fervent hope and firm belief that by His grace our lives might show forth virtue in the meekness of wisdom. It will not be easy, it will take faith in the enterprise, faith in God, and faith in faith – faith that is not 'belief in spite of evidence, but life in scorn of consequences.' I know the world is a fearful and dangerous place, and I know you know those fears. But fear of fear is not enough, for virtue is life lived in spite of fear. It is the means of courage and the hope of salvation. I wish you therefore, my dear friends,

the courage of virtuous living, the sort of living that is described by T.S. Eliot when he writes:

'...Right action is freedom  
From past and future also.  
For most of us, this is the aim  
Never here to be realized;  
Who are only undefeated  
Because we have gone on trying.

Who is wise and understanding among you? By his good life let him show his works in the meekness of wisdom."

If only we all strove to show our works in the meekness of wisdom, how different our country and culture would be.