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E.L. DOCTOROW

My dear graduating seniors. You're about to be released. You've been going to school all your lives and in a few minutes you'll be free. But not until I finish talking to you. I am the last compulsory lecture of your undergraduate careers.

Look at the beautiful composition we all make here today, in our caps and gowns and academic colors, sitting in ranks under the great trees of this college park. We've all composed ourselves this day to celebrate your rite of passage, the ritual of your coming of intellectual age. And the composition is not only one of colors and costumes and banners and light and shade, but a composition also to express what is invisible -- the values we hold, our ideal of the human mind in a state of freedom, and the great glory of the liberal humanist tradition. We are proposing in the composition we make here this morning, the beneficence to each individual of a sane and rational human order in which rank and privilege and wealth and armed might are seen as secondary to the creative achievements of the human intellect. The society of ideas is an open and classless society. Our minds make this composition as a kind of prayer for the progress to enlightenment of the human race.

You are very lucky.

Behind you sit your parents and guardians, weak and gasping from having had to pay for the whole thing.

Behind me sits your distinguished faculty. They look somewhat stunned -- perhaps because they can't believe they have managed to get you here, shining and beautiful in your orderly civilized rows, a mere four years after you arrived as an unruly lot of half educated roughnecks.

And if, during your years of association with them they have seemed at times to possess commanding intellectual presence, and I trust they have, the truth is they are itinerants, like you, having given their lives over to the strange specie grooming that is peculiarly homo sapient --- the painstaking instruction in mind survival to the generations that will succeed theirs.

Each of your teachers has had passionately to tell you something. All together what they have proven is the restlessness of the human imagination as it seeks from its own inventions, art and science and literature and philosophy and mathematics, and from its observations of itself, how it behaves, thinks and acts alone and in community --- altogether it is the imagination's struggle to encompass and represent the truth of life.

What you have thought of as your courses, your majors, the disciplines you've struggled to master, the skills you've learned, are, in fact, the multiple truths of life's elusive beauty. All together they would praise God. This is not simple piety, I express. We all make a composition of life all the time, every day, every moment, in consciousness as in dreams, and we strive to make the composition as morally immense as we can; that's why we have ideals and goals, and that is what, finally, is religious about us.

To create from ourselves is to aspire to the universal creative principle we call God. Our creativity of endeavor is the attempt to understand God. The composition of our lives, our selves, our societ is the attempt to find the design of God's composition.

Now if this is how human beings work, you may ask, how is it possible that things go wrong? For if you open the book of the history of civilizations to any page you will see things going monumentally wrong. I will presume to suggest why:

Things go wrong in the individual in his or her loss of heart for the attempt to find the design in God's composition. Things go wrong in the state in the society's loss of heart for the attempt to find the design in God's composition. It's all too vast, too endless, too perplexing. And we are riddled with demons. The individual's mind closes down. The state's borders close down. In both cases what is put away, or locked away or walled away, is the freedom to keep searching. The smug complacent mind no less than the punitive state abjures freedom. The fervent conviction of one is the national police force of the other. But in one or in the mass, what is finished is the breathtaking search for the design of God's composition. For the truth is seen as already attained, the job as already done.

Insofar as the world goes, we are sitting this morning in a free zone. Insofar as the history of populations goes we are among the incredibly fortunate. Over the centuries the concept of freedom of the mind has been created, fought for, written in blood. It is today twisted, tormented, exiled, suppressed and strung up by the thumbs. It lives on the dying screams of the murdered. You would think no one alive would not hear it every moment. Yet it wavers still and is phantom in the commerce of individuals and the relations of states. Even here, in our own country, we are having trouble with it.

This is serious stuff for a happy day but it is my job to let you know what's been going on while we've been waiting for you.

Did you know we've been waiting for you? From your very first day in kindergarten your mother and father and grandmothers and grandfathers and, in fact, all of us of the generations older than yours have been waiting for you --- for the best instincts of your opened minds, for your rise to the quest of the design in God's composition.

I will cite another writer here to show you these ideas I'm

expressing don't stand alone. The writer is Sherwood Anderson, who wrote about Ohio, as you know, and whose book about a small town in Ohio at the turn of the century that he called Winesburg, is known around the world. In his introduction to that book Sherwood Anderson proposes a theory, not a scientific theory but a mystical historical theory of what happens to people sometimes as they strive to make their compositions. Here is his theory: That all about in the world are many truths and they are all beautiful. Some of these truths are the truth of chastity, and fidelity, the truth of passion and love, of thrift and patriotism, of self reliance and so on. But as people come along and try to make something of themselves they snatch up a truth and make it their own predominating truth. And what happens, says Anderson, is that the moment a person does this, clutches one truth too tightly and to the exclusion of others, the truth he or she embraces becomes a falsehood and he or she becomes a grotesque.

Suppose for instance you believe in saving money, in the virtue of thrift, and you work hard and scrimp and live modestly in order to pay your way through college. And then afterwards you keep saving your money, even after you make a lot of it, and you deny yourself everything for this one truth of thrift and you keep saving and saving and it becomes an end in itself. You've turned the truth of thrift into a falsehood, you've turned into a miser, you've become a grotesque. You see how it works?

Undeniably self-reliance is a great truth and the person who practices it can do no better. But if he embraces self-reliance to the exclusion of other truths -- the truth of generosity to others, trust in others, cooperation, community -- he becomes a grotesque of self-reliance, he practices a kind of individualism which trusts no one, and has no compassion for any one not as well equipped to go through life as he himself. The President of the United States is a great advocate of self-reliance but his embrace of it as a truth has moved him to take away school lunches from needy children, tuition loans from students, legal services for poor people, psychological counselors from Vietnam veterans, social security payments from handicapped people, and so on. You see how it works, this theory?

No matter what truth you can name, it can twist in your hands and become its opposite. Love can become slavery. God can become Satan. The piety that aggrandizes into the claim to know God, to speak for God, to be his exclusive agent as to doctrine on earth, defames God. There are places in the world where the unsurpassed virtue of the love and fear of God becomes the justification for killing others who believe in their form of God. I think you realize what I'm getting at. In history, more often than not, people carry in their minds the creative search for the universal design just so far. Then they cannot sustain it any longer. The mind cries out for peace. The nation calls for order. And it all closes down. Beautiful compositions of shining young faces under the

trees in a college park in central Ohio become images of renewal, of intellectual ardor, of reborn freedom of mind.

As you may have suspected, I worry about the way things are going in our country now. What truth that we cherish is becoming in our clutching embrace its opposite? Is it the truth of patriotism? There are people in power now for whom disagreement or dissent cannot be loyal. To disagree, to oppose, to contend, becomes, in the minds of those in power, de facto support of communism. The National Council of Churches, in a news report just last week in the New York Times was said by its advocacy of a change in our Central American policy to be espousing "anti-Americanism." That was in a news story. You can feel things shutting down. There is these days a great pressure to conform. The argument of certain presumably intellectual voices now heard across the land is that anyone who is dissatisfied with any aspect of our government should just look at how bad things are in the Soviet Union and fall down on his or her knees with gratitude. Their theory is that America can no longer afford from its citizens anything but the most steadfast and resolute affirmation of national policy -- however stupid, selfish, murderous and insane it may be. Their argument is that the American people should honor the right of free speech by refusing to exercise it.

I wish it were not necessary to talk about these things. But we are gathered here not in substance but in illusion, if we don't understand the heritage we carry to affirm the existence of a complex multifaceted universe that sustains more than one idea at a time. The true enemy, as always, is what is simplistic, the reduction of truths to half truths, or many truths to one, the claim, from this urgency or that national security say, that enlightenment is already here, or that in any event we have not the leisure for it. Who but an educated citizenry will assume the stewardship of ambiguity, hypothesis, trial and error, open-mindedness, that is essential to a democracy? Who else will detect the sliding into non-thought from thought of our leaders, when they say, for example, that a national demonstration of Americans against nuclear arms proliferation is a production of the KGB -- or that the officers of Hitler's S.S. were as much victims of Nazism as the Jews they tortured, gassed, burned and buried alive? Who else will perceive that the truth of anti-communism, too rabid in adherence, becomes morally disfiguring -- as when it causes us to proclaim the advance of human rights in some tormented little country because last year the government death squads raped murdered and mutilated 3,000 peasants and students and teachers and priests and nuns, and this year only 2,999? And that in any event the dead are spared life under a totalitarian dictatorship?

Someone has lost heart. Someone is afraid of freedom. I think that is fairly clear. And I wonder why this is happening in the 1980's that we are grasping the truth of America so tightly, squeezing so hard, that her nature is changing and we are in danger of becoming, as a nation, grotesque. So that in our foreign policy we would carry forward our

ideal of democracy and self-determination to Nicaragua with armed terrorists run by the CIA.

Today we are in danger of becoming hideous to ourselves. More and more, debate and dissent is giving way to silence and conformity. More and more we hear language that shifts the ground from under our feet, and erases history, and defames truth. Why does this have to be? What is the reason, why is this the momentum in our country?

It is possible that forty years of cold war and the nurture of bombs cannot have left the American national mind undamaged. Two grave dangers confront the embattled mind: One is that it will succumb to the enemy. The other is that it will prevail by taking on the enemy's characteristics. It is possible we are intending to substitute for the great streaming mind-search of all our arts and sciences and scholarship and diplomacy and invention a statist reality with its own culture, its own ethos, just as with only two digits, a one and a zero, the vast but always binary operations of the computer are designed to mimic the infinite possibilities of the human mind.

It is possible we are becoming the people of the bomb.

The bomb is becoming our single truth, the looming tyrannical shape of our national composition. So that we design it and build it and redesign it and rebuild it and ship it and distribute it around the world. And our obsession is to mine it and engineer it and cast it and assemble it and aim it and make money and careers in it.

I would not be honoring you and this occasion if I did not admit these ideas into this beautiful day. There are green meadows as pretty as these Gambier lawns where concrete silos and their missiles lie in upright burial like the totems, the artifacts, of some insane primitive fantasy. Perhaps your parents, some of them, may think I am laying an awful burden on you on this day, that should be so happy and triumphant. But tell them when you speak to them that you can handle it. I can see in your eyes that you can handle it. You are triumphant. You got this far, didn't you? After all, your graduation today is a triumph over sloth, procrastination, panic, beer, unrequited love, requited love, and hackysack. Who says you can't handle the national destiny?

In fact all you have to do is be of strong heart and clear eye. Grotesquerie is not all that difficult to recognize. What Sherwood Anderson doesn't say in his theory is that the grotesque causes suffering. But he does show this in the stories of the people of Winesburg, whose unquestioned premises of life lead them into misery and death. He does show the suffering that falsehood brings. And if you have courage and do not turn away, suffering is not all that difficult to see.

You know I'm sure the poem of W. H. Auden's called "Musee de Beaux Arts". Auden, the great English poet who visited Kenyon, as all poets eventually do. In this poem he talks about suffering, particularly how

the great painters of old understood it in their paintings. And the Poet is looking at paintings in a museum and he says:

About suffering they were never wrong  
The old masters: how well they understood  
Its human position; how it takes place  
While someone else is eating or opening a window  
or just walking dully along;  
...that even the dreadful martyrdom must run its  
Course  
Anyhow in a corner, some untidy spot  
Where the dogs go on with their doggy life and  
the torturer's horse  
Scratches its innocent behind on a tree.

So what I'm saying to you is this: each generation strives to make the composition of life true and more accurate to God than history before has made it. You have learned here, whether you know it or not, the difference between authentic thought and cant, between the valid proposition and the fraudulent, between rational thought and honest perception on the one hand and oversimplification and intellectual flummery on the other. You are endowed with the spirit of this place. Down the road or up the hill from Winesburg Ohio is Gambier Ohio. Don't forget that. Keep the light in your brain. Don't close it down. And to yourself, quietly vow, as you make your beautiful way into the world and pursue your dreams, never to become--with regard to suffering, with regard to the human position of suffering, with regard to martyrdom -- vow never, never, to become a horse's behind.

I have every confidence in you. And I congratulate you. From up here, I have to say, you all look very fair and beautiful to me. Your parents are proud of you, your teachers are proud of you, Kenyon College is proud of you and let me say too I am proud of you. God bless you all.

