

Installation of a president: 1969

The pomp and pageantry of medieval England flowered in all its splendor Monday night at the installation of Dr. Max Wyman as the President of the University of Alberta.

The Jubilee Auditorium was adorned with flowers and a full military regalia provided a heart-rending edition of O Canada and a musical interlude for the grand and glorious march of the robed procession.

After a long series of "official greetings", during which Dr. Wyman read his program and seemed totally oblivious to the "honors" being bestowed on him by government, administration and student representatives, the new president began his inaugural address.

An edited version of the president's speech is printed here because it is in part his hopeful blueprint for what he as an individual would honestly like to see this university and society espouse.

However, Dr. Wyman, no matter how humanistic an individual he may be, is himself pigeonholed into a societal role which forces him to perpetuate the very system he has such harsh criticism for.

So we cannot agree when he says "it is man who has failed, not the system," that "all systems are variations of one system."

May Wyman has presented the good liberal statement that "the world has left their (the oppressed) problems unsolved for far too long."

And he has brought a certain amount of order to his own house with "my truth, a truth I am not willing to impose on any other living human being."

But just where do we draw that line, Max? The line between "imposing" on others what you know in your very soul to be as close to truth as you can come, and rearing up to shout "No, no more, we have gone the route, the bus stops here, this is where we stand and this is where we will fall if need be." It is a very important line, Mr. President. Good luck.

Tonight it is my intention to share with you my philosophy of life, and my understanding of concepts like knowledge, truth, freedom and dissent.

Each man seeks a truth that is true for all mankind, but discovers a truth that is true for him alone. As each man dies, the truth he discovered dies with him. Each generation seeks a truth which is true for all generations, but discovers a truth which is true for that generation.

As each generation finds its truth, it destroys the truth of all of its predecessors. This truth that each generation finds for itself we call knowledge.

All knowledge is a lie

Since knowledge is the creation of man, it reflects every imperfection contained in man himself, including that of mortal life. Knowledge endures for only one generation, and the knowledge of all previous generations is placed among the mythologies of man. All knowledge is a lie. It is nothing more and nothing less than a tautology of the assumptions each generation arbitrarily chooses to make.

Let me illustrate by playing the role of the late Harry Houdini. I challenge any person in this room to prove, without making any assumptions, that it is the same sun which rises every morning, not a different one. I challenge any person in this room to disprove, without making any assumptions, that thunder is caused by a war among the gods.

If these challenges are accepted, it will be found that without assumptions nothing is capable of proof, and with assumptions any answer to any question can be obtained.

The dropping of an atomic bomb on Hiroshima was a dramatic but tragic way to illustrate to the world the awesome power possessed by knowledge. The landing of two men on the moon was an equally dramatic, but much more acceptable way to illustrate to the world the way hundreds of thousands of people can cooperate through knowledge to accomplish a common goal. Although knowledge should be respected for what it can accomplish, it must not be worshipped. This would be idolatry in which man worships his own creation.

Starting with Newton, the theories developed by the physical sciences have become successively more sophisticated, and increasingly more complicated. The big idea which will revolutionize these sciences will come but once in a hundred years. There is no generation gap in the physical sciences. People working in these fields are content to study, understand, and develop the big ideas of those "whom the gods love," men like Newton, Einstein, and Heisenberg, because such ideas are exciting, because their relevance is beyond question.

But the situation in the social sciences is quite different. These disciplines have not provided solutions to the sociological problems which have plagued mankind from the beginning of time.

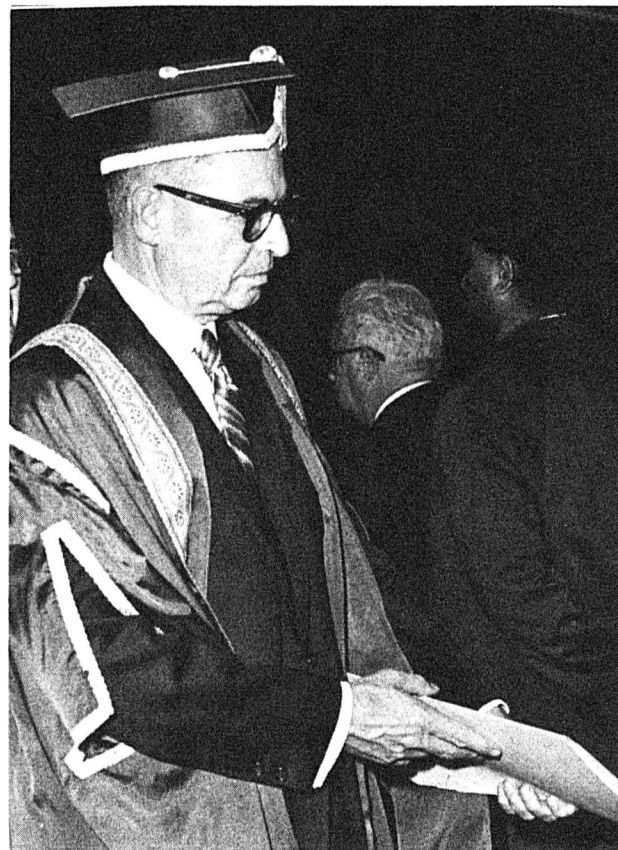
I have never seen, for example, a satisfactory definition of what it means to give significant help to people with a different culture, without destroying their culture. Whatever the reason for this failure to date, these disciplines must now provide these solutions, and they must come soon. Time is running out.

An understanding of the limitations of knowledge should

enable a nation to welcome dissent for the right reasons. A nation should not accept the agonies of dissent because of some sanctimonious desire to prove in a patronizing way its tolerance of other points of view.

A nation, knowing that its own knowledge is a lie, should listen to the voice of dissent because it might be the first voice of the future.

No matter how repugnant the message of dissent may be to a particular generation, this lonely voice of one generation may become the majority voice of a future generation.



—Forrest Bard photo

"IN DISSENSION THERE IS STRENGTH"

—President Max Wyman

eration. A nation that stifles all dissent can experience only a past and present. Such a nation has no future.

Some sincere people believe in anarchy on the basis that man, without restraints, will by inclination follow a course of natural justice. The evidence of man's inhumanity to man is too overwhelming for me to accept an anarchist faith.

I expect of course to be free to breathe the air which surrounds us. However, a freedom to breathe a poisonous atmosphere is hardly a freedom worth having, and I, therefore, want restraints to ensure the fundamental freedom involved.

If there are to be restraints, some group must decide upon those restraints, and that group must be granted an authority above that of the individual. If there is to be a higher authority, there must be a highest authority, an ultimate authority from whose decisions there will be no appeal. A wise ultimate authority must keep a balance between maximizing the freedom of the individual and, avoiding, by restraint, tyrannies which are known to exist.

The tyranny of the generations

At the moment, the eyes of the world are focused on the tyranny of the generations, a tyranny against which young people always rebel. No generation has the right to enshrine its sacred principles in a constitution which will impose these principles on all future generations. To attempt to do so would surely sow the seeds of future revolutions.

A nation must make room for the martyr, must make room for the radical, must make room for the future, and in our zeal to protect dissent, it should not be overlooked that there must always be room for the majority. When the freedoms to be protected and the tyrannies to be avoided are totalled, then the only conclusion I can make is that the nation of each generation must be the ultimate authority on all matters pertaining to that generation.

There are unwise laws and unjust laws. Discrimination and poverty exist for everyone to see. Although some people conclude that the system is destructive and should be destroyed, my conclusion is different. It is man who has failed, not the system. All systems are variations of one

system. The success or failure of any system will depend on the wisdom of the people using the system.

Millions of people are being strangled by the bonds of discrimination and poverty, and for these people there will be no escape in their lifetime. These are people who can find, within the confines of their life experience, no reason to live, let alone reasons to respect anything.

Can we, who have lived in relative affluence every day of our lives, give a satisfactory answer to the disadvantaged peoples of the world if they ask, "Why should I respect law and order?"

I think not.

Before words of condemnation come from our lips, the nations of the world should first answer the question "Why are there so many people who have no reason to respect my law and my order?"

I would like to direct my remaining words to the young people of my generation. There is no hope that my generation will understand you, because you seek to destroy us, and you will successfully complete that destruction.

Someday you will be called on to assess, for the history of the development of man, the success and failure of my generation. It will be interesting to see how your assessment will differ from mine.

My generation is man's most fruitful

My generation is the most fruitful generation in the history of man. My generation was the first generation to look inside the atom and to find there the indeterminism Heisenberg, and destroy the deterministic world of Newton and Einstein. This was an exciting discovery whose harvest has yet to be reaped.

My generation was the first generation to land a man on the moon, something our scientific fathers proved completely to their satisfaction was beyond the capacity of man.

My generation was the first generation to raise the level of the life sciences to that of the physical sciences, and extended the productive life of man by many years.

My generation was the first generation to crack the genetic code, and the possibility for the creation of life and of eternal life is now something more than a vision.

Lest my generation become arrogant, let me remind my generation that they were the first generation to create an instrument which could destroy the world, and there is now no hope that my generation will create the social instrument to prevent that destruction.

My generation has increased the economic gap between the have and have-not nations, and my generation will leave a legacy of millions of illiterate and starving people.

My generation claimed it was a pacifist generation, and yet it fought a Second World War, and, indeed, my generation has never known a day of peace during its whole history. I shall not apologize, however, for my generation.

We set sail on that vast sea of the unknown, and our only compass was the groping of the blind. The miracle is that we accomplished so much, not that we failed so often. It was not that we did not care, it was not that we did not try, but we just did not know how.

No better worlds, just different ones

I wish I could tell you that the realization of the dream of anarchy is just over the horizon, but I can't. The evidence of man's inhumanity to man is too overwhelming for me to believe that as one generation passes into the next, we move from one world to a better world.

All that can be said is that we move from one world to a different world.

If you now believe that I am pessimistic or a prophet of doom, then you are wrong. I have found that truth which is true for me alone, and this truth is contained in a simple prayer. The words resemble these:

God grant me the courage to change the things I can and should change.

God grant me the patience to endure the things which which should be changed, and which lie beyond my power to change.

God grant me the wisdom to distinguish between the two.

This is my truth, a truth I am not willing to impose on any other living human being. I do not believe in a missionary zeal which would enable me to force my light on those who cannot or will not see.

My truth has brought me a measure of happiness and a measure of content in this mad mad world which refuses to be brought back to sanity.

I say this without guilt and with the complete knowledge that the words which have come from my lips would have been quite different if my skin had been red or black. They would have been still different if I had lived all the days of my years in squalor and beneath the level of human dignity.

My words would have fallen as meaningless phrases on the ears of a mother whose only interest in life is to seek a piece of bread with which to still the agonies of hunger in her starving children.

The world in which I have lived all my life is non-existent for these people.