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Beardsley (Minnesota) High School Commencement Address (May 28, 1970)

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“Perceptions of Reality: OR What I Have to Do to Understand You and What You Have to Know to Understand Me”

Congratulations and Listen.

Fellow students—Congratulations. I’m sure that most of you are quite excited and restless. For those of you who can’t get yourself to listen to one more speech, here is what I will talk about. My point will be that we have to try to understand the other person. First, it’s a great time for you-- whether you are now graduating, a parent, a friend or a neighbor—to try to understand the other person . Whether you think he’s old fashioned and not with it, a kooky smar aleck kid, a guy who’s naïve and thinks he know it all. We have a lot that’s good in the country. But we probably can’t retain it and improve [the present situation of present danger and violence] unless we restore a level of trust and willingness to bend.

These times are dangerous, exciting, and potentially fulfilling.

We have life in Beardsley; I don’t know whether it’s like Morris. For my wife and my family, it’s quite a change from the hurly burly of New York City, where we come from. But while rural Minnesota may be changing slowly, the world around us does not wait. [Today] there is the involvement in Vietnam, killings and mass demonstrations in Kent State and Jackson State. We land a man on the moon, We worry about pollution, the population bomb and the nuclear bomb. We are anxious both about our personal lives, and the bigger community.

Different groups see things differently from each other, don’t they?

Let’s look at 3 characters that I made up, useful composites , perhaps not of Beardsley but increasingly conflicted even in rural areas—to illustrate how groups see, think differently.

Take Tom Phillips. He’s 18, graduating, although he thought he’d never made it. He sees himself in a doom environment: the nuclear bomb,t he population bomb, the draft and the Vietnam war, pollution. He’s frustrated, about being preached to, about his long hair, sex, about how he has to go to college. He can’t understand how we could be six years in an undeclared war with 40,000 deaths, 250 thousand wounded in a far-off war in Vietnam, [with the] president sending troops into Cambodia, the killings in colleges, the demonstrators who are not being listened to. He wants to live now, to fly. He doesn’t care to learn that much about the past; he is increasingly suspicious about American claims to equality, justice and progress as he learns more about many instance s of denials of justice, through school books and television. He’s not sure what he wants, what he’s going to do, although he’s sure that it’s not going to be what he his father did.

Take his dad, John Phillips. Here he’s worked all his life for his family. He grew up during the Depression and he still remembers what it means to go without. He fought in World War II, and was fighting for freedom against Nazism. When Old Glory goes by, it stirs him; he love his country and can’t for the life of him understand these long-haired demonstrators who burn their draft cards, accuse the US of imperialism, forget about the injustices in other societies, expect all evils to be eliminated in America. His son thinks he knows more about foreign policy than the President; His son lives for today. He can go to college, an opportunity the father would have given sweat for, but doesn’t appreciate it; he says there’s no freedom in America, and maybe we should tear down the system, and start over.

Take Betty Phillips (the Mom). She lives in a small town, thank goodness, not in the big urban areas where it's not safe in the streets, where there is mugging, rioting, burning, free sex, "blacks" living next to you. She doesn't know what the world is coming to. Her children will be leaving the small town and going to the big cities. Her secure world seems to be collapsing. She can't understand why the young are turning away from religion, and toward the drug scene, and espousing violence.

These are just 3 examples of how each of us looks at the reality.

The American Legionier, the college teacher, the housewife, the merchant, the student may look at the same things, but what they see seems so different: One group sees murderous repression of college students at Kent State. Another group sees a tragedy caused by the outrageous excesses of college disrupters. One group may see our involvement in Vietnam as an unfortunate but necessary one, to ensure against Communism tyranny. Another group views it as enlarging the killing of Asian and Americans without involving American security, and without ensuring any extension of freedom. One group sees drug-taking as a dangerous game of Russian roulette which cripples. Another sees it as a mind-expanding, exciting adventure and not nearly as dangerous as the alarmist older generation of drinkers and pill-takes claim. One group sees sex before marriage as a voluntary, beautiful experience; another sees it as morally sinful, and sometimes a disaster, harming a young couple for the rest of their lives.

If we look around us, throughout the nation, the hostility among groups, the generation and culture gaps, seem to be growing. There is less willingness to listen to the other person. There is an escalation of fear, frustration, anger. The danger of growing violence spreads; and the benefits of such violence will surely be less certain than its disasters.

It is in the interests of all of us to try to reduce our hostilities. We share a common bond of fear; we should recognize that however the gigantic wrongs that still exist in America, the opportunities here, the material well-being, the level of free choice is far above other societies of the population-size and diversity—Our very complex society, no matter its shortcomings, seems preferable to one which would come through internal violence on the streets.

How do we reduce our feelings of anger and hostility?

We have to be willing to try to listen. Put yourself in the place of some person who you can't figure out. Understand his experiences, who he associates with, the events that formed his life. Respect him enough to hear him out. (You may strongly disagree with what he says). And within your own family, try to comprehend and appreciate each other's experiences, disappointments, fears, hopes.

Bend where you can, but certainly not in your moral principles. Don't preach. You'll just get red in the face. Let's face it. High school graduates are adults, like it or not. They have new ideas, and offer other generations new challenges. Let's recognize also that former generations did pretty well in settling and developing America. They have lived through depressions and wars, and are eager for their children's happiness. Whatever the group or generation we are in, each of us must continue to learn and contribute. We are not justified in assuming that our peers, our thinking, is automatically right; every group goes through an environment which shapes him. Keep in mind that ideals, brains, true facts—the reality- and moral rectitude are not the sole possession of any particular group. We have much to learn from each other.

Learning involves a greater recognition for some of us, of the huge gaps that still exist between America's claims of justice and equality, and the reality. Commitments to reducing the substantial poverty, terrible housing, injustice in the courts, that may well exist for millions should be part of a new vigorous and honest communication. Otherwise the credibility gap will also increase in dimension.

I hope that as each of us leaves this evening, he will think about some of the very real problems concerning our needs and our dreams. I trust that we will not be put coals upon the fires of our growing hostilities but rather work toward reducing them. Frankly, I am quite worried about an escalation of anger and despair, and violence. We all we will all be losers if it comes to be. It need not come. But we must now work hard to try to prevent it.