

to listen. If you finish your job before
I finish mine, I hope you won't tell me.

ADDRESS TO GRADUATES

I feel not unlike the crochety fairy godmother who usually turns up at events like this: the coming-of-age of princes and princesses. She usually fulminates around the festive chamber awhile, raises a little hell about the seating arrangements, drops a gloomy warning or two about the world in general and these royal children in particular, and then--once her feathers have settled--offers a gift. Well, fasten your seatbelts, kiddies, 'cause here I am!

It's not an easy gift you receive at graduation--nor are the rites of initiation easy. The gift is the freedom to wrestle with the world as men and women.

Make no mistake. There are obstacles--trolls and ogres and demons, lurking like mutant highwaymen around the bends in your road. They are obstacles that will make your innocent idealism and self-confidence shudder, obstacles that will prove to you that knowledge is only the first step to wisdom. They will give the real test to what you've done--or not done--here. And the battles you wage with them will not be such simple and dramatic tests as a basketball game or an opening night or the College Boards--because the battlefield will be in the silence of your own soul, and it is single combat to the death. But the prize is your fulfillment as a human being.

The gift you receive, then, is freedom. The alternative is slavery. The obstacle is inertia. And the price is thinking.

First, the gift is freedom.

But let's be clear from the beginning about what the gift is. Freedom is not total independence. For one thing, I can guarantee that you will not be free henceforth from the law of gravity or from being five-ten or from the last eighteen years of your experience. You will not be free from death. And yet, despite your protestations to the contrary, no one really even wants TOTAL freedom. You want only a kind of freedom from your

parents, because you don't want freedom from Dad's car keys or Mom's wallet. You want only a kind of freedom from societal structures, because you won't want freedom from garbagemen and firemen and freeways. You want only a partial freedom from the demands of others, because you are not unwilling to fall in love--and when you fall in love you freely surrender a part of your freedom to the one you love; you willingly open yourself to be taken advantage of; you sign blank checks. No, no one really wants to be totally free.

The gift we give you at graduation is rather an act of trust--first that you are mature enough to handle an enlarged scope to your choices, and second that you are mature enough to foresee and live with the consequences of your choices. I can claim to be free and a mature person only insofar as I claim full responsibility for what I say and what I do. If you say, "Well, how could you expect me to be any different with parents like mine?" you have admitted by those very words that you are not ready to be free.

Without a realization of one's self, summed up, known and accepted as a person, life is just onedamnthingafteranother--one mannerism, one pose, one meaningless and unrelated "kick" after another. Only a man or woman can be free, because only a man or woman can know the person, the self, which unifies all his experiences.

One obstacle to this unity and integrity is our double-mindedness--in the same instant both wanting--and not wanting--contradictory alternatives. We stand in the yellow wood, longing in vain to travel both roads and be one traveler, unwilling to realize that freely to choose one road always means freely to reject all the others.

Paradoxically, it is these rejections and sacrifices which give you freedom. Because you know who you are and what you want and why you want it, you do choose one road rather than another. You are suddenly free to take one road, whereas before your silly desire to have both left you unfree to take either.

The gift is freedom--but it is a paradoxical gift. It is the freedom in some degree to complete your freedom.

Second, the alternative is slavery.

Dostoevsky's Grand Inquisitor says that there is no gift a man or woman will more freely part with than freedom, and no matter what we say--it is surprising how often his statement is true. What would we part with, for instance, to attain the instant Plastic Paradise promised by the Sirens of Madison Avenue? Some of us actually struggle to become "The Unknown Citizen" who holds the proper opinions for the time of year and against whom there is no official complaint. We read the same newspapers, file the same reports, ride the same buses, watch with Buddhist concentration the same inane T.V. programs and commercials, wear the same uniforms--whether they be grey flannel suits or levis--take the same standardized and standardizing tests.

The core creed of this enslaving paradise is that, given the magic touch, any man or woman can be guaranteed an Endless Summer, inevitable luxuries, irresistible sexual powers, uninterrupted inertia. The electronic baby sitter has brainwashed you far more than any teacher or parent or priest. And look at its evangelistic promises: a fountain of youth in every bottle, spray can, chassis, flip-top box. So, with the witless obedience of slaves, many of us--daily more desperately--crave not challenge, not risk, not the freedom to create what we are tomorrow from what we really are today, but rather odorous- and acne-free comfort and acceptance, at minimum cost, and with a lifetime guarantee. We are willing to expend passionate degrees of energy in order to look cool and careless.

But what of the lonely struggles by which men and women have always wrested their dignity from an uncompromising earth? What indeed? What happens to humanity when every mystery can be handily reduced to a problem which can be analyzed, computed, solved and filed away--even love, even patriotism, even people, even God? The price for this convenience is quite high. To change mysteries into problems, love must be reduced to sex, patriotism to taxes, people to sociological statistics, and God to a cosmic

gas bubble. Anything intangible will not compute; therefore, we just jettison the intangibles--and with them, humanity. In exchange, science has promised that, given time, no problem is insoluble--for loneliness there is television, for self-pity there are pills and pot and booze, and for one's struggle toward adulthood there is eternal childishness.

And every day we tote-dat-barge-lift-dat-bale to reach the painless Utopia--heaven, not in some distant time or place, but just around the corner, here, now! But where is it? Sadly, this decade's Pepsi Generation inevitably becomes the next decade's Pepto Generation.

Therefore, in angry disillusionment with the Myth of Progress, there is today a silent revolution. In the 60's they threw bombs; in the 70's you are much more polite about it. Sensing, like Hansel and Gretel, that there is really a witch lurking inside the homogenized gingerbread paradise, many young people long to break out of the smothering plastic and plunge themselves into communion with the dynamic energy deep beneath the surfaces--an aliveness, a freshness-deep-down-things, which may indeed be God.

As a fellow idealist, I rejoice at their aims, but as one who has learned too often how inaccessible perfection is, I am apprehensive about their success. I can't help but wonder, for instance, if--in fear of slavery to the System--they have not enslaved themselves to an Aquarian Establishment, with its own uniforms, saints, devils, sins. I can't see how wearing cruddy clothes mocks the System, especially when most of them have Sears Roebuck labels. I'm troubled by the fact that the most hasidic Aquarians often burn their draft cards but never burn their Social Security cards. I can't see how puffing a joint or popping a pill sets one truly free unless he can achieve the same insight and freedom without them. I can't see how it is any more conformist to shave off a beard because one's employer demands it, than it is silently to rebel just because everyone else is silently rebelling. The difference is not between conformity and rebellion but between thinking and unthinking. Unfortunately, the less one knows the more certain he

can be--that he is right and the old fogies are wrong. "Many men would rather die than think. Most of them do."

And so, like Aesop's donkey, you get trapped between the promises of two Utopias, more or less free to choose either, and yet unable to surrender the values of one for the values of the other. And knowing, deep down, that Utopias inevitably diminish human dignity.

The gift is freedom, but it is a mixed blessing. The alternative is slavery--but an appealing slavery.

And third, the obstacle to freedom is not external structures but our own inertia and fear of thinking.

Newton knew as much about men as he did about apples when he declared the first law of his physics: any body at rest or in motion will tend to stay at rest or in motion unless affected by some external force. The law of inertia is as true of the human spirit as it is of the planets.

Standing at the final edge of adolescence, we all want to dive into freedom, maturity, commitment, responsibility. It looks so inviting. And we stand there at the edge, "Here I come! One, two, three...78, 79...." We long for someone to push us in. "Why didn't someone make me study? Why didn't someone compel me to become involved?" No. We wouldn't. Because even then we couldn't violate your inner freedom.

Nor will anyone now be able to force your inner freedom, partly of course because many won't give a damn whether you commit yourself or not. There are laws outside these walls: mind your own business; don't bother me and I won't bother you; good fences make good neighbors.

Some of you kept saying, "I'll wait till graduation. I'll wait till college." Well, that time is here, and you find that maturity does not turn on automatically like a thermostat with the issuance of a diploma--any more than it did when you received your driver's license, that all-purpose "proof" of maturity.

With such postponement of risk, it is no wonder that class has been boring, church has been boring, work has been boring--because there has been

none of one's self in them. They have been worth nothing because they have cost nothing. And all the while freedom is asking, "Who if not you? When if not now?"

Freedom is the gift; slavery is the alternative; inertia is the obstacle...

And the price is thinking.

Difficult as it may be for your parents to accept, you will be free when you go away to college to have hair down to your knees, to drink till three, to ignore church, to indulge in casual sex. At this moment, when you receive that freedom, it might be well to ask yourself if you will also be free to have short hair, free to work in silence, free to go to church, free to indulge in chastity. The System is not the only tyrant waiting for you. You realized long ago that the tyranny of one's peers also demands a kind of slavery in return for acceptance. When, after all, does the price of belonging become too high?

Ultimately all slaveries come down to one: the slavery of unthinking. There is no one less free than the man enslaved to his own unexamined opinions. The one who wants things settled once for all, the one who rejects books and wrestling ideas onto paper, the one who prefers his own initial whims to the effort of thinking is already running blindly into slavery with open arms.

This search for freedom and fulfillment is hard and exhausting--and it lasts one's whole lifetime. It's sad how many avoid it. And I wonder, in the end, if we really mean it when we say we want to think for ourselves--or do we just like talking about wanting it?

The old witch has one more gift--a wish. As you struggle forward through this beautiful and dangerous world you have inherited, half-blindly contacting only the surfaces of some things, fearful of drowning in the mysteries of others, I pray that when you come to the end and see--no longer in a mirror, darkly, but face to face, you will be able to cry out: "Oh, my God! It was you all the time! "

Godspeed.

Rev. William O'Malley, S.J.
St. Xavier High School
June 1, 1976