Pieces of Eight

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Commencement Address: The 'Splendid Torch' of Service

By William Friday

President Emeritus, University of North Carolina

T is good to be here. But I must confess I came with a bit of anxiety. What does one who graduated 58 years ago have to say to the last graduating class of the 20th Century? My first thought was how ancient that sounds— 58 years ago! My former colleague Jay Jenkins summed us up this way:

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We were before frisbees, frozen food, Xerox and the Kinsey

ingly unconcerned over the hurt we may cause another. We tolerate vulgarity in our culture to a degree unheard of a quarter of a century ago. Election campaigns seek to destroy individual candidates rather than to illuminate issues. Indeed, we too often confuse manufactured celebrities as authentic American heroes. What has happened to the tradition of "courtesy"-good manners, if you will, and to decency and respect, so long the hallmark of Southern living? We want and expect serious and intense debate and vigorous discussion of all issues-of such is our democratic society. But please put on your personal agenda a sustained effort to restore the quality of grace to human relationships and thereby insure fair play and decency one to another in our democratic process. It is a much more enjoyable and useful way to live. Soon you will encounter a tough assignment at work. This is exhilarating, because the discipline you gain from steady, daily effort helps you focus your own life and thought toward objectives increasingly meaningful to you. Therefore, my second request is that early on in your career, take the time and energy to be enriched by bonding with your children and your family. There is no more powerful, sustaining force than the love of family, and restoring the family as the center of our culture is urgent and critical to the future of our country. Always remember this: there never is a time when unbridled ambition or obsession with work should come ahead of this primary responsibility.

Poverty is always being on the edge of good things going on. You are never allowed to join in—you don't ask—even for the events that are free—you just stand in the shadows and accept. That is the worst poverty of all—acceptance. For you see, poverty is the color of a bruise—it's a birthmark on your soul.

One million of our fellow citizens exist this way each day in North Carolina and, to our shame, 400,000 are children. Political rhetoric has not clothed, fed, cured, taught, or trained one single North Carolinian living under these conditions. Poverty and ill health and literacy do not wear a Republican or Democratic label. Rather, they reveal dramatically our sense of economic justice and our sense of moral accountability as a state. I share these thoughts to ask you to respond to the compassion that lies within your heart and lead North Carolina in providing a sense of wellbeing to these fellow citizens. And let us be about this task now for these citizens deserve the opportunity for a better life to qualify themselves to be a part of the work force industry needs right now. William Penn put it this way:

Report. We had never heard of radar, credit cards and ballpoint pens, yogurt and Ann Landers. In our day, you mowed grass and pot was something you cooked in. For a nickel you could make a phone call, buy a Pepsi or mail a letter and two postcards. We got married and then lived together—how quaint we were!

More recently, our generation has been the subject of a best-selling book by Tom Brokaw. He called us the "Greatest Generation" because of experiences he had visiting the beaches of Normandy on the 40th and 50th anniversaries of our military landing there. He used generous terms, but we had our failures and our failings. But he is correct in marking us in a different generation. And this is true because of two events early in our lives that had much to do with who we became.

First, we were all raised during the Great Depression, and this was an experience like no other in teaching one to live with adversity. Suppose, for example, when you go to your new job your pay would be 18 cents an hour and you had to work 56 hours during the week with Saturday afternoon off. We did. And you were in a city where every bank closed, most of the businesses shut down, and people got in line to get food to eat. We experienced that too. The Great Depression taught frugality, and it taught selfreliance. You learned not to wish for too much, if anything, and to make do with what you had. Upon finishing high school during those years, some of us were lucky enough to get a scholarship to go to college. And on graduation day, in 1941, many of my classmates literally walked off the stage straight into a military career and into World War II-the second event of our early years. This involvement lasted for four, if not five, years, and for some of my classmates-it was forever. We were not heroes, because everyone else in our generation was doing the same thing. We were different because these kinds of experiences made us grow older ahead of our time. Somehow material things did not matter that much because very few of us could own them. A Depression and a war had a way of sorting our personal priorities for us. We learned how much we loved our family and to take responsibility for yourself and for your own action and to think about such things as duty, honor, and justice in our society and love of country. As Mr. Brokaw reports, my generation has seen and has been a part of the arrival of the jet engine and the space age, the dramatic extension of the life span, of computers, digital transmission, the age of technology, and the emergence of the global community. This has been a period of vastly accelerating change with much left to be done and much left to understand.

Thirdly, it is especially important that you and your generation renew the once honored tradition of public service in America. Feel deeply about the common good and give back to the society that has nurtured you. Build the quality of life you wish for yourself, for your family, and for your community. Another has said: "When good people stay away and do not act, bad things happen in our society." It is our duty to be instruments of positive change. To be a successful and constructive force for change requires integrity and character, simply because there is no other way to have the essential personal freedom to act. How you live as a private citizen and the integrity manifested in your every day life have everything to do with the kind of leader you will become. And it is that sense of inner peace and self-confidence that sustains you when crisis comes, as it surely will.

I shall pass this way but once. Any good that I can do, or any kindness that I can show, let me do it now. Let me not defer or neglect, for I shall not pass this way again.

Underpinning all efforts to correct these debilitating conditions affecting so many is the absolute necessity of greater educational opportunity through continued improvement of our schools. I believe in public schools; much good work is going on there. We know also what steps to take for further improvement. While we debate the range and scope of new developments, I fervently hope that we will not resort to legalized gambling by installing a lottery as part of our state's financial structure. Surely, the North Carolina that could reduce taxes by more than \$1.2 billion during the last five years will not now legislate this new, implicit tax that will impact the poor of the state more dramatically than any other group of citizens. Tom Brokaw was kind to my generation, although we fell short many times in doing what we knew to be right. But we did believe deeply, as I know you do, in the personal freedoms our Constitution guarantees to all of us. We believed in one another, and we believed that our nation and what it represented was worth fighting for and-in years of peace-worth working for to make it better. So it has been that we have spent our lives.

A ay I share a personal experience with you that af-IVL fected my life? When I left university administration a decade ago, I knew of the great progress our state had made, how much change had occurred and how much the economy had improved. Like you, I was, and I remain, very proud of this progress. It was when I became a volunteer worker in poverty, in rural economic development, in literacy, and in improving the delivery of health care that I discovered the other North Carolina. I visited food kitchens, homeless shelters, rural health clinics, and adult education classes. I had conversations with men, women, and children-Afro-Americans, Whites, and Native Americans who found themselves in economic and personal circumstances that they did not create and which they could not control. They were living in poverty. It is one thing to read statistics about them; it is quite another to meet these people face-to-face and feel their loss of self-respect, their loss of hope, their sense of despair.

Bernard Shaw said it for us with these words:

I want to be thoroughly used up when I die, for the harder I work, the more I live. I rejoice in life for its own sake. Life is no "brief candle" to me. It is a sort of a splendid torch which I have got hold of for the moment, and I want to make it burn as brightly as possible before handing it on to future generations.

E ast Carolina University believes you are ready to take hold of that splendid torch this morning. Through the years to come, remember and support this place and especially the members of this faculty and administration who have given so much to you and to our state. Keep this university ever vigilant, ever vital, and above all, keep it free of hostile forces from within and without. Keep it ever the servant of all the people, and return here time and again to renew your own sense of purpose and dedication and your commitment to a better society.

So out of that generation, I reach across this half century to extend you every good wish, every hope, our abiding confidence in your future. Our state needs each of you, as does our country. Certainly, the community in which you shall dwell will need you as a prepared and qualified person to help introduce the 21st Century.

I fervently hope you will soon direct your talents to building a greater civility into our lives. Today we seem to be an angry, unhappy people, quick to judge and seem-

Have you ever really wondered what it's like to live under these conditions? Hear these words of a North Carolinian who has: And in all that you do—be men and women of peace and good will. May the God of us all bless you and keep you and those you love in all the glorious years that are to come. It is your turn now.

East Carolina University