



The Worth of Education: *Notes for Undergraduate Commencement*¹

Ted Ward

To talk about commencement is to consider the *worth* of education. Such talk for years has centered on costs. Higher education is a *very* expensive matter. But now things are changing. We wonder if it is really worth it.

The “Bill Gates Effect” has captured the imagination. The richest man in America. And Bill Gates didn’t bother with a college degree. So success doesn’t depend on how much education you have, after all. I agree. Education isn’t magic. Education doesn’t guarantee success. But a sound education surely improves the odds! So we make a grab for it.

The *worth of education* depends on *what you do with it*.

Fascination with the *easier way* has always been popular. It’s the stuff of adventure novels, of pirate stories. It’s the appeal of the lottery. It’s the drama of “the big break” . . . the Gold Rush . . . The *Get-Rich-Quick* scheme. Hard work was never that appealing!

Education helps you organize and put your abilities and aspirations together and to put it all in a higher gear.

But Just What are the Characteristics of a Sound Education?

Information? Yes, but this is only the start. Consider the valuable outcomes of a well-ordered education:

1. **Information** (basic to mental tools). Information, commonly called “knowledge” is the raw material of an expanding mind.
2. **Habits of Diligence** (basic to effective learning). Doing the difficult, even when it is not “fun.”
3. **Awareness** (basic to creativity). Scope, depth, and variety are the dimensions of consciousness that grow in consciousness and sophistication throughout life. You become alert to events and conditions of life. You gain a sense of fulfillment—you become an active participant in the universe of which you are a part. You become a player on the stage of human society, and you have a name. You are more alive because of the education which has been your special blessing.
4. **Sensitivity** (basic to effective relationships). Emotional consciousness, sometimes called the “soft side” of thought, the artistic and aesthetic capability needed to balance the “tougher” sorts of

¹ Ted Ward. The Worth of Education. Notes for undergraduate Commencement address. Cornerstone University, Grand Rapids, May 2000

intellect—*sensitivity* is part of the center core of a well-formed person. No matter how many facts a person commands, how logical, how much capacity for academic organizing of information, *the person who lacks sensitivity is a profoundly handicapped person*. To overcome this handicap you develop an alert sensitivity to those around you. You pay attention to others. You learn to listen. You learn the arts of respect for others. And through all of this you learn the value of diversity. We are each different from the other in important ways. God has created us unique. Even in large groups, yes, even in a mob, we are not just so many ants! We are people.

5. **Perspective** (basic to judgment). The capacity to “see” (perceive) from more than one point of view is uniquely human. Perspectivism is basic to the qualities of interpersonal and intercultural competency. Wisdom calls for perspectives larger than one’s own narrow biases.

6. **Responsibility** (basic to quality of life). Basic component of moral and ethical integrity: You can be *trusted* and *counted upon*. You acknowledge the public good. You are aware of the hazards of selfishness and personal domination.

Reflect With Me a Moment . . .

Without doubt, the freedom and expectation to exert initiative, *to seek new paths, to try new ways of doing things, to break with the past whenever necessary*, are fundamental to personal development.

Yes, in college we have discovered and improved upon the natural talents that we have had available as our starting place. We have become *more thorough and better grounded* in our skills and in our reasoning.

But there’s more to it. What we can become *depends heavily on the support systems*, people and institutions, that we are learning to trust.

Commencement is a great time to *reflect on the value of those who have given you the support, strength, and encouragement* to develop as a worthy person.

None of you is here alone. Tonight you are celebrating with those who are most proud of you just what life has become for you. Mothers, fathers, brothers, sisters, grandparents, aunts, uncles—yes, and *schoolmates*, friends who will be important to you throughout your lifetime.

Most of us have learned that wherever we are and at whatever time of life, there is more ahead, and much of it will be good. And it will be especially good because there are those around us who truly love us and want to see us fulfill all that we truly are.

Family is the foundation for many. Although the tendency among young people in recent years has shown a dangerous willingness to minimize the importance of the family, sooner or later, most competent people come to recognize the vital contributions that relationships with significant others bring into the launching and nurturing process.

At seventy years, I miss my father and mother; but their influence in my life lives on. Never a day goes by without an evidence of their guidance, support, and encouragement in my life. It was not just *then*; it is still *now*. I have but one brother. As we were growing up we went through long periods of adjustment to each other, using each other as sparring partners while learning to live with people who

are competitive, sometimes combative, and at the end of the day, people with whom we could share life's ups and downs. As time goes on the relationship with sisters and brothers can mature and become ever a greater source of strength.

The Consequences of Education

Schooling is a resource. You have sought it out and invested yourself in it. *So what will you do with it?* Sadly, now and then we find college graduates who are so self-centered that all they can do with their educational benefits is to puff up their egos. But education is most beautifully and comfortably a crown on your head when it becomes your tools for service. Service to others and your contribution to human society. I grieve for those whose learning becomes tool for gaining power and control over others.

How Will Your Life Be Different?

Those who have invested in you, supported you, and encouraged you have earned a stake in your life. Your educational experiences have increased the number of "parents" who will be listening for the effects you make upon society, your family, church, and job world. You cannot let yourself become obligated to standards and goal which are disconnected from your God-given mission in life. You should learn the value of bringing others along as you mature into more than a self-centered, self-defining, and self-satisfying loner.

You are part of the *community of humanity*:

Many of you, we can assume, are part of the *community of faith*:

Many of you, we can assume, are part of the *community of change*:

Many of you, we can assume, are part of the *community of godliness*, and for you, especially, we hope and pray that you will be strong in the *community of compassion*.

What Obligations Have You Accepted?

... *to dedicate yourself* to fulfill the very best in your character.

... *to repay to your family, yes, and to humankind* in whatever way best represents the gifts that God has placed within you..

... *to continue to learn*. At its very best, learning is a habit, a lifestyle and a continuing basis of constructively interacting with ideas, dreams, and spiritual liveliness.

Your time here was only a beginning. Yes, you count the years now and it seems like a big chunk out of your young life. But this truly was only part of the beginning. *The best is yet to come*. That part now commences!

May God bless you in his service.